

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

20 August 2004

Europe

British Airways check-in and ground staff vote to strike

On August 18 check-in and ground-handling staff employed by British Airways (BA) voted to strike for 24 hours in a pay dispute. The members of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) are set to hold industrial action on August 27 at Heathrow, Gatwick, Birmingham, Manchester, Edinburgh and Glasgow airports.

The TGWU represents around 8,000 BA staff and turnout for the strike ballot was 60 percent.

Earlier in the week BA staff belonging to the GMB union also voted to strike. Some 3,000 GMB members are to walk off the job for one of four days over the August Bank Holiday weekend—one of the busiest times of the year when BA estimates it carries 100,000 passengers a day.

GMB general secretary Brendan Gold said, "Taking strike action is the last resort but the consistent failure by BA to address the issues seriously has led to our people feeling they have no alternative".

The company and trade union representatives are to hold further talks in an attempt to resolve the dispute.

BA this week announced a new pay offer to its staff that includes cutbacks to workers sick leave entitlement. The company has offered employees one-off payments of up to £1,000, if they take less than 16 days sick leave between October 2004 and September 2006, and also what BA says is an 8.5 percent increase in pay over three years in addition. BA claims its staff takes an average 17 days off sick each year, against a UK average of seven days.

A TGWU spokesman said in response to BA's latest offer, "We have a real difficulty with that and we have to find a way through the problem. If the company insists on linking pay with absence, it will cause a real problem."

Many staff in the airline industry are low paid. The

TGWU said that BA baggage handlers are paid about £14,000 a year, while check-in and administration staff, many of whom are women, earn between £2,000 and £3,000 less.

Rail staff vote to strike

This week customer service agents and platform staff workers employed by the cross-channel rail company Eurostar voted to take strike action in a dispute over pay and grading. Staff at Waterloo in London and Ashford in Kent voted by a majority of two to one in favour of industrial action.

The workers, members of the Rail Maritime and Transport union, are to strike over the August Bank Holiday weekend. The union is to announce exact dates when strike action will commence later this week.

Employees have voted to take action due to pay differentials between workers in London and Kent. According to the union, staff at Ashford in Kent are paid £4,000 less than colleagues doing the same work at Waterloo, London.

RMT leader Bob Crow said, "Workers are no longer prepared to accept low pay and indefensible pay differentials between people doing identical work in different locations." He added that starting salaries for some workers have remained at about £13,000 for the last decade.

In an attempt to weaken the strike, a spokesman for the company said that it would redeploy staff from elsewhere in the company to do the job of any workers who took industrial action.

Aer Lingus workers vote for action

Aer Lingus airline workers in Ireland voted for strike action in a ballot result announced on August 17. The ballot held by the SIPTU trade union resulted in support for strike action by a majority of more than 90 percent. Some 2,400 members of the union employed by Aer Lingus participated in the vote.

The ballot was held in response to a plan by the airline to cut 1,325 jobs as part of a restructuring plan.

The union said that the ballot authorises the union to hold industrial action “if necessary” in defence of jobs. The union said, “No convincing case has been made by management for the 1,325 job cuts they propose. It could hardly be otherwise when even the company recognises that this is not a survival situation and where Aer Lingus is expected to make around €100 million profit this year, thanks to the sacrifices of the workforce”.

But SIPTU National Industrial Secretary Michael Halpenny made clear that the union was prepared to assist the company in its attack on jobs. He said, “There have already been 3,000 redundancies since 2001 and the workforce is now less than half it was a decade ago when the Cahill Plan was introduced.

“Time and again SIPTU members have shown themselves able and willing to embrace change in order to protect the airline, but we are not in the business of promoting other agendas. Aer Lingus is not just another company, it is the national airline and what is required now is a balanced, measured and inclusive approach to its future and the interests of all the stakeholders, and particularly the workers, who have turned it around from a loss making to a significantly profitable enterprise.”

Bus drivers accept pay offer in South Yorkshire bus strike in England

This week bus drivers employed by the First bus company South Yorkshire voted to accept a pay offer from the company. Workers voted 835 to 254 in favour of the deal, following a recommendation to accept by the Transport and General Workers’ Union. The offer includes a pay increase of 30p an hour backdated to April, with another 30p rise in April 2005.

Africa

Ugandan teachers strike to win promised pay rise

Primary school teachers in Kabale, Uganda, have gone on strike to demand the salary increase promised to them by President Yoweri Museveni. The strike began on August 10 in two sub-counties and has now spread to other areas of the district.

The district director of education, Sam Basulwa, ordered the teachers to end their action, threatening that their salaries would be withheld if they did not.

Zambian council workers protest over salary arrears

Workers at the Chingola Municipal Council (CMC)

in Zambia have gone on strike after management failed to pay them the four months’ salary arrears.

The strikers are members of the Zambia United Local Authorities Workers’ Union (ZULAWU). Union branch secretary Bruno Namachila said that workers wanted the local government minister Sylvia Masebo to intervene in the matter. He added that the strikers did not believe that the council had no money to pay them, since it was collecting rates and levies. Namachila said that the strike would end only after an auditor examined the council’s financial affairs.

Miners’ strike in Botswana

Around 250 machine operators belonging to the Botswana Mining Workers Union (BMWU) in Selebi-Phikwe organised a strike on August 17. Its purpose was to demand a salary increase in recognition of their seniority, following the introduction of a new wage structure. There has been no contact between management and the union since the BCL mine management suspended 13 union leaders over a leaked document considered confidential by management.

Kabelo Oitsile, one of those suspended, said: “We hear that the two sections are concerned that the new salary structure has lumped or bundled workers in one group without recognising their level of seniority.” He added that the workers in Selebi-Phikwe were eager to strike, in spite of their union’s decision to suspend the action due to the failure to meet all legal requirements.



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