

Textile workers strike in Ethiopia's new economic zone; Sibanye miners union ends strike paving way for slave labour deal

## Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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### Textile workers strike stops production in Ethiopia's new economic zone

Thousands of Ethiopian textile workers at the Hawassa Industrial Park went on strike March 13 to demand a pay increase along with improved health and safety conditions.

The giant park was constructed as a manufacturing base for Chinese, US, European and other major international companies. Built by Chinese companies and completed in a record nine months in 2016, it houses some of the world's big fashion names including Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger. It is projected to eventually employ 60,000 or more workers, with a one billion dollar turnover, and is seen as a model for manufacturing in Ethiopia, with the most modern factory technology.

The striking workers are barred from unionisation but the IndustriALL affiliate, the Industrial Federation of Textile, Leather and Garment Workers Union are appealing to government and retailers to be allowed to unionise workers on the pro-capitalist basis of tapping into the "economic bonanza."

### South African Sibanye Stillwater Gold miners' strike ends in sell-out after union agrees arbitration deal

A South African Labour Court ruling against Sibanye Stillwater Gold striking miners has paved the way for the imposition of a slave labour pay deal after the union agreed to a deal struck at arbitration.

The 15,000 Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) members began striking in November for an annual wage increase of R1,000 a month over three years. Three other unions settled for what the AMCU called a "slave labour deal."

The AMCU agreed to an arbitrated deal last week to end the strike even though it was rejected by the company. Sibanye Gold said the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration's proposals which the union accepted were similar to its own offer, except that the union wanted a further R2,700 in back pay.

At the beginning of March, the AMCU suspended proposed secondary strikes that would have closed South Africa's gold, platinum and coal mines. A labour court ruled the action illegal.

A further court ruling has now rejected AMCU's claim to represent the majority of miners. This means Sibanye can impose the inferior wage deal agreed with the other unions, declare the strike was illegal, and proceed to

impose 7,000 planned redundancies. Strikers fear victimisation as a result.

### South Africa BMW contract workers strike over shift pay

Workers began a strike on Monday over shift pay at the German car manufacturer BMW's plant in Rosslyn, South Africa.

Night contract workers will be paid at a reduced rate of 23 percent on their hourly rate, down from 28.

The company has locked out all the workers, even those that are not part of the strike. The company was granted an indictment last week outlawing the strike, against which the National Union of Metalworkers is appealing.

### South African public sector workers protest redundancies in KwaZulu Natal

South African public sector workers demonstrated at Inkosi Langalibalele Municipality headquarters in Estcourt over threatened layoffs.

The Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union and the SA Municipal Workers Union members protested the decision to make 250 of the 598 public service workers redundant in the KwaZulu Natal province.

The unions have collaborated with local government over proposed reductions in the number of casual contract workers and the increase of responsibilities for full-time staff.

The municipality was formed in 2016 and went into bankruptcy in 2017, claiming an increase in staff expenditure.

### RCL Foods bakery workers strike over pay in Pretoria, South Africa

Bakery workers have gone on strike at RCL Foods, in Pretoria, South Africa, for a wage increase of 112 percent. The National Trade Union Congress members demonstrated outside the company premises last week.

The company increased its offer to 14 percent, but reverted to the original offer of six percent as the strike got underway. Scabs have been offered a 14 percent rise. The company went to the labour courts and won

an interdict claiming the strike illegal.

The strike follows the back to work agreement at Premier Foods' Blue Ribbon Bakery last week where workers struck for 105 days. The Food and Allied Workers Union agreed a settlement on company terms of eight percent over three years.

### **South African tax workers threaten strike over pay claim**

Workers at South Africa's Revenue Service (SARS) threatened to strike on Thursday.

The National Education Health and Allied Workers Union and the Public Servants Association initially put forward a wage claim of 15 percent but have since reduced it to nine. SARS is offering 7 percent. The unions and management were due to meet this week.

### **Lesotho textile workers threaten strike over work classification**

Lesotho workers in textile factories doing heavy-duty work threatened to strike from March 22. They say they are wrongly categorised and should be on higher wages. The Unite union is calling on the government to reclassify these workers.

The Taiwanese textile company, Nien Hsing, employs a quarter of the country's textile workers.

Workers in textiles are also demanding a minimum wage of US \$277 a month as opposed to the existing US \$117. The products of these lowest paid workers in the country are sold under the high-priced fashion labels of Gap and Levi Straus in the US, Europe and around the world.

Textiles is the country's largest industry, employing around 40,000 workers while creating 20 percent of national GDP.

### **Zimbabwe civil service federation agrees poverty pay rise**

Zimbabwe's civil service federation, Apex Council, has agreed a wage deal with the government. The deal gives public sector workers a 20 percent pay rise starting April, duty free imported vehicles and a promise to provide viable public transport so they can carry out their jobs. Travel is so expensive, workers cannot afford to get to work.

The pay increase goes nowhere near workers demands, due to runaway inflation, at 60 percent in February. The government aims to cut its budget deficit by 50 percent.

### **Sudanese journalists demonstrate against arrests**

Several dozen journalists demonstrated in Sudan's capital Khartoum on Monday demanding the freeing of the editor in chief of the daily *Al Tayar* and to protest the arrest of colleagues.

The editor has been locked up since February 22, the start of mass demonstrations for the removal of President Al-Bashir, and denied outside contact. He had given an interview to the News Arabia Network criticising the President's state of emergency, warning that it would start a

new wave of protests.

Ninety journalists have been arrested since the start of the demonstrations.

### **March and rally against closure of Honda car plant in south-west England**

A march and rally will take place tomorrow in Swindon, England to protest the closure of the Honda car plant. The Japanese car manufacturer plans to close the factory with the loss of around 3,500 jobs plus 12,000 jobs in the supply chain.

