

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

20 December 2013

## Amazon workers in Germany in pay strike

Employees of the Internet retail firm Amazon went on strike Monday at the company's logistic centres in Bad Hersfeld, Leipzig and Graben in an ongoing pay dispute.

Amazon employs over 9,000 workers in Germany.

The industrial action, the latest in a series this year, coincides with the busy Christmas shopping period.

There are also concerns among staff of the company's practice of "constant monitoring" of workers, as well as unrealistic workplace targets.

Also on Monday, a delegation of German workers protested at Amazon's US headquarters in Seattle.

Amazon's sales in Germany last year rose by 21 percent and the country is the company's second-biggest market after the US, responsible for about one-third of all overseas sales.

Last month, an investigation by the BBC's *Panorama* programme into a UK-based Amazon warehouse found conditions a stress expert said could cause "mental and physical illness."

## French rail strike

French rail unions, including the Fédération CGT des Cheminots (CGT) went on a nationwide 36-hour strike December 12, in response to government reforms at state rail company SNCF.

Local TER train services varied from one region to the next, with a national average of six out of 10 running. Only a third of trains operated on the Paris-Limoges-Toulouse line. Six out of 10 TV high-speed trains were expected to run.

Unions say that the SNCF is already trying to implement railway reforms before a parliamentary debate, scheduled for the beginning of 2014. Workers fear a company reorganisation could lead to its break-up and see conditions of employment worsened.

The government plans to create three new public bodies in 2015, to replace the SNCF and Réseau Ferré de France, which oversees the maintenance of the tracks. Unions say that SNCF's Excellence 2020 plan and the RFF's Réseau 2020 are not properly financed.

The number of private rail operators has increased to 29 in recent years.

## Madrid anti-austerity protest attacked by police

On Saturday, Spanish riot police attacked protesters in the capital,

Madrid, during a demonstration against government austerity policies.

At least seven people were arrested and 23 injured according to state TV, as around 3,000 joined the rally to protest against cuts to public services by the government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy outside the Spanish Parliament.

Protestors also stated their opposition to the new Public Safety Law draft, which proposes heavy fines for participating in an unauthorized protest. Huge sanctions of between €30,001 and €600,000 (\$820,000) could be imposed for offences including recording and broadcasting images of members of the security forces in the course of their work, disturbances in public, religious, sport and other protests, demonstrating outside parliament, regional parliaments, the Senate and high courts without official authorisation; non authorised protests in front of important building such as nuclear power plants or airport landing strips; and "escraches"—protests in front of politicians' houses.

Some demonstrators held signs reading, "Freedom to protest" and "People's Party, shame of Spain!"

Police and barricades prevented them from getting any closer to the parliament building. Some protesters chanted, "The voice of the people is not illegal."

## Portuguese pilots to strike over holiday period

EasyJet pilots working in Portugal are to take a series of 24-hour strikes, on December 24, 26 and 31 as well as January 1, over the airline's contravention of labour law in relation to vacation leave and maximum working hours.

A previous strike, set for last Friday, was cancelled by the SPAC, the union representing the pilots, due to an invitation by management for negotiations.

## Cypriot public sector workers protest outside parliament

Public sector workers, including nurses, civil aviation workers, electricity technicians and others, protested against wage cuts outside parliament December 12.

They are protesting a proposed 50 percent cut in shift allowances, included in the 2014 budget. They have threatened to strike if the wage cuts are passed.

In a resolution given to the MPs, cited by the *Cyprus Mail*, the public sector workers described the proposed system of shift allowance as "uneven" and "unfair."

"As employees under a shift system, we work 24 hours a day, 7 days a

week and 365 days a year. That alone shows that we are working more than other workers in the public sector. We are employed in vital areas, such as power stations, ports, police stations, hospitals and telecommunications. Shift allowances is the minimum compensation for the impact these jobs have on our health and on our social life.”

### **Strike continues at French Total refineries**

A strike at Total’s La Mede, Gonfreville and Feyzin refineries entered its sixth day on Wednesday, as workers continued to demand improved annual pay rises.

On Monday, the CFDT and CGC unions signed a pay rise deal with management at the Donges plant near Nantes and ended their participation in the strike. This has isolated workers in the CGT union, which represents around a quarter of Total’s refining workers.

France’s eight refineries have a production capacity of 1.4 million barrels per day, but focus on gasoline while French motorists mainly use diesel. The country imported 17-18 million tons of diesel in 2012, making up about half of its consumption.

### **Cleaners at Beaumont Hospital in Dublin, Ireland to prolong strike**

Cleaning workers, employed by Resources Facilities Services Ltd, at Beaumont Hospital are to take three further days of action in a dispute resulting from the company decision to implement a cut to workers pay without agreement.

Further work stoppages are scheduled for a total of 10 hours on January 6, 8, and 10.

The workers, members of the SIPTU trade union, have held two previous one-hour work stoppages. SIPTU has 90 members at the hospital.

### **Spanish Stolt Sea Farm workers strike**

Staff at the Stolt Sea Farm company, with facilities in Carnota, Muxia, Camariñas and Ribeira in Spain, began a four-day strike last week over a new labour agreement.

The strike was called by the IGC trade union. Union leader Xabier Santos Canosa, accused the firm of using “coercion and threats” as a director had sent letters warning that those employees supporting the strike could “have an impact on their jobs.”

The Fish Information and Services web site said the union thought “that the company may decrease wages from EUR 3,000 to EUR 5,000 per year,” adding “current employees fear being replaced by others who can have access to the plants with lower payrolls.”

### **UK firefighters continue strikes**

Firefighters in England and Wales staged a four-hour strike from 6pm on December 13 and again from the same time the following day, in a

long-running dispute with the government over their pension rights. The workers are members of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU).

