

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

29 August 2003

Bus drivers strike in York, England

Bus drivers employed by First Bus in York took strike action on August 27 in pursuit of a pay rise.

The drivers, members of the Transport and General Workers' Union, are trying to secure a pay deal of £8 an hour which the company has so far rejected. Wednesday's action was the first of 15 strike dates that have been announced over the next three months.

Scottish nursery nurses to strike

Nursery nurses in Scotland are threatening weeklong strike action from September 8 to 12 if their employers do not make an acceptable pay offer.

The nurses, who are employed by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, have already been involved in a series of two and three-day strikes since May and a continuing boycott of additional duties.

An average nursery nurse earns between £10,000 and £13,800 per year. The nurses are seeking a £4,000 a year pay rise.

UK postal workers set to ballot for industrial action

The UK's 160,000 postal workers are set to ballot for their first national strike action in seven years following the breakdown of talks with Royal Mail.

The Royal Mail and the Communication Workers' Union (CWU) met on August 27 for negotiations brokered by the government's arbitration service Acas. But the talks broke down with the CWU rejected a 14.5 percent pay rise over 18 months, conditional on meeting targets and changing working practices. The CWU has called for an unconditional 8 percent increase.

The CWU has sent strike ballot papers to its members with the vote result expected on September 17.

Birmingham postal workers in unofficial action

Postal workers at the Castle Bromwich delivery office in Birmingham took unofficial action on August 26 in protest at low staffing levels. Fifty workers walked off the job, leaving 9,000 residents in parts of the city without mail. Royal Mail managers were drafted to deliver post to thousands of other homes after the workers voted to continue their stoppage.

Norwegian air strike averted

Last minute negotiations appeared to resolve a pay strike by airport workers in Norway, narrowly averting a threatened strike.

The talks were over a wage settlement for 2003 with airport staff demanding a wage rise in line with other public

employees, effective from May 1. Public sector unions said a deal had finally been agreed with the Civil Aviation Administration just before the deadline, after talks broke down on several occasions.

Irish community workers on hunger strike

Community workers in Dublin, Ireland began a hunger strike on August 27 to protect their jobs.

Thirty-four of the 325 people affected by cuts to the Job Initiative Programme gathered outside Dublin's General Post Office for a 24-hour hunger strike aimed at pressuring the government to reverse the cutbacks.

The jobs programme was introduced in July 1996 to provide full-time employment for people aged 35 years and over who had been unemployed for five years or more. This year the government's budget allocation allowed for just 2,200 participants but 2,525 had enrolled.

Bank of Ireland IT staff to ballot on outsourcing deal

Bank of Ireland IT staff who are members of the Irish Bank Officials Association (IBOA) are to ballot on the bank's proposed seven-year outsourcing deal with Hewlett Packard.

The proposals led to a 24-hour walkout last month by the IT workers in protest at plans to transfer 500 bank staff to Hewlett Packard.

The bank and the IBOA have agreed to proposals from an independent arbitrator. These include a one-off payment of 5,500 euros and job security for two years for staff transferred to Hewlett Packard, along with an option for deployment within the bank for five years after that.

The final ballot of the IBOA members will be held on August 29. An IBOA spokesperson said that if its members rejected the deal the bank will face "total war" and any further strike action at the bank could "totally close it down."

Tea plantation workers strike in Kenya

About 3,000 workers in tea factories in Kenya went on strike on August 19. Workers walked off the job to oppose harassment by management and poor living conditions.

Employees complained of six people, some with families, being made to share a small room. Overtime payments have also been stopped. In some cases, the multinational companies that control the Kenyan tea industry have sent workers home without any benefits. One worker recently died on duty after a senior manager refused to grant him a sick day.

The strike was called off after one week, following a meeting at the weekend of August 23-24 between trade union leaders

and the factory management.

Zimbabwean railway workers strike to defend living standards

National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ) employees went on strike on August 25, after salary negotiations failed to produce results. The workers are demanding an increase to compensate for soaring inflation levels.

Passenger services and other trains were cancelled and thousands of commuters in Harare and Bulawayo left stranded on the platforms. The Harare to Bulawayo and Harare to Mutare routes were cancelled, as were evening urban commuter services in Harare and Bulawayo.

There are more than 10,000 workers employed by NRZ, represented by three unions—the Rail Artisans’ Union, the Railway Association of Enginemen and the Zimbabwe Amalgamated Workers’ Union.

A union member told the local media: “[The members of all] the three unions have decided to come up with a common position against the management as it has failed to agree to our demands for a 1,000 percent increment. We last received an increment of 70 percent in January, but due to the inflation and other circumstances on the ground the 70 percent being offered by the management does not suit what is happening.”

The strike does not have official union backing and is illegal. Railway Artisans Union President Phibeon Chenyika said, “We are not aware of this strike but what we have heard is that there was a disruption of normal services in Harare and we are in the process of consulting our members to find out what caused [it]”.

Chenyika suggested that a signal failure might have caused the disruption. Negotiations were going well, he claimed and anticipated that “an amicable solution will be reached soon.”

Zimbabwean construction workers strike

Construction workers demonstrated outside the offices of Zimbabwe Construction and Allied Trades Workers’ Union on August 26. Union officials responded by calling the police to disperse them.

One of the employees told reporters, “We are blaming the union for failing to address the issue of increasing our salaries. Since May, the officials have been saying they are still negotiating with our employers—we are not happy with the delays. We have decided to go on strike until the issue of our salaries has been solved.”

Zimbabwean court declares strike illegal

The Zimbabwean Labour Court ordered Rufaro Marketing employees back to work on August 21. The workers have been on strike for three weeks. They are demanding an increase in their minimum monthly salary from \$54 to \$150.

Rufaro Marketing is owned by the Harare City Council and sells liquor in working class suburbs. The court assured the company that it was free to take disciplinary action against the strikers when they returned to work.

Public sector workers strike in Zambia

Public sector workers came out on their second national strike in two weeks after the government refused to honour a recent pay deal.

Civil Servants and Allied Workers Union of Zambia (CSUZ) Secretary-General Darrison Chaala told reporters, “We have officially started a countrywide strike because the government seems to be ignoring our demands, even after they signed a collective agreement. The strike we have started today is indefinite and all the workers have responded to it.”

Zambian President Levy Mwanawasa has refused to implement the pay deal under pressure from aid donors who predict a \$US124 million budget overrun this year.

Zambia has just failed to qualify for debt relief because it has not instigated an IMF privatisation programme to sell-off the state-owned Zambia National Commercial Bank and the Zambia Electricity Supply Corporation.

With a \$6.5 billion debt, Zambia spends \$150 million to \$200 million on loan repayments. Debt relief would have allowed Zambia to keep approximately \$3.8 billion of this money over the next 20 years.

Charity Musamba of Jubilee Zambia, a non-governmental organisation that campaigns for debt relief, said, “This clearly goes to show that the solutions our creditors give to our unsustainable debt problems greatly lack substance and are unable to work. The budget overrun, which is being cited as one of the reasons Zambia has to miss out on debt relief, is responsible for only about two percent of the national budget ... is it fair to punish almost 10 million people because of such an issue?”

Gregory Chikwakwa of the Civil Society for Poverty Reduction explained, “The suffering of the majority of Zambians is definitely ignored by the western bilateral and multilateral donors when they make a decision to deny us debt relief. What this means is that money that could have gone towards poverty reduction will now be going towards debt servicing, and poverty reduction [programmes] will suffer again because the West has changed the goal posts.”



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