The Unite union is not calling any action to fight the closures but is campaigning solely on the basis that workers contact their local MP. It is calling on Honda to reconsider the closure and pledged that it will do everything it can to ensure the Honda site is profitable in the future. Honda, the town's biggest employer, has been in Swindon 30 years.

### **French customs staff continue work to rule**

French customs staff at Eurostar terminals in France and the port of Calais are continuing their work-to-rule action. The action, begun on March 4 and initially due to end on March 20, has slowed down the dispatch of passengers leading to big holdups.

The workers are demanding higher pay for overnight work, a danger allowance, and more staff and resources in anticipation of the UK exiting the European Union.

A recent Eurostar statement said, "Due to industrial action, we are experiencing very long queues in Paris Gare du Nord... We would advise not to travel from Paris unless necessary..."

### **Strike at school in Sheffield, England against redundancies**

Around 40 teachers struck Wednesday at Bradfield Secondary school in Sheffield, South Yorkshire. School management intends to shed 15 teachers' jobs due to a financial deficit.

They intend to close the sixth form (for post-16 year olds) as student demand was lower than expected. Management have been criticised by staff and parents for concealing the financial shortfall while increasing the size of management.

A public meeting of around 150 parents, staff and supporters took place on Tuesday evening and a picket commenced the following morning outside school supported by pupils and parents. The National Education Union says further strikes will take place on April 17 and 18 unless school management enters negotiations.

### **Cleaners on London rail overground to strike**

Cleaners at Vinci Cleaners, which provides cleaning service for the London Overground rail system company, Arriva Rail, have voted to hold a 48-hour strike on April 4. They are demanding higher pay and improved

conditions.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union members plan to hold a protest outside Arriva Rail's London head office on April 5.

### **Social workers in Scottish local authority consider strike**

Children's social workers at West Dunbartonshire council, near Glasgow, are threatening to strike.

The Unison union members complain they have reached a crisis point over the number of cases of children who are unallocated to a worker. According to the Unison trade union, there are around 250 unallocated cases. Social workers are concerned for the safety and well-being of vulnerable children.

Unison is to hold a consultative ballot over the issue after social workers lodged a collective grievance over the unallocated cases. Problems escalated following a recent merger of two teams. There is also concern over 12 unfilled team vacancies.

### **Northern Irish electric grid workers vote to strike over pay**

Around 100 senior staff working for System Operator Northern Ireland (SONI), the electric grid operator in Northern Ireland, have voted for action up to and including strike. SONI is owned by the Irish Republic grid operator, Eirgrid.

The workers have not had a pay rise since 2015. Action will take place in April. Meanwhile, the Prospect union representing senior staff hope for further negotiations to avert action.

### **Greek refinery workers set to strike against privatisation**

Workers employed by the state owned Hellenic Petroleum oil refinery were to begin a three-day strike Thursday against its privatisation. Hellenic is worth around €1 billion and owns three sites. April 3 is the deadline for bids to take over the company.

### **Workers at Greek hospital to strike over enhancement pay**

Hospital workers in the Attica region of Greece, including the capital Athens, were to hold a four-hour strike on Thursday. The strike, due to begin at 8am, is in support of a demand for the payment of a hazard enhancement.

The POEDIN union members also planned a protest rally outside the Labour Ministry in Athens.

### **Portuguese refinery strike to end March 31**

A strike by oil refinery workers at two Portuguese oil refineries owned

by Galp will end on March 31. Those at the Sines refinery, in southern Portugal, began their strike at the beginning of the year. Workers at Galp's refinery near Porto began theirs in mid-March.

The Fiequimetal union members are demanding a new collective bargaining contract, a pay increase, better conditions, and an end to the use of casual labour with those on casual contracts to be made permanent.

### **Croatian ship builders strike over unpaid wages**

Workers at the Uljanik ship building company in Croatia struck on March 21 over unpaid wages. They have not been paid for seven months. They went on strike twice last year over non-payment of wages.

Uljanik, which owns two shipyards at Pula and Rijeka, is 25 percent owned by the Croatian government. In the past, the government has pumped in money to keep the company solvent. However it is feared that the company may now be allowed to go bankrupt.

### **Irish ambulance crew plan further strikes over union recognition**

Irish ambulance workers have announced two further strike dates. Around 500 National Ambulance Service Representation Association members, affiliated to the Psychiatric Nurses Association (PNA), are to hold 10-hour strikes on April 2 and 10.

This follows four 12-hours stoppages earlier in the year. The strikes are to demand the Health Service Executive (HSE) recognize the PNA as a negotiating body. Currently the HSE only recognizes the Services Industrial and Professional Trade Union for negotiating purposes. The PNA planned to hold a protest outside parliament on Wednesday.

### **Demonstrations in Ireland call for additional funding for tertiary education**

Students and lecturers across Ireland held protests on March 22 demanding the government increase funding for tertiary education. Following the imposition of austerity measures after the 2008 global financial crisis funding has been cut by around 40 percent. This is despite increasing student numbers.

### **Workers at Turkish conveyor company strike over union recognition**

Workers at the Kale Conveyor factory in Istanbul, Turkey, came out on strike earlier this month. The Perol-Is union members won recognition at a labour court, but the company refuse to recognise the ruling.

The majority of workers at the company were in favour of joining the union. The workers accuse the company of intimidation. It has dismissed two leading union members.

### **Moroccan teachers protest**

On Sunday, thousands of teachers held a protest in Rabat, the Moroccan capital. They were demanding an end to the use of temporary contracts, that teaching posts be made permanent, higher pay and improved conditions.

Around 15,000 teachers, who held a sit-in overnight Saturday, were dispersed by riot police using water cannon early on Sunday morning.



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