

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

29 January 2016

## Widespread strikes and protests across France

Strikes by taxi drivers, aircraft control staff, civil servants and teachers took place this week on “Black Tuesday”, with 120 demonstrations being held across the country.

More than 2,000 taxi drivers in Paris blockaded major roads with piles of burning tyres. Their demonstration continued throughout the day into the following day. The taxi drivers were protesting against drivers working for the phone app taxi hailing service Uber. They accuse the service of undermining their livelihoods. Ibrahima Sylla, a spokesman for the Taxis de France collective, stated on Yahoo news service, “Today our service is at stake, we are fed up of meetings and negotiations.”

Air traffic control staff at Orly and Charles de Gaulle airports held a one-day strike over pay and working conditions, which led to the cancellation of 20 percent of flights.

Around 5.5 million civil servants reportedly joined the action in opposition to austerity cuts. Those involved included crèche workers, hospital staff and doctors. Around 10 percent of primary school teachers and 20 percent of secondary school teachers took part in the one-day strike.

Farmers joined the action protesting against falling prices for their produce. They used their tractors to block roads in rural areas and dumped manure outside tax offices.

Around 10,000 protesting workers took part in a march in Paris. They carried placards reading “Enough of austerity” and “Increase wages, not shareholders.” The unions say 150,000 jobs have been wiped out since 2007 and that hospitals had been particularly badly hit.

## One-day strike of Greek advice staff

Staff working for the Greek Citizens’ Information Centres (KEPs) held a 24-hour strike last Thursday. They were protesting at an increased workload and demanded staff increases and more training to meet the extra demands on their service. They held a march to the Interior Ministry.

## Further protests in Greece against the attacks on pensions

Hospital workers held a protest outside the Finance Ministry Tuesday against the Syriza-led government’s pension “reform” plans. Later, other unions held anti-government protests outside parliament to coincide with a speech to parliament by Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras.

Greek small farmers went on strike Wednesday, protesting the

government’s plans to “reform” the pension system. They held a protest at a market in the centre of Athens and gave out free fruit and vegetables to desperate people.

Farmers have been involved in nationwide actions blocking roads with their tractors as part of their protests against the ongoing attacks.

## Strike of Portuguese public-sector workers

Portuguese public sector workers represented by Common Front, an umbrella organization, began a 24-hour strike today. The strike by Common Front which represents around half of the 600,000 government workers is expected to have a nationwide impact with schools, hospitals, courts and other public services affected.

They are demanding the newly elected centre-left minority government move quickly to roll back austerity measures imposed by previous governments.

## Wildcat action at Irish construction site

Construction workers on the West Pharma building site in the southern Irish city of Waterford walked off the site Monday in a wildcat action. They had a series of grievances. Some of the employees are Portuguese and were reportedly being paid only €7.50 for 12-hour shifts. Other grievances included payment for wet time (when it is raining) and overtime.

Employing around 150 workers, it is one of the biggest building sites in the country. The main contractor is Sisk, but it has contracted work to some 30 subcontractors.

The strikers returned to work Tuesday following the intervention of the Union of Construction Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT) and Services Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) which held talks with Sisk.

The unions were keen to regain control of the situation. A press release by SIPTU on Monday stated, “Disquiet among the workforce ... has led to unofficial action by workers. ... This action is not authorized or supported by SIPTU. ... it indicates the level of frustration ... due to the intransigence shown by management...”

## Irish supermarket staff threatened with pay cuts

Long-serving staff working for the supermarket chain Tesco in Ireland are facing a cut in pay and conditions. Currently, staff are employed under a two-tier system. Any staff who joined the company 20 or more years ago are employed under a more beneficial contract. For example, they get premium pay rates for working on Sunday. Around 6 percent of the 14,500 staff working for Tesco in Ireland will be affected.

The company, which is facing financial difficulties, is seeking to scrap the enhanced contract paid to employees taken on before 1996 and transfer them to a contract agreed with the Mandate union in 2006. According to Mandate, workers forced off the old contract could lose up to €2 an hour as well as being expected to accept a more flexible working pattern.

### **All-out strike of Slovakian teachers**

An all-out strike began Monday by Slovakian teachers organised by the Initiative of Slovak Teachers (ISU). More than 11,000 teachers reportedly took part, leading to the closure of 300 schools with other schools operating on a limited basis. They are demanding increased pay, dismissing a recent 4 percent pay increase as too little. They are also demanding greater resources for the education system in Slovakia, saying it is underfunded.

