Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

29 July 2005

Europe

Dockers block French port

An Irish Ferries vessel sailing for France with 1,100 people on board was prevented from docking on July 18 because of a blockade by protesting French dockers.

The Rail Maritime and Transport union said its members joined the protest at Cherbourg, forcing the MV Normandy, which sailed from, Rosslare, Ireland, to turn away from the port.

This is the third time in three months that seafarers have blocked Irish Ferries' ships from docking at French ports. The same vessel was prevented from docking in Cherbourg in June because of a union blockade.

The action was part of a long-running campaign against the recruitment of workers from overseas countries who, unions claim, are on lower pay rates and worse conditions than crews from the UK.

The dispute had worsened in recent weeks following the dismissal by Irish Ferries of a Latvian worker who was sacked and flown back to her country after contacting union officials.

London Underground strike threat over workers' safety

London Underground (LU) drivers are threatening to strike if their concerns over safety and security in the wake of the July 7 London bombings are not addressed.

The Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union said it will consider balloting members if talks with LU bosses fail to reach agreement.

RMT officials described a meeting on July 22, which included London Mayor Ken Livingstone, as "disappointing" and had said its members would not strike but the union would support any that felt too at risk to work.

Drivers are demanding assurances over staffing levels and extra security measures. Issues the RMT want addressed include more visible staff, a review of present suspect-package procedures, the return of guards to tube trains and a return to dedicated gate-line staff that patrol ticket barriers.

Threat of national strike at Rolls-Royce

A dispute over the sacking of an official at Rolls-Royce's Bristol, UK, plant is threatening to spill over into national industrial action.

Members of engineering union Amicus voted last week to ballot for industrial action at the Bristol military jet plant—which employs 3,500 workers—following the dismissal of convenor Jerry Hicks for misconduct.

Hicks was sacked after a disciplinary hearing last week found him guilty of "gross misconduct" for organising an unofficial strike at the plant after two other union members were faced with dismissal. Last week, union convenors from across Rolls-Royce's UK plants, including major sites in Derby and Glasgow, met and discussed the issue. One Amicus official present said national action was discussed.

Asda distribution staff on strike

Staff at the Asda distribution centre at Washington, Tyne & Wear began a three-day strike at midnight on July 27 in a dispute over pay.

The GMB union involved in the action by 538 workers told the BBC it would be "solid" and affect the supermarket's stores across the north of England.

The workers had been offered a 10 percent pay rise earlier this year, conditional on giving up the right to collective bargaining. They were balloted and voted three to one to reject the offer.

UK firefighters announce strike action

Two-thirds of unionised firefighters throughout the county of Suffolk voted this week in favour of strikes between August 2 and 5.

The decision to strike was taken after Suffolk County Council said 12 turntable ladder crewing jobs would go in Bury St. Edmunds.

Suffolk Fire Brigade Union chairman Vince Jell said: "We do not want to strike, but these cuts are based on a flawed plan and there is no evidence to back it up.... Although we know people will say strikes put the public at risk, we say allowing the plan to go through will put the lives of the public and firefighters in jeopardy for the long-term."

The county council's decision was part of its annual Integrated Risk Management Plan, which also proposed using money saved from the job cuts to fund extra retained rural firefighter posts.

It was also revealed this week that the military could be called in to Suffolk in the event of the strike. Lee Howell, chief fire officer and director of public protection for Suffolk Fire Service, said, "A formal approach has been made to central government for assistance in dealing with a strike and it looks like it has been treated positively.... At the moment it is only a provisional agreement, but we are expecting Ministry of Defence firefighters in red fire engines to be used rather than Green Goddesses."

Careers service workers to vote on strike action

Several hundred staff at Scottish Enterprise (SE) are to be balloted on strike action over a pay dispute. The move affects the organisation's Careers Scotland office, and follows a four-month standoff over a performance-related pay scheme introduced by Scottish Enterprise.

About 900 members of the public sector union Unison—almost 90 percent of the Careers Scotland workforce—will be asked in August how they intend to escalate industrial action.

As part of the action, workers have been refusing to input information into the organisation's national client record system, called Insight. It holds the details of more than 200,000 people.

SE has expressed concern that the timing of the strike may have an "adverse" effect on the advice it can offer to school-leavers at a crucial time—just after they receive their exam results.

SE says the industrial action is a material breach of contract. It considers the system to be a critical part of Careers Scotland and says the workers' stance is affecting the service it provides and is damaging its reputation. The enterprise agency says unless staff resume their normal duties, they will be docked 16 hours' wages a month, the time it believes workers spent inputting information into Insight.

The company also informed its staff that should industrial action continue, their wages will be reduced come August 19, while those workers who elect to return to full duties will be fully remunerated.

General strike in Greece

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A general strike, called by unions responding to proposed changes in labour law by the conservative government of Costas Karamanlis, swept Greece on July 26.

Trains and buses were halted, and more than half of the flights by the Greek carrier Olympic Airlines were grounded during the day. The Greek national railway offered only a reduced service. Public transport in Athens ground almost to a standstill. Trolley buses suspended service in the morning, but resumed service to carry crowds of commuters who also tried to reach the city on traffic-clogged highways.

