

Public sector general strike in Tunisia; Plastics workers and goldminers continue stoppages in South Africa

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

23 November 2018

Tunisian public sector workers hold general strike

Some 650,000 Tunisian public sector workers carried out a general strike on Thursday. They were joined by thousands of other workers, in the action directed against the government's refusal to increase wages.

The strike was the country's largest in five years. Schools, universities, municipalities and ministries were shut, and hospitals had only emergency staffing. Protests were held nationwide, including in Tunis, Gabes, Sfax, Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine.

Nafisa, a 50-year-old teacher, who was protesting outside the parliament in Tunis told Al Jazeera: "I can't pay for my sons' food and studies out of a 900 dinar (\$309) salary. I can't pay back my bank loans."

Prime Minister Youssef Chahed's government plans to slash the public sector wage bill to 12.5 percent of GDP in 2020, down from the current 15.5 percent. The number of state companies will be reduced and fuel subsidies slashed.

The cuts are being demanded by the International Monetary Fund, which loaned Tunisia \$2.8 billion in 2016 in exchange for a prolonged austerity programme.

Libyan university staff walk out over pay and health insurance

Libyan university and higher educational staff walked out last week across the east, west and south of the country.

The educators are demanding a pay increase and a health insurance scheme. Government authorities have not responded.

Strike by Algerian aircraft technicians

Last week, aircraft maintenance technicians at the maintenance base of Algier's Houari Boumediene airport downed tools. The action was in support of 12 dismissed engineers. Workers from other local airports reportedly joined protests in support of the stoppage.

Iranian sugar cane workers continue protest

Workers at the Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane Company are continuing strike action. They are demanding unpaid wages and calling for the nationalisation of the company. On Sunday, around 10 of the workers were arrested after they joined a general protest in the Shush region of western Iran.

Steel workers in Shush have also been on strike for more than a week, over unpaid wages and poor working conditions.

Ten thousand workers in South Africa's plastic industry continue strike

Ten thousand South African plastic industry workers are into the sixth week of a strike.

The members of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and the Metal and Electrical Workers Union of South Africa are demanding a 15 percent wage rise and pay parity with engineers.

Management has responded with violence, including sending thugs to shoot at the workers.

Despite this, the labour courts awarded the Plastic Convertors Association of SA (PCASA) a temporary order against NUMSA for picket line violence, which the union claims is the work of agents provocateurs. If found guilty when court resumes on February 1, the union faces fines of R1 million and Numsa sector coordinator, Vusi Mabho, and general secretary, Irvin Jim, fines of R100,000 each.

PCASA has refused to negotiate with the unions and is encouraging workers to sign individual agreements.

Stoppage against redundancies continues at Gold Field's South Deep mine

Miners at South Africa's South Deep Gold Fields mine are continuing a strike they began on November 2 against job cuts.

The mine is the second largest gold bearing ore site in the world. Management is planning to reduce its workforce of 5,500 by 1,560. The sackings will hit 1,102 full-time employees and 460 contractors.

Gold Fields has allegedly sought to smuggle scabs across the picket lines through secret entrances. The company secured a court interdict against the National Union of Mineworkers to stop alleged picket line

violence.

South Africa's NUM/Sibanye Gold deal heads off strike

South Africa's Sibanye Gold corporation has signed a three-year wage deal with unions covering 32,321 employees, averting strike action.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), Solidarity and the United Association of South Africa have settled for R700 per month in the first two years, and R825 per month in the third year for category 4-8 above and underground workers. The increases are the equivalent of the retail price index. Rises of around 3 and 4.3 percent were conceded in allowances.

The increases are lower than the 6.5 percent for skilled workers offered at other companies, Harmony Gold and AngloGold.

Sibanye Gold is also rolling out a "cost effective" formula for a new medical scheme in the next six months.

Cape Town bus strike continues over casual labour

MyCiTi bus drivers in Cape Town are into the sixth week of unprotected strike action. They are demanding permanent employment. An attempt at conciliation between Cape Town City administration, labour agencies and wildcat strikers failed last week.

The drivers are employed by labour agency Kidrogen—MyCiTi's Vehicle Operating Company—and want to be employed directly by the city on better wages and conditions.

City transport authority MyCiTi is concerned that if they bring bus drivers onto their books it will encourage similar calls from other workers.

When workers rejected demands by one of the bus operators for strikers to pay for the cost of vandalised buses, the council pulled out of the talks and advised disciplinary measures against the strikers.

According to Kidrogen, 80 strikers have been sacked since the dispute began on October 15, for "misconduct" and "desertion."

Striking South African pharmaceutical workers fired on by police

Workers at South Africa's Dis-Chem Pharmaceuticals took industrial action last Friday to demand a wage increase. Police fired rubber bullets at 2,000 workers demonstrating outside the company's offices in Midrand, Johannesburg.

Members of the National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers (NUPSAW) are demanding a minimum wage of R12,500 a month and a 12.5 percent pay increase for workers earning above that level, plus an annual bonus.

The union says the company increased its turnover by 13.3 percent and intends to open a further 20 outlets. Dis-Chem refuses to recognise NUPSAW because it claims less than 30 percent of its 13,500 employees are union members. Conciliation broke down and the union was granted a certificate to strike.

Casual workers demonstrate for permanent jobs in Cape Town

Demonstrators from South Africa's Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) marched through Cape Town's civic centre last Friday.

The protesters handed an appeal to the mayor demanding permanent jobs, as opposed to employment as casuals through agencies, in the EPWP, at MyCiti buses, in nursing and firefighting.

Casual workers on the EPWP scheme complain they receive just R80 per day while full-time employees are paid R350, along with employment benefits and safety clothing.

