

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

4 February 2002

Strike action spreads on Britain's rail network

A 48-hour strike by drivers and station staff on South West Trains (SWT) virtually paralysed parts of the south-east England rail network on January 28 and 29. SWT ran just one-third of its normal 1,700 daily services during the action, which was the second strike this month in a protest over pay.

The company has taken a belligerent attitude towards the dispute, refusing to negotiate whilst staff remain on strike. SWT drafted in a scab force of 100 managers to run the replacement service, leading to union protests over passenger safety. The Rail Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) said some managers had just two days' training instead of eight weeks to work as guards and perform other roles. A further 48-hour strike is scheduled to begin on February 12 and SWT has threatened to bring in more managers to run the service.

The SWT strike began as train guards employed by Arriva Trains Northern ended a 48-hour walkout that had begun on January 24. Most of Arriva's 1,600 daily services were cancelled across northern England due to the action taken to protest growing pay differentials between station staff and train drivers. A second 48-hour strike is scheduled to begin February 5.

In separate disputes, also concerning pay, rail workers at Silverlink trains, operating between London and the Midlands, at the Docklands Light Railway in London and at Scotrail are to be balloted for strike action. Drivers on the London Underground are also expected to vote for a series of strikes over the next weeks.

UK JobCentre staff strike over safety at work

On January 28 and 29, JobCentre workers began a second 48-hour strike in a dispute over safety at work. Offices in England, Scotland and Wales were struck as part of a long-running campaign to oppose government plans to remove "safety screens" from JobCentres and benefit offices. In a strike ballot over the issue, staff gave a mandate to strike for up to five days a month, every month in a bid to maintain safety measures.

The latest strike involved up to 60,000 workers across the UK, including approximately 8,000 in Scotland. The action has been organised by the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) after workers voiced fears that their personal safety would be at risk with the removal of safety screens. The union organised a strike ballot following the stabbing of a security guard in an east London benefits office in November. Workers at that office refused to go back to work when the office reopened following the incident.

The change to screen-less offices is part of the Blair government's plan to merge JobCentres and benefits offices into one new service called JobCentre Plus. The government has opposed the campaign of the benefit workers to keep the screens and has instead agreed to install CCTV cameras in the offices and to employ security guards.

Workers at the offices have to deal with unemployed workers and youth on a day-to-day basis, many of whom face extreme hardship and are angry and frustrated at their plight. There have been numerous incidents of staff facing both verbal and physical abuse, leading to the installation of the screens some years ago. The PCS states that figures show that there are at least three violent incidents in JobCentres and benefit offices every week. In total, more than 300,000 working days have now been lost as a result of the dispute.

Airport staff to strike at Manchester, England

Strike action by members of the Transport and General Workers' Union (T&G), employed at Manchester International Airport, is to begin February 4. A series of one-hour stoppages was called in protest at the airport's decision to cut 140 security jobs. A further 590 jobs could be at risk due to a wider restructuring project at the airport.

T&G members, which include firemen, security guards, airfield marshals, engineers and clerical staff, voted by 726 to 153 to proceed with the action. The intention is to strike for one hour each Monday, Thursday and Saturday until February 16, unless the job losses are rescinded. The union said that passenger numbers have grown by 26.3 percent in the last five years. The cutbacks will jeopardise passenger safety.

Bus drivers in London strike following stabbing of colleague

On January 30, hundreds of bus workers began an unofficial strike in London after a driver was stabbed. Francis Thomas was taken to hospital after being stabbed once in the chest earlier the same day in Paddington, central London. He had been involved in a collision with a car driver. Thomas then drove around a corner and the passengers on his bus disembarked. The car driver stabbed him in his bus cab shortly after this.

The workers are members of the Transport and General Workers Union. Officials of the TGWU met with the representatives of the company following the attack to discuss issues of workers' security. The TGWU stated that there had been a number of incidents in recent weeks in London and other parts of the country that have included stabbings, objects thrown at buses, and physical and verbal violence from members of the public against bus drivers.

Norwegian nurses strike to demand higher pay

Nurses in Norway began strike action last week to demand higher pay. On January 23 some 350 nurses were involved in the action and were joined by colleagues at the major Oslo hospital Ullevål, the largest in the country. A further 70 nurses struck at the Haukeland Hospital in Bergen, while 13 walked off the job at the hospital in Namsos. The nurses union, Norsk Sykepleierforbund, has targeted those facilities around the country that do not involve critical or acute care.

The workers are in dispute with their state employers' organisation,

NAVO. On January 1, NAVO assumed the ownership of Norway's hospitals, previously run by local townships. Most of Norway's hospitals were already under state control and nurses demand that the wage rates applied to employees recently taken over by NAVO be brought into line with the wage rates paid to other NAVO workers.