Most public banks were closed, while telephone service, utilities and the post office were subject to slowdowns.

Several unions also staged demonstrations in Athens, although the events were not well publicised due to the cancellation of television and radio news broadcasts because journalists had also joined the strike.

The nationwide walkout is the second in a month.

The General Confederation of Workers, the largest umbrella union in Greece, called the 24-hour strike in an effort to pressure the Karamanlis government to back down on plans to press legislative reforms through parliament.

The proposed plans would allow employers to reduce overtime payments, revise pension plans and impose more flexible work hours. A vote of 55 MPs in favour and 44 against paved the way for shops to stay open until 9 p.m. on weekdays and 8 p.m. on Saturdays.

Meanwhile, MPs also voted in principle to pass the labour bill—another key tenet of the government's structural reforms policy—which seeks to introduce cheaper overtime and flexible work hours.

Under the bill, for the first five hours of overtime, employees will be paid half the current rate they receive for this type of work, meaning they will be paid 25 percent on top of their normal hourly rate. It will also allow employers to ask staff to work up to 10 hours in a single day, rather than the normal 8, in return for working fewer hours on another day.

Caramanlis took power 15 months ago, vowing to make the economy more competitive and to spur growth. In the year since Athens hosted the Olympic Games, his government has sought to exploit the momentum from the games to develop Greece's tourist industry.

This year, Greece became the first European Union member state to come under the close supervision of the European Commission. Its budget deficit of 6 percent, swollen by spending on the Olympics, was more than twice the ceiling set by the "stability and growth pact" of the EU.

Russian dock workers strike for better conditions

Dock workers at St. Petersburg's port began a limited three-day strike July 25 to demand better working conditions, accusing port operators of pressuring them to accept less favourable contracts.

The workers will strike for one hour a day and refuse to work overtime, said Alexander Moiseyenko, head of the St. Petersburg dock workers' union, according to the Interfax news agency. After three days, the workers may decide on a full-scale strike.

The strike is aimed at slowing down the loading and unloading of ships in the port, a major transport hub in northwest Russia that processed 14.6 million metric tons (16 million tons) in 2003.

The three port operators in Russia's second largest city are attempting to push through new collective contracts that remove indexation of pay and weaken job security. Union leaders were seeking dialogue with employers, but the port administration told the trade union to leave its offices and switched off their phones.

Meanwhile, the port of Kaliningrad—which is due to celebrate its 750th anniversary with great ceremony this month—is the focus of a bitter industrial struggle. The commercial port's management and dockworkers have been engaged in an ongoing dispute since 1997 over basic wages and conditions.

24-hour strike at Italian airline

A 24-hour strike by cabin staff belonging to the SULT union began at Fiumicino, Italy, on July 18, after the end of one of the two "protected" periods when the law forbids strike action.

Due to the strikes, Alitalia was forced to cancel 59 flights (26 national and 33 international) from Rome and Milan.

Reasons cited for the strike include the safety and security of workers; the application of unilaterally imposed and partially agreed or un-agreed contracts by the carrier; the lack of staff, which leads to crew shortages on flights; and the use of flexible fixed-term contract labour.

Middle East

Iranian labour protests

More than 50,000 workers took to the streets of cities across Iran on July 16 to protest the government's labour policies. Many protesters blamed the government for not ensuring that workers' salaries were paid and for systematic deductions in insurance scheme benefits.

The largest protest was in the western city of Ilam, where 17,000 workers took part in a rally. At least 20,000 workers also rallied in two separate towns of Pakdasht and Varamin near Tehran. Around 10,000 workers from the province of Golestan, northern Iran, 4,000 factory workers from the eastern province of Khorrasan Jonoubi, and at least 1,000 workers from Iran's Pars Electric, based in Tehran, all went on strike.

Transportation facilities in the Iranian capital and the holy city of Qom, in central Iran, also suffered disruption as city employees joined with the protesting workers.

Several thousand industrial workers from Bushehr, southwest Iran, Yazd, central Iran, and Shushahr, southern Iran, also took part in the strikes.

Iraqi oil workers protest

Around 15,000 Southern Oil Co. workers from the General Union of Oil Employees (GUOE) began a 24-hour strike July 22, cutting most oil exports from the south of Iraq.

The strike is in support of demands made by Basra Governor Mohammad al-Waili for a higher percentage of Southern oil revenue to be ploughed back into Basra's local economy.

Basra's sewage system, electricity grid and medical services are severely damaged due to the aftermath of the US invasion. Despite being the capital of Iraq's oil reserves, the city has an official unemployment rate of 40 percent and now faces severe poverty and malnutrition.

