

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Hungarian airport workers protest outside German Embassy

According to *Deutsche Presse Agentur*, representatives of striking Hungarian airport workers protested outside the German Embassy in Budapest December 22, calling for action to ensure that the German-owned company operating Ferihegy International Airport adheres to European labour regulations.

The walkout caused chaos and dozens of cancelled flights in the first days of the strike.

Unions are calling on the German government to act over what they claim are "unlawful strike-breaking tactics" used by Budapest Airport, a subsidiary of the German firm Hochtief.

Around 50 striking airport workers and family members gathered in front of the embassy to hand over a petition to the German ambassador to Hungary, Dorothee Janetzke-Wenzel.

Budapest Airport had previously brought in 38 strikebreakers as security staff from Greece. With the extra staff, the company was able to continue operating, although all passengers were now being squeezed through just one of three terminals.

Deutsche Presse Agentur reported that the president of the Railway Workers' Free Trade Union, Istvan Gasko, currently involved in a strike that has "crippled" Hungary's rail network for a week, turned up to show solidarity. Francois Ballester, political secretary of the European Transport Workers Federation, was also outside the German Embassy.

Ground staff came out on strike on December 10 in an attempt to force Budapest Airport to end a restructuring programme and extend a collective employment contract until a new one has been agreed. Unions also want backdated overtime payments, a pledge from management that there will be no job cuts before 2010 and no further outsourcing.

Greek protests against Sunday opening for retailers

Protesters blockaded shops in central Athens that were trying to open on Sunday December 28 to make up lost revenue in three weeks of rioting that badly damaged the capital's retail district.

The Associated Press reported that the shopkeepers' association had asked to keep their businesses open for a second consecutive Sunday—one more than the customary Christmas exemption to the usual opening hours.

The retailer's organisation claimed it wanted to try to recoup some of the losses from the economic slowdown that has begun to affect Greece, and from the riots that followed the police killing of 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos on December 6.

But according to AP, protesters say that the shop-owners wanted an excuse to extend Sunday shopping throughout the year. This, they claim, will only benefit the large department stores and supermarket chains and harm the small shops, resulting in longer hours for employees and, ultimately, job losses.

UK refuse collectors' take strike action over pay

Refuse collectors and street cleaners in Leeds were working to rule from December 27 over managements' refusal to make enhanced payments for their increased workload over the holidays.

Workers at household waste sort sites are also taking part in the action.

In a joint statement, the GMB and Unison said: "Our dispute is not with the people of Leeds but the city council that is supposed to serve them. This dispute is about our members being paid the appropriate rate for the vital service they provide and for being recognised where they work above and beyond the call of duty."

Teachers in UK school threaten strike after colleague is sacked over clothing

Teachers are threatening to go on strike at a London secondary school after one of their colleagues was sacked for wearing trainers and tracksuit trousers to work.

The *Guardian* December 30 reported that Adrian Swain, 56, was dismissed a week before Christmas from St Paul's Way, a comprehensive in Tower Hamlets, east London. The special needs teacher had refused to stop wearing the clothes, which apparently fell foul of the school's new dress code.

Swain said that while other staff regularly came to work in "banned items", he was being singled out because he was a union representative.

The acting head teacher who imposed the dress code has since left the school.

Swain said he had worn tracksuit bottoms and trainers throughout his 30-year teaching career and had never received complaints. His colleagues are now pressing for a ballot on industrial action.

Egyptian mineral workers stage sit-in

Over 1,000 workers of the Mineral Projects Company in Qalyubia staged a sit-in December 25 in protest against the company incurring half a billion pounds in losses, as per the report of the Central Auditing Agency.

Al Masry Al Youm said that the workers held the previous board of directors responsible for the heavy losses, and asked to refer them to the prosecutor before appointing a new board.

Egyptian farmers protest against selling of land

In Assiut, 150 farmers staged a sit-in in Al-Hawatka village in protest against selling their 500-acre land to a Saudi investor, according to *Al Masry Al Youm*. Security forces dispersed the protestors and arrested three.

