

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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Europe

under the auspices of the government mediation service ACAS.

Polish miners' strike continues

The strike by over 20,000 miners employed by the Polish Jastrzebska Spolka Weglowa (JSW) group is continuing. They began the action at the end of January, protesting the company's attempts to freeze wages, tie bonus scheme rates to profit levels and are calling for the replacement of the current management team. They are demanding the reinstatement of 10 sacked miners.

In recent days, the strikers have clashed with riot police using water cannons in the freezing weather to try and break up their demonstrations. This week, some of the striking miners have held a sit-in, while others have begun a hunger strike.

The strike has cost JSW 130 million Zloty (\$35m) in sales since it began. The share price slumped by nearly eight percent over the past week.

German airport security staff in one-day strike

German airport security staff at three airports, as well as civilian security staff at military bases and nuclear power facilities, held a one-day strike Monday. The airport most affected was Hamburg, with Stuttgart and Hannover also hit, as passengers faced delays. Lufthansa cancelled 18 domestic flights in anticipation of the strike.

The staff, members of the Verdi trade union, took the action in support of a pay increase. Currently, many of the staff involved earn only the federal minimum wage of between €8.50 and €9 an hour. The employees are seeking a pay rise of between 70 cents and €2.50 an hour.

Union calls off strike by London bus staff

Bus drivers in London held a one-day strike last week to demand uniformity of pay and conditions for staff working for the 18 bus companies that cover the capital. Currently, pay can differ by up to £3 an hour, depending on the company.

The strike, called by the Unite union, was to be the first of a series of one-day strikes, with further stoppages planned for February 13 and 16. However, these planned strikes have been called off by the union as an "act of goodwill." Unite called on the 18 bus companies to hold talks

Strike action call by London tube train drivers over sacking

London Underground tube drivers have voted in favour of strike action to oppose the sacking of a tube driver who failed an alcohol breath test. They are members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) union. The affected driver is diabetic and the union said his medical condition can lead to false readings in such breath tests. No date has been set for the strike.

A strike over the same issue was held in December, which affected the Northern line of the tube network.

English firefighters announce further 24-hour strike

Firefighters, members of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), have announced they will hold a further 24-hour strike in the coming weeks. The FBU has not yet announced a date. The workers are involved in a long-running dispute with the government over pensions and have held a series of strikes, some for several days at a time.

The government wants firefighters to work longer, and pay more money in and receive a lower pension when they finally retire. Firefighters are also concerned that many will fail the statutory fitness tests as they get older and so will receive even lower pension benefits by being forced to leave the service before reaching the higher retirement age.

French TV staff announces one-day strike

Three out of the four unions representing staff at the pay TV operator Canal+ have announced they will strike for 24 hours on March 5. The three unions, CFDT, CFE-CGC and CGT say the strike is to protest deteriorating conditions and staff layoffs.

If it goes ahead, the action will hit programming on its main Canal+ TV channel, as well as its free-to-air channels. The action will also affect call centres and the technical services arm of the company.

Canal+ is facing intense competition, especially from the beIN sports service run by Al Jazeera and has cut jobs and imposed speedups in its attempts to compete. Canal+, which employs around 3,500 staff, last faced industrial action in 2003.

“Crucifixion” protest by unemployed Italian worker

Last week, Marco Cusano, an unemployed car worker, staged a mock crucifixion outside the Fiat car factory in Pomigliano d’Arco near Naples where he worked prior to being laid off. He was helped by other former Fiat employees who fixed him to the cross for his protest.

The main target of his protest was the new Italian labour laws which will make it easier for employers to lay off workers. The unemployment rate in Italy is currently around 13 percent but for youth is over 40 percent.

Dutch unions sign up to job losses for money transporter staff

The money security transport company Brink’s, last week, signed deals with the FNV and CNV unions which will see the loss of around 650 jobs out of a total of 1,000. Brink’s recently lost the contract to fill up cash point machines for the Rabobank and ABN Amro banking services companies.

According to press reports, the deal signed was an improvement on previous offers made by the company. Brink’s staff has held several strikes over the last few months in an attempt to save their jobs. It had been previously suggested that the companies who took over the Brink’s contract may hire the redundant staff, but the companies involved did not respond to media inquiries as to whether this would be the case.

Spanish unions call off strike opposing airport privatisation

Trade union federations, Union Confederation of Workers Committee (CCOO) and the Workers Union (USO), have called off a strike due to have begun Wednesday to oppose the privatisation of the Spanish airport operator Aena.

The Spanish government is offering 49 percent of the shares in an initial public offering (IPO). Aena is the world’s largest airport operator which runs Madrid and Barcelona as well as several smaller airports in Spain. It also runs Luton in the UK and some airport hubs in South America.

The unions, who have called off previous strikes opposing the privatisation, planned to hold a token protest at the entrance to the Madrid stock exchange where the share offering is being made.