A Reuters report quotes an ISU representative saying: "Many teachers work two jobs to make ends meet. Schools lack money to buy proper teaching aids. We will stay on strike until our requests are met."

A demonstration of some 2,000 striking teachers was held in the Slovakian capital of Bratislava Monday. It was supported by school pupils and others.

### **Financial Times journalists to strike**

Journalists working for the UK-published *Financial Times* (FT) newspaper voted by a 92 percent margin to hold a 24-hour strike. They are members of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ).

The local chapel (branch) of the NUJ at the paper is asking management to pledge it will honour its £4 million pension commitment, following the takeover of the FT by the Japanese media firm Nikkei. Nikkei bought the FT in July last year.

The NUJ say the 24-hour strike will take place in February unless an agreement is reached by Friday. The NUJ is willing to take part in further talks with the FT management and would agree to the intervention of the government reconciliation service, ACAS.

### **Planned strike of London underground rail workers called off**

A 24-hour strike due to have begun Tuesday evening by London Underground (LU) rail workers was called off. All four unions involved, the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT), the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) the drivers union, Unite and the Transport and Salaried Staff Association (TSSA), representing clerical and ticket staff, called off the action.

The strike had been called in the long-running dispute over LU's plans to introduce 24-hour services in part of the underground rail system.

The unions suspended the strike on the pretext of allowing further negotiations with LU management over the issue. Currently, two planned 24-hour strikes on February 15 and 17 are scheduled to go ahead.

### **Job threat to Israeli supermarket staff**

The jobs of the 2,500 staff working for the supermarket chain Mega are under threat. The company has gone into receivership, but last week the receivers were given 30 days to try to sell the business as a going concern.

The chain runs 126 stores. Workers were angry that Avigdor Kaplan, the chairman of Alon Blue Square, Mega's parent company, was recently awarded a \$140,000 bonus. Kaplan claimed the bonus was in connection with a separate company with which he is involved. However, he has agreed to give the bonus to the Mega workforce. He presented a cheque for the amount to the trade union federation Histadrut to share out the money.

Other major shareholders who shared a \$25 million dividend shortly before the company was declared bankrupt have shown no such inclination towards a token gesture.

### **South African university workers oppose casual labour**

Workers at the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), South Africa, went on strike Monday over the use of casual labour. TUT staff protested outside the university's administrative headquarters in Pretoria, demanding the end to outsourcing work to contractors. The campaign against contract labour is being organised by a body calling itself Outsourcing-must-fall (Omf).

Management met with campaigners and contractors later in the day, after which the strikers returned to work.

Registration for the new term was interrupted by the action at the university under protest, but two other north Pretoria campuses remained unaffected.

### **South African parliamentary staff end strike**

South African parliamentary staff have ended their strike, which began in December, and have entered into negotiations. They began their strike action over the unfair distribution of bonus payments.

The National Education Health and Allied Workers' Union has returned to the CCMA, the labour mediation service, in an attempt to get the bonus paid.

The parliamentary workers' line management have downgraded some workers' status excluding their eligibility for a bonus payment. The strike was drawn out over four weeks and a bonus deal was accepted, supposedly giving workers from 3.5 percent to 9 percent on a performance rating. As part of the settlement, the union agreed that workers would put in extra time for time lost in the strike. Other issues such as outsourcing went unresolved.

### **Nigerian university staff strike**

Members of the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities, (SSANU), have been on strike against job losses since December 24. They held a demonstration on January 19 calling for a threat to 2,000 jobs to be lifted.

A senior staff member met with the Nigerian Education Minister January 12 in an attempt to get an agreement on a return to work.

Two thousand jobs of Universities Staff School workers had been removed from the Education Authority's books. Directly following the meeting, vice chancellors at the universities had put SSANU jobs up as vacancies, scuppering any possibility to return to work.

### **Strike of Nigerian water workers**

Nigerian Water Corporation workers in Kwara State began an indefinite strike Tuesday, protesting the nonpayment of wages for the last four months. They are members of the Amalgamated Union of Public Corporations, Civil Service Technical and Recreational Services Employees (AUPCTRE).

They were also protesting that the union dues automatically taken from their wages have not been remitted for the period of February to July 2015. They are opposing a lack of promotion opportunities and that money deducted for the housing fund has not been forwarded among other grievances.

### **Strike by Kenyan nurses banned**

A strike by Kenyan nurses in Kakamega state planned for next Monday has been banned. Nurses put in a strike notice two weeks ago.

The nurses' demands are for everyone to be brought onto state contract, better working conditions and overdue promotions to be made. The state spokesperson said any nurse striking will be sacked.



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