Ragab Abdel Azim, a farmer, said that the governor sent a committee with six police cars and four central security cars to seize the land that is the only source of living for 1,000 families. "We will never give the land up even if we have to die for it," he said.

Mohammad Salah said the farmers sold all their possessions to reclaim the land eight years ago, asking the officials to search for any other land to sell to investors. Mohamed Said, the farmers' lawyer, said the land belongs to the Agricultural Reform Authority and not to the Municipality.

Egyptian hunger strike

According to *el-badeel*, 600 workers at Industrial and Engineering Projects in Shubra el-Kheima went on strike December 25, protesting corruption in the management and attempts to liquidate the company and sell its equipment.

Also on December 25, a worker at the Kom Ombo Sugar Refinery went on a hunger strike in protest against the refusal of the company's doctor to approve sick leave after a serious work injury. As a result, the worker has not received his salary for three months. In a petition to the governor of Aswan, 150 workers at the company accused the doctor of charging a special fee from every sick worker visiting the company's clinic.

Malawian postal workers strike over pension payments

Postal workers employed by Malawi Posts Corporation (MPC) downed tools on December 18 to protest the failure of their employers to honour payments into their pension scheme.

One of the affected workers told the *Nation* that the pension scheme, with Old Mutual, had begun for all permanent employees in 1997. He said that although contributions had been deducted from workers' salaries, management had failed to deposit the money into the scheme from June 1 2000 to June 30 2001.

"Management never informed us of this break. We simply found out when we asked to have our financial statements from Old Mutual last year. When we demanded an explanation, they told us that the break was due to lack of adequate finances... Further letters and meetings with them

have yielded nothing and we are tired. Where is our money? We want our money as soon as possible, with interest."

It is also alleged that MPC did not pay the premiums from November 2007 to the present.

Austin Msukwa, general secretary for the worker's union told the *Nation*, "Management have acknowledged the anomaly and insist on remitting the money to our funds but we do not agree. The money should be given to us, otherwise we shall not return to work."

Nigerian telecom workers demonstrate against nonpayment

Hundreds of employees of Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (Nitel) and Mobile Telecommunication (Mtel) demonstrated in Kaduna on December 22 to protest the nonpayment of seven-month salary arrears by the Bureau of Public Enterprises (BPE). They were joined by ex-employees protesting the nonpayment of severance benefits.

The demonstrators gathered outside the NITEL/MTEL North West Zonal offices. They accused the Federal Government of violating the rights of the current and former staff of NITEL/MTEL and demanded the sacking of BPE Director General, Dr Irene Chigbue.

Their banners carried slogans such as "BPE is deadlier than HIV/AIDS", "Yar'adua, why do you hate NITEL?!", "BPE pay us, we are jobless, homeless," "BPE/FGN pay us now! Our children are out of school" (referring to the Federal Government of Nigeria) and "Remove Irene Chigbue for misleading government on privatization."

Christopher Okoro, chairman of the NITEL/MTEL Staff in the North West Zone, told *Daily Trust* that BPE's failure to pay the retrenched workers their remaining pension pay-off since February 2007 and the seven-month salary arrears being owed the current staff had resulted in untold hardships for members and their families.

Local government workers in Oyo State, Nigeria, protest late payment of salaries

Civil servants and teachers in Oyo State, Nigeria, protested against the failure of the state government to pay their December salaries before Christmas.

A cross section of the protesting workers told reporters from the *Daily Nation* that the problems had arisen since the Governor Chief Adebayo Alao-Akala had taken over from his predecessor, Alhaji Rashidi Ladoja. Under the previous administration the salaries were paid between the 22nd and 25th of each month. Now workers claim that their salaries are paid late on a regular basis and even when cheques are received, they are often rejected by the bank due to the lack of cash backing.

After a lengthy strike last year, one bank began treating salaries paid into them with dud cheques as overdrafts. "Sometimes, cheques issued to us may be returned up to three times. That was why the bank deducted between N1,000 [US\$7.25] and N5,000 [US\$36.24] from our salaries last year as overdraft charges," explained one worker.



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