Middle East

Regional general strike in Tunisia

A general strike was held Tuesday in the southern governorate of Tataouine, Tunisia. It was called by the Regional General Labour Union (URT), the Regional Union for Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (URICA) and the Regional Union for Agriculture and Fisheries. The strike closed down the majority of private and public institutions.

The stoppage was called in response to police violence in the town of Dhiba on Sunday which left a protestor, 21-year-old Saber El Miliane, dead. The weekend protest was against the lack of jobs and called for regional development.

Israeli chemical workers protest layoffs

Following a recent strike, workers at the Bromine Compound factory in the Negev, owned by Israeli Chemicals Ltd (ICL), held a demonstration outside ICL headquarters Tuesday.

Over 140 of the workers at the plant face dismissal as the company restructures its operations, including some jobs going abroad. The employees accuse ICL of greed, saying the company enjoys high profits, that the Bromine arm is a lucrative part of the company and that dividends and CEO pay have risen sharply.

The Bromine workers were joined by their colleagues at the Dead Sea Works factory which is owned by ICL and faces job cuts. They were also supported by ICL employees at the Rotem Amfert phosphate plant near Arad who halted export of ICL chemicals in solidarity.

ICL runs other chemical factories in the Negev region. Other sources of employment are in short supply, and the loss of ICL jobs will have a big economic impact.

Protest by Palestinian teachers over pay

On Sunday, teachers demonstrated outside the Ministry of Education building in the West Bank city of Nablus. They were protesting the seizing of Palestinian tax funds by the Israeli government.

The teachers also protested the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) method of dealing with the shortfall, whereby they make deductions from salaries across the board irrespective of how low an income a particular worker receives. The teachers union wants the PA to only apply deductions to those earning more than NIS 10,000 (\$2,600).

Palestinian workers in Israeli industrial zone set to strike

Palestinian workers employed at the M S Aluminum plant in the Mishor Adumin Settler industrial zone in Eastern Jerusalem are set to strike. A labour dispute and the proposed strike have been called by the WAC-MAAN trade union. Under Israeli law, the 15-day cooling-off period after the issuance of a strike notice ends February 18.

The strike is in response to the company’s refusal to recognize the union and open negotiations over a collective agreement. The firms’ employees have formed a workers’ committee, but the company refuses to even allow the workforce to hold meetings on its premises. Currently, 31 out of the total workforce of 65 have said they wish to be represented by WAC-MANN.

Iranian trade union activist arrested

According to the Coordination Committee for Establishing Labour Organisations, Hatam Samadi, a trade union activist, has been arrested by plainclothes police and is being held in an unknown location. He was arrested at his workplace.

Ribvar Abdollahi, another activist, was recently jailed for 12 months but is currently on bail.

The committee was set up in response to growing protests by workers

over the recent period, with many being over non-payment or delayed payment of wages.

Africa

Kenyan teachers still refusing to return to work

Teachers on strike in the northeastern region of Kenya are still refusing to return to work, fearing for their lives. They went on strike after 22 of their colleagues were killed while travelling to work on a bus.

The Somalia terrorist organisation Al Shabaab claimed responsibility for the over-the-border raids and for selecting and killing the teachers. These killings followed the killing of 39 quarry workers in similar circumstances.

The teachers are willing to return to work but only if assigned to posts outside the threatened area. Schools in the northeast in the threatened area are suffering from a lack of staff.

Trade unions, including the medical and teaching unions, have advised their members to move out of the region and not return to work. The Teachers Service Commission, an agency working for the government, has responded by threatening the 1,089 teachers with the sack if they do not return to work, and has advertised their posts.

Namibian construction staff strike

Namibian construction workers building the N\$2.4 billion (\$200m) Neckartal dam near Keetmanshoop have gone on strike, demanding safe working conditions, among other things. They accuse Salini SpA Construction Company of favouring its Italian labour force. The union claims the Italian workers have air-cooled canteens while the Namibian staff have to eat their lunch in the open with no supply of drinking water and are expected to work 10-hour shifts out in the heat of the day. There are further complaints of wage discrepancies.

Strike of Zimbabwe university staff

Lecturers and support staff at all state universities across the country went on strike in Zimbabwe on Tuesday. They are demanding the payment of January's wages and bonuses and a fixed date for salary payments as opposed to the current sporadic payment dates.

The lecturers' union, Zimbabwe State Universities Union of Academics (ZISUUA), also speaking for the non-academic workers at the universities, said they could not attend work because they are hungry. The ZISUUA chairman said, "We are borrowing money to send our children to school; our landlords are demanding rentals and we don't have fuel to go to work."

The union claimed other workers in the civil service have received their pay and bonuses.

Zimbabwe grain board staff in sit-in strike threat

Workers at the Zimbabwe government-owned Grain Marketing Board threatened a sit-in strike if their wages were not paid by Thursday. The union representing the workforce is demanding three months' pay and bonus arrears and say their members have no money for their day-to-day needs. However, the situation is even worse for the workers as they have not been paid for five months.

The company also failed to remit monies paid in for medical, housing and pension funds even though they have been deducted from wages.



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