Kenyan nurses threaten national strike over Collective Bargaining Agreement

Members of the Kenyan National Union of Nurses are threatening to strike for three weeks from November 19, if their Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) is not fully implemented.

The CBA was signed in November last year, after the longest nurses' strike in Kenyan history.

A service allowance of Sh3,000 in July this year, Sh3,500 next year and the same in July 2020 was agreed to. Nurses have not received the first installment of the allowances.

Nurses are angry because the Salary and Remunerations Committee (SRC) categorises them as unskilled workers. They also want an increase in the uniform allowance mandated in the CBA to be paid.

The SRC has refused to meet with the nurses' union.

Sudanese municipal staff and teachers strike over unpaid wages

Municipal workers in West Kordofan, Sudan began an indefinite strike on November 14. They are owed seven weeks of unpaid wages. The leader of the Babanusa branch of the Workers Union was threatened with arrest unless the strike ended.

Teachers in El Gezira also came out over unpaid wages for October, following previous strikes across the country. Sudan is losing its teachers to other professions and schools are being closed.

Even if paid, there is not enough liquidity in the banks to cover cheques, and five of the 14 localities in West Kordofan have no banks. Pay is further eroded by inflation, so wages only cover two percent of living costs.

Europe

Further strikes by rail staff at UK rail franchises

Rail staff working for Arriva North and South Western Railways will hold 24-hour strikes on Saturday. It will be their 14th consecutive Saturday strike at Arriva North. They are set to continue until the end of the year.

South Western staff have also held a number of Saturday stoppages throughout this month. The workers are members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT).

The strikes are against plans by the rail companies to extend the use of

driver only operated (DOO) trains. The dispute against DOO, threatening passenger safety and 6,000 conductors' jobs, has been ongoing for two years.

The RMT has limited action to regional, short-term strikes, isolating and dissipating struggles. It has already sealed deals with rail franchises at ScotRail and Greater Anglia. The union has agreed to a sell-out deal "in principle" with Merseyrail and the Labour Party-led Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, whereby "door control and dispatch of the trains will transfer to the driver" on new trains.

London tube workers to strike prior to Christmas

London underground train drivers on the Central Line are set to strike on December 21 in the run-up to Christmas. They will stop work at 8 p.m. on December 21 until 2am the following day and from 4 a.m. on December 22 until 8 p.m.

At the centre of the dispute is the call for the reinstatement of a driver summarily dismissed after many years of service. Management are accused of bullying and failing to abide by agreed procedures. The shortage of drivers puts current drivers under immense pressure.

The strikes follow a well-supported 24-hour stoppage earlier this month, which affected around 800,000 commuters.

Support staff strike at UK Gatwick airport suspended

A planned November 26 strike by 250 employees of logistics firm Wilson James at Gatwick airport has been suspended. The workers support 670,000 passengers, including the disabled, annually.

The Unite union called off the strike when it received a revised pay offer from the employer, which is currently being voted on. The ballot closes December 10. If the deal is rejected, a planned 48-hour strike for December 21 could go ahead. The workers currently receive £8.27 an hour. The union has demanded an extra £1 an hour.

Cambridgeshire local government workers rally against forced unpaid leave

Staff working for Cambridgeshire County Council held a rally outside the council's headquarters on Monday. The Unison union members were protesting plans by the council to impose unpaid leave.

To save money, the council is proposing workers earning above £25,000 a year take three days unpaid leave at Christmas. Those earning below will be expected to take three days of their leave allowance. If they have no leave remaining, they will be expected to "buy" extra leave. The proposals amount to a 1.2 percent pay cut.

Local government unions plead with Scottish government to avoid strike action

The Unison, Unite and GMB unions have written to Scottish

government finance minister Derek Mackay urging further talks over pay to avoid strike action by local government employees.

The membership of the unions rejected a three percent pay offer from the local government employers' body, COSLA. The unions are pushing for the Scottish National Party government and COSLA to come up with an improved offer they can sell to the membership.

Strike by airline staff at Eurowings in Germany

Cabin crew based at Dusseldorf airport working for LGW-owned Eurowings struck Tuesday morning. The members of the Verdi union are demanding improved rostering arrangements, better working conditions and more representation on the workers' council.

Greek public sector strike

Greek public sector workers walked out on November 14. They are opposing austerity measures being imposed by the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) government.

Workers are protesting a pay freeze introduced by Syriza. They are demanding a two to three percent wage rise and the restoration of bonuses. Pay across the sector has decreased by around 40 percent in real terms since 2010.

The strike was called by the ADEDY union representing around half a million public sector workers.

Greek refuse collectors protest over safety concerns

Refuse collectors employed by local authorities across Greece struck on Monday. The members of POE-OTA union are protesting lax health and safety enforcement, poor equipment and lack of protective gear, along with staff shortages.

There has been a slew of fatal accidents and injuries involving municipal refuse collectors. Recently, a 53-year-old driver was crushed in an accident at an Athens landfill site.

During Monday's stoppage, dozens of members of the POE-OTA union stormed the Labor Ministry headquarters in Athens to demand a meeting with Minister Effie Achtsioglou.

Maltese VAT inspectors' strike continues

The strike of VAT inspectors in Malta, which began November 5, is continuing. They are seeking an improved working agreement. Their UHM union was due to meet with Finance Ministry representatives to discuss the issue earlier this week.

Strike of subway drivers in Romanian capital suspended

A twelve-hour strike planned for Wednesday by Bucharest subway workers was suspended after a court ruled it illegal. Workers are seeking a 42 percent pay rise against the employer's offer of 18 percent. A two-hour warning strike that took place November 15 was also ruled illegal by the court.

The union covering the workers announced it would wait for the appointment of a new transport minister before considering further action. Lucian Sova, who had been transport minister, was recently fired. The subway carries over half a million passengers each day.



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