

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East & Africa

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Europe

Russian workers end hunger strike

On January 21, 59 workers employed Ivedelsky hydrolysis plant in Russia ended a seven-day hunger strike after an agreement was secured to repay outstanding wages. Most of the employees returned to work following the protest but three remained in hospital. Five also refused water during the course of the protest.

One of the hunger strikers, Klavdia Konibolotskaya, said that about two million roubles had been paid to the strikers but that she did not know where the money had come from. Some of the workers had wage arrears dating back over the last three years.

As part of the legal action against the company, employees were due to appear for questioning just days after the hunger strike ended. The legal action was over wage arrears and allegations of tax dodging, illegal actions in the bankruptcy procedure, and office abuse.

The hunger strike was the fourth such action at Ivedelsky with more than 200 workers involved in total.

Glasgow tube workers continue industrial action

Following an initial four-hour strike on January 20, Glasgow Underground staff in Scotland have voted to hold a series of one-day strikes in a pay dispute. The staff, members of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), have voted to implement a total overtime ban from January 30 and hold industrial action one day later.

Workers have rejected a 5.9 percent pay deal from Strathclyde Passenger Transport (SPT). TGWU representative Scott Foley said: "What our members need and deserve is a modern agreement, properly evaluated, that truly reflects the worth and value of the jobs they do, comparable to that of their peers in the industry and SPT must recognise this. Our members want a modernised SPT Underground, complete with a modern progressive grading structure".

The union has also raised concerns that its members operated in "a safety critical environment" and were not paid according to the responsibilities entailed in their employment. SPT have stated that the offer is final and would not be increased.

French GPs, ferry staff and museum workers strike

Following widespread strikes by five million public sector workers in France on January 20 over the government's austerity measures, several groups of workers continued industrial action last week. On January 22, the two main general practitioners trade unions, the Intersyndicale Nationale Autonome Représentative des Internes en Médecine Générale (ISNAR-IMG) and the Médecins Généralistes-France (MG-France) held a demonstration in Paris. The action led to the closure of many practices for its duration.

The industrial action was also supported by the union of French doctors (FMF) and trade unions representing young general practitioners. Trade union leaders demanded a meeting with Minister of Health Douste-Blazy and Prime Minister Jean Pierre Raffarin.

The doctors are protesting against new health assurance regulations and the introduction of regulations concerning "doctors in attendance". GPs are critical of regulations that shift more work and responsibilities onto them without additional recompense. They have also denounced the measures as they increase health costs for patients. Unions called on the public "not to send back" certain documents that require patients to choose a practitioner.

Three other trade unions representing practitioners have already agreed to the government's regulations and signed an agreement on January 12 to this effect.

On January 24 the Louvre and Orsay museums in Paris closed due to industrial action by civil servants. Other museums also shut during the action, including the Guimet museum of Asian art, the Gustave Moreau museum and the French capital's tropical aquarium.

On January 26, ferry services between Dover in England and Calais in France were hit due to unofficial industrial action. SeaFrance was forced to cancel sailings of the Cézanne ferry and the Manet ferry was also stranded in Dover as a result. The company's flagship ferry Rodin also had technical problems with its car deck access and it was unable to sail. Workers walked off the job in response to the introduction of new laws due to be discussed in the French parliament on January 26.

SeaFrance said it expected the strike to last more than 24 hours. A spokesman said: "SeaFrance regrets that a national strike by French seamen has resulted in an unforeseen stoppage by the SeaFrance Manet. In addition, this situation will almost certainly result in disruption of services on Thursday with possible blockades on the road systems around the ports due to national strike action".

Middle East

Israeli aviation authority workers strike

The Israeli Civil Aviation Administration (CAA) has stopped inspecting incoming aircraft belonging to foreign airlines because of a weeklong strike by the administration's employees.

The dispute is part of a general strike by all Transportation Ministry employees. It was called over the ministry's plans to privatise its licensing, computer and meteorology departments. Workers are also protesting against a plan to turn the CAA from a unit of the ministry into an independent authority, arguing that these and other changes could lead to dismissals or reductions in their benefits. The ministry has thus far refused to negotiate.

CAA inspectors usually examine the paperwork of all foreign planes upon arrival to ensure that they meet safety standards.

A senior CAA official warned last week: “The lack of inspection impairs safety ... If the Americans learn about this, they are liable to stop flights to and from Israel.”

The official said that the strike is also affecting other aspects of air travel. Pilots’ licenses are not being renewed and various projects by Israel Aircraft Industries have been stalled while awaiting CAA permits. An IAI spokeswoman confirmed that the strike has caused the company “heavy damage.”

