

# Tempers flare as Spain holds general strike

Spanish unions are holding a general strike to protest against labour reforms which the new government hopes will help cut unemployment

Road, rail and air transport are all due to be affected, with domestic and European flights cut to a fraction of their usual volume. Mariano Rajoy's conservative government is to unveil measures on Friday to save tens of billions of euros. The strike is the government's first big challenge since taking office. Scuffles broke out between protesters and police as workers from Spain's largest unions picketed at the capital's bus depot early. The interior ministry said a total of 58 people were detained and nine were injured.

Outside Atocha — one of Madrid's main rail stations — picketers waved red union flags and blew shrill whistles as police looked on. Overnight, the UGT union said that participation in the strike was 'massive' and said that virtually all workers at Renault, SEAT, Volkswagen and Ford car factories around Spain had honoured it during the shift. With the EU's highest rate of unemployment, Spain is under pressure to reduce its budget deficit and bring its public finances under control.

"The question here is not whether the strike is honoured by many or few, but rather whether we get out of the crisis," the country's Finance Minister Cristobal Montoro said. "That is what is at stake, and the government is not going to yield."

The country's two biggest un-



A picketer shouts slogans as he demonstrates with others in the centre of Madrid

ions called the strike to demonstrate against new legislation which makes it easier and cheaper for companies to fire employees. Protest marches are planned throughout the country during the evening. The government insists the reforms will create

a more flexible system for businesses and workers, in a country with a stagnant economy that needs to start creating jobs. Polls have suggested only 30 percent of workers will take part in the strike but observers say the results of regional elections on

Sunday — which punished the ruling People's Party — may lead to greater participation. Ignacio Fernandez Toxo, leader of the CCOO trade union, said the strike was 'a just response to a brutal reform of our system of labour relations'.

## UK growth revised down

**Britain's economy shrank more than previously thought at the end of last year**

Updated numbers from the UK's Office for National Statistics show GDP contracted by 0.3 percent between October and December. That means growth for all of last year was just 0.5 percent. The ONS said the downward revision to fourth quarter GDP was driven by the transport and communication and business services and financial sectors.

The services sector was particularly weak and the figures add to concerns over Britain's ability to return to growth in the early part of this year. Most economists are pencilling in a small rise in first quarter GDP. But some also believe that weak construction and consumption data in recent weeks, along with the prospect of disruption in the second quarter due to an additional public holiday, strengthen the argument for the Bank of England to inject more stimulus to boost growth.

The central bank restarted its quantitative easing programme last October and is half way through its latest 50 billion pound tranche of asset purchases. Most economists reckon it will call a halt to the 325 billion pound programme when it finishes in May.

## Kindle Touch comes to Europe

**Amazon is launching a touchscreen version of its Kindle e-reader in the UK, Germany, France, Spain and Italy**

The Kindle Touch will be available for delivery from 27 April, five months after it went on sale in the USA. Unlike in America, there will not be a discounted version with adverts. The device aims to challenge touch-based e-readers from Kobo and Sony. Ama-

zon had no update on a European release date for its bestselling Kindle Fire Android-based tablet. The Touch is being sold for £109 with Wi-Fi, and £169 with both Wi-Fi and 3G connectivity, with no monthly fee. Both options allow books to be bought 'on the go' from Amazon.

The device also contains an 'experimental' web browser, but it only works with a Wi-Fi signal. The e-reader is 70 grams (2.5 ounces)

heavier and slightly larger than the basic Kindle model, which is sold for £89. However, it also offers an 'x-ray' feature — exclusive to the device — which lets users to find related passages in a book as well as more detailed information from Wikipedia and Amazon's community-written book encyclopaedia Shelfari. The latest version of its operating system will allow books to be read in both portrait and landscape mode.

## Opel-Vauxhall closure?

**The uncertainty continues for thousands of workers at Opel and Vauxhall**

US parent company General Motors — fed up with years of steep losses — is pressuring its European division to close two plants. Germany's Bochum and Britain's Ellesmere Port are in the firing line. But there was no decision as the carmaker's European board met on Wednesday, only a statement issued afterwards that restructuring talks continue. There are seven plants in Europe: three in Germany, two in Britain, one in Spain and one in Poland. Last year, 19,600 workers produced 1.27 million cars and vans. Management has said that no factories will close until 2014, but ahead of any closure decision, the political protests have already started.



Workers arrive for their change of shift at the Opel plant

GM is not alone in its overcapacity problems in Europe where economic weakness has hit sales. Industry ob-

servers expect closures by other struggling carmakers like PSA Peugeot Citroen, Renault and Fiat.

## European Citizens' Initiative starts on 1 April

**The European Citizens' Initiative regulation, which takes effect on 1 April, empowers European Union citizens to work together across borders to play a direct part in shaping democratic decisions. It is the world's only transnational tool of direct democracy.**

Committees of at least seven citizens living in at least seven EU member states who can gather at least one million signatures in support of an idea will be able to ask the European Commission to propose legislation to enact it, provided that the idea falls within the Commission's sphere of competence and is consistent with the EU's fundamental values.

Georgios Papastamkos, European Parliament Vice-President in charge of the ECI, said, "The establishment of the European Citizens' Initiative constitutes an innovative participatory instrument of the EU. It certainly raises the expectations of European public opinion, but it could have an unpredictable impact on EU rule making. The ECI will help to create a 'European public sphere' in which the EU can be built from the bottom up. The European Parliament's substantial contribution to shaping ECI participation rules made it friendlier, simpler and less bureaucratic for EU citizens." This tool should help to strengthen democracy in the European decision-making process in the era of the internet and social networking.

## A new bus that's just the ticket

**You wait and wait and then three come at once, so the old joke about buses goes, but the bus has been getting a makeover**

Umberto Guida, the co-ordinator of the European Bus of the Future (EBSF) project said, "Half of public transportation in Europe is done with buses. But buses are still widely considered as the least efficient and least attractive transport system. So our idea was to bring about the renaissance of the bus."

A brand new Number 16 bus running on one of the busiest routes in Gothenburg is part of the plan to rekindle a love affair between Europeans and their buses. And it's a magic bus with a few tricks built-in to give passengers 20 percent more space.

Lars Carlden, an engineer with Volvo Technology explained, "To start with, we have these two new wider, sliding doors that allow a better flow of passengers. We also have foldable seats. We have 15 of them. During the peak hours, the drivers can lock them in the upright position. We have also put the driver in the centre between the front wheels, and we have moved the front wheels forward so that more space is generated. In the back, we have the new bellows that are transparent, and by that means, we get more light into this area, because usually this area of the bus is very dark."