

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

30 January 2015

Europe

Strikes hit Polish coal mines

Around 25,000 miners working at mines belonging to the Jastrzebska Spolka Weglowa (JSW) group began an open-ended strike Wednesday, following an overwhelming vote for industrial action.

The miners, members of the Solidarity union, are opposing financial cutbacks, which would impact a pay rise due in 2015 and a reform of the annual bonus scheme. JSW is attempting to tie any such payments to profit levels. They were also protesting the sacking of nine miners at the Budryk mine over disciplinary matters. The miners are demanding the replacement of the current JSW management.

The strike at the JSW mines comes less than two weeks after miners working for the Kompania Weglowa returned to work following a government-brokered deal between management and the unions.

Walkout of Italian bank staff

More than 15,000 bank employees, represented by eight unions, were due to strike today after the Italian Banking Association (ABI) rescinded a collective bargaining contract. Bank staff will hold protests in Rome, Palermo, Ravenna and Milan.

Italian banks currently employ around 300,000, but 68,000 jobs have been lost over the last 15 years. The ABI is attempting to remove national collective bargaining and replace it with contract negotiations on a firm-by-firm basis, which would lead to job losses and worsening conditions.

Nationwide protests by Italian health staff

Hospital staff including doctors held nationwide marches and protests last Friday. Protests took place in Rome, Milan, Florence, Naples and Bari. They were opposing overcrowding in the country's A&E units, which currently receive 65,000 patients each day. The protesters say government-imposed fees for visits to doctors have led to increased visits to A&E by people unable to afford the charges.

According to Massimo Cozza, secretary of the doctors' section of CGIL, there have been cuts of over €30 billion (\$34 billion) in health care spending in Italy over the last four years.

Action by French power workers

Power workers employed by EDF held a one-day strike Thursday. They are protesting government plans to cut the amount of nuclear power-generated electricity from its current 75 percent to 50 percent.

Norwegian two-hour general strike

Norway's major trade union federations held a two-hour general strike Wednesday, beginning at 2 p.m., with rallies in Oslo, Stavanger, Bergen, Trondheim and Tromsø. Around 1.5 million workers in the public and private sectors were involved.

Areas affected included transport, schools and hospitals.

The strike was to protest government-planned changes to the Health and Safety at Work Act, which the unions say will lead to forced overtime and weekend work and reduce job security.

English health unions call off action

A 12-hour strike of health workers in England and Northern Ireland, due to have taken place on Thursday, was called off by the unions involved. The main unions, Unison, Unite and GMB, together with several smaller unions, including the Royal College of Midwives, called off the action following talks with the Conservative health secretary, Jeremy Hunt.

The action was to be in response to the government's refusal to pay an across-the-board 1 percent pay increase as recommended by the Pay Review body. The government said it would only pay increases to staff at the top of their pay grade and so not due for an annual pay increment.

According to BBC News, the deal will only include a 1 percent pay rise for staff up to band 8B and an extra £200 (\$303) for low-paid staff. It will need to be put to the union membership.

National Gallery staff in London set to walk out

Around 250 staff who work at the prestigious National Gallery in London have voted by a more than 90 percent to hold a five-day strike beginning Tuesday, February 3. They are members of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS). They are opposing management plans to outsource jobs to a private security firm in an attempt to cut costs.

The security firm CIS already provides its services to the Sainsbury wing of the National Gallery. In addition, CIS provided staff to the *Rembrandt: The Late Works* exhibition; staff were employed on a three-month contract and earned £10 (\$15) an hour.

Cyprus dock strike

Dockers in Larnaca staged a three-hour strike Wednesday morning. They were protesting a further extension of an agreement signed in 2012 with the Zenon Consortium. This enabled the company to develop Larnaca port and marina in a deal said to be worth €700 million (\$790 million). However, due to the company having recurring problems financing the project, the plan has been delayed. To date, the company has been given seven extensions.

Cypriot nurses strike over lack of resources

Emergency room nurses held a two-hour strike last Friday to protest staff shortages and lack of equipment in hospitals. Nurses explained a lack of beds on wards meant patients backing up in the emergency rooms making it difficult to attend to incoming emergencies.

The strike took place between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m., but the nurses' union provided skeleton staff coverage in case of a major event.

Middle East

Iranian teachers' walkout

Iranian teachers held a strike last week in support of a pay claim and to protest the underfunding of the education service. They demonstrated in front of Education Ministry offices in Shahroud and Marivan. Six thousand teachers signed a petition in early January protesting low pay and calling for parity with other government employees.

Israeli social services offices closed for one-day action

A one-day strike of staff working for the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services on Wednesday closed their offices throughout the country. The strike followed the suspension of six employees working for the children's welfare section.

Tunisian phosphate workers' strike

Phosphate production in Tunisia at the end of last week was brought to a halt following a strike by production workers. Phosphate, which is used as a fertiliser, is the country's main export.

Africa

South African air cabin crew to take action

South African airline cabin crew have been given a certificate to take strike action after negotiations through the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) broke down. The Solidarity union is seeking a 12.3 percent pay increase. The airline, Comair has offered 7.5 percent as part of an overall package.

A cabin crew's basic wage is only 53 percent of total pay. The remainder is made up of other compensations. The airline has offered to increase its offer to 8 percent if overtime rates are not claimed until 125 hours a month have been worked. The union argues this is equivalent to the workers funding their own pay increase.

Kenyan nurses strike

More than 800 nurses came out on strike Monday at Kenya's second largest hospital, the Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital (MTRH), after management refused to sign a two-year-old Collective Bargaining Agreement in spite of a court order to do so. Nurses are working under pressure due to drug and equipment shortages.

Riot police using tear gas broke up a peaceful rally of nurses outside the hospital and a court deemed the strike illegal. Management ordered the striking nurses to return to work.

The union, the Kenyan National Union of Nurses, said it would not return to work until its demands had been met and the arrested nurses released.

Ebola unit staff in Sierra Leone protest unpaid wages

Support staff and burial teams based at the Ebola Treatment Centre at the Police Training Schools in Hastings, near Freetown, came out on strike at the end of last week demanding unpaid wages since mid-December.

Strike of Namibian uranium miners

Miners employed at the Swakop Husab uranium mine in the Erongo desert held a demonstration at the mine to demand equality of pay and conditions in line with other mines across the country. The Miners Union of Namibia (MUN) shop steward at the mine said workers at Husab do not receive housing allowances or medical cover and are paid less than those in other mines.

The 200 miners are also protesting the use of inexperienced workers by subcontractors. The mine is jointly owned by the Namibian government and China General Nuclear Power Company (CGNPC). It is China's largest single investment in Africa.

The miners' other demands include a N\$5,000 (\$432) housing allowance, 100 percent medical aid cover, training, fair transparent recruitment policies and that ex-employees be recruited. The union wants its demands to be met within seven days.

Niger oil refinery workers demand improvement in working conditions

Workers at the Zinder refinery went on strike last Thursday demanding improved working conditions. The refinery is a joint operation of the Niger government and the China National Petroleum Company (CNPC) and produces 20,000 barrels of oil per day.

They are demanding a salary increase, the payment of an extra month's salary at the end of the year and a review of transport and food fees. They are members of the National Union of Petroleum Workers. A two-day strike called by the union in 2013 over working conditions was called off after one day.



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