Israeli bank strike continues

The ongoing dispute at United Mizrahi Bank deteriorated January 25, as management filed a complaint with the police and the Israel Bar Association claiming that the workers’ legal counsel, attorney Asher Helled, urged bank employees at a recent conference to ostracise strike-breakers. In a blatant attempt to encourage company scabbing, the bank is also providing legal aid to strike-breakers.

Helled denied the charges, saying he did not incite anyone to break the law. He said that when a worker joins a labor organisation he is “making a commitment to demonstrate solidarity”. When he fails to do that, it is not only a “breach of a contractual obligation, but also parasitic,” he added.

“Mizrahi management has failed to reach an agreement on workers’ rights following the merger with Bank Tefahot, so it is trying to intimidate me, just as it is threatening the committee,” Helled said.

The labour committee is calling for the equivalent of one and a half months salary as a merger bonus, as well as the retraction of 100 letters sent to former Tefahot workers regarding the bank’s intention to fire them. The chair of the bank’s labour committee, Sarah Lazarovich, said: “There are no new rabbits in [Mizrahi CEO] Eli Yones’ hat. False complaints, scare tactics, empty threats and above all, the axe of dismissal above the heads of the workers. These are the only tools Yones has to break the labour organisation and the workers. But they won’t help him.”

Management and workers are also involved in a dispute over interpreting management’s commitment not to fire Mizrahi workers over the next four years. While management claims it will only desist from firings for cut-costing purposes, the committee is arguing that workers should not be fired for any reason, including disciplinary issues or incompetence.

Africa

Nigerian doctors return to work after a two-month strike

Nigerian doctors in the government-owned hospitals have suspended their strike after the government promised to provide funding to address their grievances.

The strike by the National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD), in opposition to the failure to pay their salary arrears and rises, halted medical treatment in the hospitals. This breakdown of care led to the deaths of around 20,000 people, according to health and union officials.

Ayo Olagunju, spokesman for NARD at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH) said on January 24, “The local branch of NARD and the medical and health workers union met this morning and decided to comply with the directive of the national body”.

NARD national president Jerry Oguzie said: “The decision to suspend the strike was taken after an emergency executive meeting to consider the proposals made by the ministry of health. They have given us the assurance that the 7.9 billion naira (\$US61 million) needed to offset our salary arrears was ready. But we insisted that if our members do not get their salaries in two weeks time, we will resume the strike.”

Ugandan local government workers strike

Local government workers in the district administration of Tororo in Uganda went on strike January 20 to demand payment of their salaries. They had not been paid for the last two months. The workers went to their workplaces at around 7.00 a.m., and barricaded them with stones.

On January 24, the offices were empty but guarded by police from the Local Administration. The police also guarded all the government vehicles.

Zimbabwean telecom workers sacked for striking

Almost half the 2,100 workers suspended for going on strike last year at the Zimbabwean telecom company TelOne have now been dismissed.

The workers have been suspended since October 2004. They told the Zimbabwean *Financial Gazette* that they were brought before the company’s disciplinary committee and told they had to plead guilty to the charges of taking part in an illegal strike. The union at TelOne, the Communications and Allied Workers Union of Zimbabwe (CASWUZ), was prevented from attending the hearings.

CASWUZ president Lovemore Matombo confirmed that the workers had been dismissed, and said the decision was a “despotic action” that could mean the end of good-natured labour relations. “The management called on the workers to appear before the disciplinary committee constituted of management only in the absence of the union (CASWUZ). This was as if they were the aggrieved, the judges and the implementers. All the workers who attended the hearings have been dismissed.”

TelOne workers had gone on strike in protest against a management decision to deprive them of their salary increase, which had been awarded to them by an arbitrator in March. The management responded by trying to get approval for the dismissal of the striking workers, by means of a “show cause order”.

The court action, which went before the labour court in November, was thrown out when the court declared that the strike had followed correct procedures and was legitimate, meaning that any dismissals resulting from the strike would be illegal. Regardless of the court decision, management locked out workers to prevent them from reporting for duty.

Teachers on strike in Zambia

Secondary school teachers in Lusaka, Zambia, went on strike last week over housing allowance arrears owed to them from 2002 to last year. They were also protesting the delay in payment of their December salaries.

Their union, the Secondary Education Teachers Union of Zambia (SESTUZ), is warning that if the government does not respond the strike will spread throughout Zambia. SESTUZ acting secretary general Emmanuel Zulu said, “We (the union) had a meeting with the permanent secretary and the Minister of Education, and they were just making the same promises they have been making before.”

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