In recent months, firefighters have struck four times in protest against changes to pensions and their retirement age. Older firefighters could face losing their jobs if they fail fitness tests as part of changes to the pension age from 55 to 60 yrs.

London Fire Brigade again deployed 27 fire engines in an attempt to break the strike.

The FBU has ensured that the strikes have all been of just a few hours duration. Further token strikes are planned by the FBU on Christmas Eve, New Years Eve and January 3.

Commenting on the dispute FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack said, “By simply conceding common sense and allowing firefighters a fair deal, the government could end this industrial action today.”

### **Egyptian Iron and Steel workers protest**

Egyptian Iron and Steel Company’s workers protested outside the cabinet Sunday after they rejected a deal brokered with top government officials on their demands.

According to *Daily News Egypt*, “a deal was announced on Saturday after negotiations were held on Thursday and Friday between representatives of workers and Minister of Social Solidarity Ahmed El-Boraie and Minister of Industry and Foreign Trade Mounir Fakhry Abdel Nour.

“The workers were handed a pamphlet summarising the deal; however, Emad Abdel Halim, one of the workers who attended the talks, said the workers were not satisfied with the pamphlet and that they want to see a copy of the official signed deal.”

The workers had been striking for 19 days over several issues, including the payment of 16 months of profit shares.

Their demands include reinstating these workers into the factory, improving working standards, developing the company and investigating allegations of corruption. Workers are also demanding the removal of top company and union officials.

The demands also include that the factory be supplied with coke fuel. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) said the amount of coke supplied to the factory began declining since October, when it was 800 tonnes a day. In November, supply fell to 400 tonnes a day, which meant that the factory was operating under capacity, utilising only one of its four ovens.

### **South African platinum miners strike to continue**

The strike by around 7,000 platinum miners working for Northam Platinum which began in mid-November in pursuit of a 40 percent pay increase will continue.

The workers are members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM)

Northam management has taken an intransigent stance, insisting that the mediation process currently being pursued by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration be put on hold till after the Christmas holiday period.

The company normally closes for a ten-day break over the Christmas period, so settling the dispute before the holiday break would be of no benefit to Northam, but will increase the financial hardship of the striking

workforce.

Workers have rejected a previous pay offer reportedly of between 8 and 9 percent for non-core and core employees in the A and B categories and an 8 percent increase in the living-out allowance, conditional on a two-year wage agreement.

In response, NUM Lesiba Seshoka said tellingly, "Although the offer made by Northam may be viewed by observers as generous, NUM has still made larger and more defined compromises in the dispute than Northam has."

### **Liberian teachers' school protest**

Around 200 teachers picketed Gboveh High Scholl in Bong County, Liberia, in support of their go-slow which began in November. They are protesting the non-payment of an alleged 11 months of wages arrears. They picketed the school to disrupt examinations due to be taken by senior students.

Teachers' representatives recently met with an assistant minister in the education department. He promised the teachers that they will receive their back pay. The teachers said they would resume their previous strike action if the promise was not kept.

### **Kenyan health workers strike continues**

Doctors and other health workers in Kenya are currently involved in an all-out nationwide strike opposing the government's plans to devolve responsibility for health service provision to county governments.

Currently health services are financed and administered by central government. The health workers fear the devolution will lead to confused administration and to pay cuts.

On Wednesday, Kenya President Uhuru Kenyatta declared the action taken by doctors to be against the Hippocratic Oath and called on the county governments' governors to make other arrangements to provide health services to their areas.

On Monday, the Industrial Court issued a further order declaring the strike action to be illegal and insisting that the health workers should return to work pending a hearing on December 24. That is set to examine the health workers' objection to devolution of responsibility for health provision.

Sultan Matendeche, Secretary General of the doctors union (KMPDU) said no representatives of the doctors' or the nurses' union had been served with any court order and that the strike would continue.

### **Ongoing strike of Nigerian polytechnic lecturers**

Polytechnic lecturers in Nigeria represented by the Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics (ASUP) have been on strike since October 4 demanding the government pump more money into polytechnic education. They accuse the government of favouring the universities as the expense of the polytechnics.

Education minister, Nyesom Wike, met with the Committee of Pro-Chancellors of Federal Polytechnics in Abuja this week. He told them the government would be prepared to fund 80 percent of the finance being

requested by ASUP members to fund polytechnic education and to pay any salary arrears owed.

### **Strike by Nigerian medics**

Nigerian doctors represented by the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) began a five-day strike Wednesday of this week. It is in response to the federal government's failure to implement a previous mutual agreement to improve doctor's conditions and allowances. They will resume their withdrawal of labour after the Christmas holiday period if the government fails to make any commitment to address the issue.

### **Nigerian oil unions threaten strike to oppose privatisation**

Two oil workers unions, the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) and the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) are threatening strike action beginning January 4 if the federal government goes ahead with plans to privatise four oil refineries.

### **Nigerian academics end long-running strike**

This week the Nigerian Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASSU) announced the end of their strike which began in July, instructing its members to resume normal duties by Tuesday. The announcement follows talks between ASSU and central government representatives last week.

ASSU president, Dr Nasir Fagge, told the press that the Federal Government would provide revitalisation funds for a period of five years to improve conditions in tertiary education including infrastructure improvements. The lecturers had begun their strike after central government refused to implement an agreement signed in 2009 to commit more resources to university education.

An implementation monitoring committee to be set up to carry through the re-negotiation of the 2009 agreement, however, will not commence work until the third quarter of 2014. The federal government has agreed to reimburse any outstanding pay arrears.



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