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Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

1 February 2013

Europe

French central bank staff strike over “restructuring” job losses

At least 1,500 bank employees demonstrated Tuesday in Paris, according to union officials, in a protest against a restructuring of the Banque de France that is expected to result in the loss of up to 2,500 jobs by 2020.

The Banque de France, which currently employs around 13,000 full-time workers, has already cut about 25 percent of its workforce since the introduction of the euro, according to a report last year from the French Court of Auditors.

The French central bank says that many of the tasks that workers are currently employed to do should be automated. It wants to reduce its network in France to 105 branches, from the current 127, and reduce the number of currency processing centres from 72 to 32.

Security staff at two German airports strike over pay demand

Hundreds of security staff at Düsseldorf and Cologne-Bonn airports went on strike January 24 to demand a 30 percent pay increase.

According to the union, 80 percent of the security personnel work for a wage of €8.23 (£7) per hour.

The industrial action led to the cancellation of over 100 flights.

At Düsseldorf—the country’s third largest airport—80 flights were cancelled, while at Cologne-Bonn airport, 28 flights were grounded out of a scheduled 195.

Similar action by security personnel in December also led to flight delays and cancellations at several airports across Germany.

Workers picket cake factory in Hull, England over “raid” on wages

About 200 food industry workers went on strike and formed picket lines Tuesday at a Greencore cake factory in Hull in order to reverse a £1.2 million “raid” on their wages.

The Ireland-based firm supplies celebration cakes and sandwiches to major supermarket chains, such as Asda and Sainsbury’s.

The Unite union says the company has breached its pledge to restore pay cuts made in October 2011 which mean a reduction in take-home pay of up to £50 a week.

The strike coincides with the firm’s annual general meeting at which the Chief Executive, Patrick Coveney, asked shareholders to authorise bonuses for directors, including €1.7 million for himself.

The group last year posted profits worth £70 million.

Greencore employs around 11,000 workers at 23 sites across the UK and US.

Academics at University of Birmingham, England balloted

Academics at the University of Birmingham are to be balloted over industrial action in protest at forced redundancies and “aggressive management tactics.”

The Birmingham branch of the University and College Union (UCU) said 17 academics in the Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity were threatened with redundancy, and at least seven from its department of nursing and physiotherapy as well as two in its School of Education.

A series of strikes has been proposed by the union to begin February 28.

BBC Scotland staff set to strike over redundancies

BBC journalists in Scotland have voted Saturday in favour of taking industrial action in response to the threat of compulsory redundancies.

BBC management were given seven days’ notice of the action due to take place at their offices in Glasgow, Edinburgh—including the Scottish parliament—and Selkirk in the Borders.

A spokeswoman for BBC Scotland said: “We’re continuing to work closely with our staff and the unions to seek re-deployment wherever possible, and those talks are ongoing.”

Strike by cleaning workers at Madrid International Airport

A strike by cleaning workers at Barajas International Airport in Madrid, Spain continued this week, against company plans to lay off 54 out of 270 workers at the airport.

The strike affected terminals 1, 2 and 3 on Tuesday, a day after a similar strike at Terminal 4, the airport’s main terminal, was suspended after one day.

Passengers are now passing by accumulated garbage, made worse by the fact that the airport has very few trash containers for public use.

Thousands of Portuguese teachers march in Lisbon over spending cuts

Thousands of teachers from across the country marched in downtown Lisbon over the weekend to protest proposed spending cuts they say will slash €1 billion from the education budget.

Unions say the government plans to privatise many public schools and cut around 50,000 sector jobs, meaning “the end of a free and inclusive public school system.”

Portugal is moving towards a third consecutive year of recession. It was the third country in the euro zone to require an international bailout.

Polish rail workers strike over plans to cut bonuses

Rail workers went on a two-hour strike January 25 prompted by the state railway company PKP and Transport Ministry’s plans to cut bonuses for rail employees and retirees.

Nearly 400 trains were delayed nationwide as a result of the strike. “Major railway junctions and stations were blocked, such as Warsaw, Krakow, Katowice, Sosnowiec, Wroclaw, Poznan, Lublin, Czestochowa,” said a PKP statement.

Belgian police and steel workers clash at protest over 1,300 jobs at ArcelorMittal plants

On Tuesday, scuffles broke out between Belgian police and 2,000 steel workers protesting plans to lay off 1,300 workers at several ArcelorMittal plants in Liege.

According to the *Associated Press*: “Workers attempting to get close to the regional government offices in southern Namur threw bricks at police, who responded with tear gas and water cannon.