Irish pilots vote for strike action

Pilots employed by the Irish airline Aer Lingus have voted for industrial action by a large majority. Fully 97 percent of pilots at Aer Lingus have voted for industrial action in protest at compulsory redundancies. In total 489 pilots were balloted by the trade union Impact. Under current employment legislation the union is required to give the company seven days notice before going on strike.

The ballot was called over compulsory redundancies and the terms of redundancy packages being offered by Aer Lingus. The company has issued 10 compulsory notices on junior pilots and is asking another 80 workers take voluntary redundancy. As yet none of the workers have voted to accept any of the 80 job losses.

Impact is not opposing the job losses outright and instead described the offer as "discriminatory and unfair" and a "publicity stunt". It cited that workers in other parts of the company had received a better offer from the company.

The company disputed this and condemned the potential strike stating, "They have the precise same terms. There are no conditions that do not apply to every other member of staff. The consequences of a strike would be absolutely dreadful from the company's point of view. We cannot afford to have a strike—not just purely in cash terms—it would be absolutely catastrophic from a business point of view." Michael Landers, Impact assistant general secretary said, "If Aer Lingus wants to avoid industrial action, I would say that they have to withdraw the redundancy notices that they have issued to 10 pilots—the only group that they have singled out for compulsory redundancies."

Israeli high school teachers to strike

The Israeli High School Teachers' Association announced that as of January 30, all high schools in Israel would be subject to an "indefinite" strike. The strike has been called because of a dispute over changes to grading the winter Bagrut (matriculation) finals. Until this year, pupils who took exams during the winter to amend their grades from the summer were not required to have a class mark included in the final mark. But recently, the Director-General of the Education Ministry, Ronit Tirosh, announced that the class mark must be included in the winter exam grade just as it is in summertime grades. The final High School Exam, usually taken at the end of the academic year, is meant to reflect the student's achievement throughout the year and makes up 50 percent of the grade for each individual subject.

According to the chairman of the teachers' association, Ran Erez, "The implementation of these instructions obliges the schools to provide the pupils with a grade that is not based on the real estimate of the teachers but is a fabrication. ... The fabrication results from the fact that the class mark, which constitutes 50 percent of the grade that appears on the Bagrut certificate, has to include the pupil's achievements in his studies ... but the students who are tested in the winter do not study the subjects in which they are examined that year. Therefore the schools ... cannot give a grade according to actual achievement."

Ran Erez claims that the reason behind the ministry's decision was "a desire to increase the percentage of successes in the Bagrut exams by artificial means." He said this was necessary because the

psychometric entrance examinations to the universities had been scrapped, and the Bagrut results therefore assumed greater importance. If the reliability of the Bagrut exams is undermined, the universities will introduce entrance examinations, he warned.

Ghanaian teachers' strike

Sixty teachers at the Apam Secondary School went on strike last week calling for the removal of the headmistress, Esther Hamilton. The teachers had previously petitioned the Presidential Spokesman, Kwabena Agyepong. They have rejected the proposal from the Minister for Girl Child Education Christine Churcher, that the headmistress be allowed to stay in office until the end of the academic year.

According to the *Ghanaian Chronicle*, Hamilton is a woman with "known strong political patronage" and the teachers feel threatened and hold the view that the headmistress is capable of using the two terms at her disposal to completely destroy their files.

One of the issues that have provoked the anger of the strikers is the decaying state of the school. The *Chronicle* reports that there are more than 1,200 students housed in overcrowded dormitories with completely inadequate toilet facilities. The school kitchen is in a bad state, serving insufficient and poor quality food. Disused school furniture is sometimes used for fuel for cooking as the school has been without gas for many years and firewood is always in short supply.

The regional director of education has given the striking teachers a 10-day ultimatum to call off their strike, or face the consequences. The dispute highlights the deep crisis facing education throughout the country. The *Chronicle* claims that "other Secondary Schools in the country are beset with similar problems that are waiting to implode".

Sacked Kenyan workers given quit notice

More than 250 former employees of the Kitale Municipal Council in Kenya are threatened with eviction from their homes. The council sacked them last October, after they went on strike demanding to be paid their six-month salary arrears. The council ordered them to move out of their houses by January 31. A letter from Director of Social Services, John Chebii, reads, "This office is willing to regularise your tenancy upon request and those unable to pay the rent should surrender the houses for reallocation." The workers have declared they would not move out of the houses until the council clears their salary arrears. They are calling for an investigation into the circumstances of their dismissal.



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