“Police said two policemen had to be hospitalized with the others treated locally, all for minor injuries. It was unclear how many protesters were injured.”

ArcelorMittal is the world's largest steel company. It has blamed a slump in demand and structural overcapacity in Europe for last week's decision to close the plants.

Belgium's Prime Minister, Elio Di Rupo, held talks with Mittal at the World Economic Forum in Davos last week.

Last year, ArcelorMittal revealed plans to close two blast furnaces at its plant in Florange, northern France. Following talks between Mittal and President Francois Hollande, a deal was agreed where only slightly fewer jobs were cut.

Middle East

Cairo wiring company workers strike

Hundreds of workers at Leoni Wiring Systems Company entered the second day of their strike January 23, demanding better wages and work conditions. *Daily News Egypt* reported, "The company is located in the free zone area in the Nasr City district of Cairo. The area hosts more than 100 different companies.

"Workers prevented the employees of all the free zone companies from taking their cars out of the area, allowing them to leave only on foot."

The paper interviewed Mohamed Saeed, worker at Leoni, who said, "We are fed up with our miserable working conditions. Everything is getting more expensive and we are earning nothing. The company executives earn EGP 50,000 per month and we earn EGP 600, with no annual profit shares, no health insurance, nothing."

Saeed said that workers had destroyed two buses because they tried to run over striking workers in an attempt to exit the area. "We won't allow anyone to leave until our demands are heard. We will raise our demands if they are not met soon."

The worker said the company raised their salaries by 7 percent after several negotiations, adding that this was not enough. "We want a 20 percent wage increase, health insurance and an annual profit share. The company earns million every year and we get nothing but humiliation and work-related injuries."

Laid off Iranian workers protest at South Korea embassy

Around one thousand workers laid off by Iran's Entekhab group demonstrated outside the South Korean embassy in Tehran, Sunday after an acquisition deal for Daewoo Electronics fell through due to sanctions.

Located in the central province of Isfahan, Entekhab produces domestic appliances including refrigerators, washing machines and televisions under the brand names Snowa and Haier.

The company said it laid off the workers when it shut down a manufacturing line.

Africa

South African food processor workers strike

Around 180 workers employed at the Letaba Citrus Processors Pty Ltd in Limpopo went on strike Monday.

The workers, members of the Food and Allied Workers Union, are seeking a 13 percent pay increase and a compulsory thirteenth month bonus cheque. The company is offering a 5.8 percent pay increase and wants payment of the thirteenth cheque bonus to be at the company's discretion.

Malawi nurses pledge to support two-day strike call

Malawian nurses and midwives have pledged to support the two-day strike on February 11 and 12 which has been called by the Civil Servants Trade Union (CSTU).

The strike has been called to protest poor working conditions and for a pay increase. Workers are facing an erosion of their incomes due to a sharp rise in the cost of living and the government's imposition of austerity measures.

Namibian workers oppose pay cuts imposed by fishing company

Around 200 workers held a protest at the Etale Fishing Company in the coastal city of Walvis Bay on Monday, handing in a petition to the company's managing director. The company plans to halve the wages of fishermen and factory processor workers employed by the company.

The workers began a strike on Friday last week. Around 700 workers would be affected by the proposed wage cuts. The company has a record of ongoing financial difficulties.

Tangeni Shidute, shop steward explained: "For the last two months we have received only half of our salaries...this has been a practice at Etale since 2010...70 percent of the employees are on a 'no work no pay' system."

Zimbabwe brick workers protest wages and conditions

Around 300 workers employed at the Chinese-owned Mazowe Bricks works at Good Farm between Bindura and Harare held a demonstration Monday to protest their low pay and bad working conditions.

They earn around only \$US20 a month. Fadwell Papaya, chairman of the workers' committee, highlighted the poor conditions the workers face. They include just one toilet for 300 people, no leave, no provision of protective clothing and no first aid provision.

Nigerian oil workers unions threaten strikes

Nigerian oil and gas unions have threatened strikes over the actions of companies operating in the Onne Free Trade Zone area.

The zone was set up by the Nigerian government in Rivers state in 1997. It is the only free trade zone in the world devoted exclusively to oil and gas production.

The two main oil and gas workers' unions, NUPENG and PENGASSAN, have issued a notice to hold a three-day strike beginning February 13. They are calling for the reinstatement of workers employed by companies in the FTZ sacked for joining a union. The strike would affect all southeastern states apart from Delta and Edo.

The unions say they will call for a nationwide stoppage, following the three day strike, if the companies still refuse to reinstate the sacked workers. Of the more than 120 companies operating in the FTZ, only five permit union membership.