The GUOE has been involved in an industrial dispute with the Southern Oil Co. administration, the Ministry of Oil and the government since June 20 when workers at the Basra Oil Refinery staged a protest action and a lockout. The union is demanding the removal of high-ranking Baathist managers in the SOC and "regime loyalists" serving in the Ministry of Oil. It is also calling for an increase in workers' wages. According to the media and culture officer, Faraj Rabat Mizbhan, the basic starting pay for an Iraqi soldier is 700,000 ID (£270) per month, whilst a senior oil worker with 30 years' service is being paid on average 400,000 ID (£150).

Negotiations between the government, the Ministry of Oil and the union were recently resumed in order to avert a full general strike that would involve a further 8,000 workers, including the Amara and Nassiriyeh provinces. Nonunion workers have joined GUOE strike action in the past.

Currently, the southern oilfields are providing the central and northern areas of Iraq with the vast majority of its petroleum, LPG and oil, as well as providing the bulk of oil exports.

Israeli labour court clears energy workers' strike, but says, "Unload the coal"

The Haifa Labour Court ruled July 26 that industrial action taken by Israel Electric Corp. (IEC) workers is legitimate.

As part of the action, IEC workers have not been fixing installations at most power stations or company facilities. They are also not unloading ships bringing coal to the IEC.

The strike action was sparked by the company's refusal to sign an

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agreement with the union that would guarantee workers a 20 percent pay rise. Workers also oppose structural changes planned for the IEC, which would break the firm up into 17 separate entities, some of which would be put up for sale.

IEC management claimed the dispute was causing incredible damage to Israel's energy sector and the company's coffers, and are increasing the number of power problems. Management also claimed the strike was threatening the IEC's coal supplies and are harming the company's good name, as well as being illegal.

The labour court judge rejected management's claims that the strikes were politically motivated. In a partial victory for management however, the judge did order the workers to unload the coal ships.

Africa

Strike wave hits South Africa

A strike wave has hit South Africa over the past seven days, affecting workers employed by airline companies, supermarkets, local authorities and the steel industry.

Twenty thousand workers, out of a total workforce of 32,000 employed by the supermarket chain Pick 'n Pay, have been on strike across South Africa since July 22. The action is in support of a wage demand of Rand 400 (US$60) or 12 percent, whichever is the greater. The company has offered 7.9 percent or R310 (US$46.4) per month.

The chief executive of Pick 'n Pay, Sean Summers, said the company lost trade amounting to Rand 24 million (US$ 3.5 million) on the first day, which increased to around Rand 50 million (US$ 7.5 million) after four days.

On the second day of the strike, police were called to the Sea Point branch of the supermarket in Cape Town, when workers defied a court interdict obtained by Pick 'n Pay preventing them from entering the store. The police used tear gas canisters when they arrested the workers.

The South African Broadcasting Corporation reported that most shoppers outside the Adelphi Centre sympathised with the strikers and were disgusted by the way they were being treated. Fifty strikers were brought before the magistrates' court, amid a noisy demonstration by their fellow workers. Proceedings at both the magistrate's court and the Cape Town regional court were disrupted.

Police intervened to break up picketing at other Pick 'n Pay supermarkets across South Africa. Ninety workers spent a night in Cambridge police station before appearing in East London magistrates' court.

According to *Sapa*, police intervened at several Gauteng stores "where striking workers, in defiance of the court interdict, forced their way onto the shop floor and forcibly tried to close the stores."

On July 26, 4,000 marchers petitioned the company's head office in Kensington, Johannesburg, threatening to call for broad-based consumer boycotts and action if their demands were not met within 48 hours.

Similar marches were held in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. Pick 'n Pay human resources director Frans van der Walt acknowledged that between 15,000 and 20,000 workers took part.

Saccawu spokesperson Moses Makhanya said the union planned to march in cities across the country on July 29, along with the South African Municipal Workers' Union, whose three-day strike was due to begin two days earlier.

The Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) has been called in to arbitrate on the dispute.

Employees of Kentucky Fried Chicken are also on strike in support of their demand for an 11 percent increase.

South African airline staff strike over pay

After six months of fruitless negotiation, 5,000 South African airline employees—including both ground staff and cabin crews—went on strike for six days from July 22, over the size of the yearly pay increase. Five hundred of the strikers picketed outside the headquarters of their employers, South African Airways (SAA). Management offered 5 percent, an increase of 1 percent over its original offer, plus a lump sum payment of Rand 1,600 (US$239), but the strikers rejected this and demanded 8 percent.

The strike originally involved members of the United Association of South Africa (Uasa). Later, staff belonging to the SA Transport and Allied Workers Union (Satawu) joined them on the picket lines. The pilots threatened to join the action and the technical division were rumoured to be on the verge of doing likewise.

Sapa reported that the six-day strike virtually grounded the airline, causing chaos at airports all over the country. It led to the cancellation of more than 100 domestic and international flights, including fights to Lusaka, Nairobi and Entebbe. Passengers at airports and terminals across the country waited for hours for flights that did not materialise.

Management and the unions met on July 26 under arbitration by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). The outcome of the talks was a return to work based on a pay increase of 6 percent.

SAA recently announced a year-end Rand 966 million net profits compared with a net loss of Rand 8.6 billion last year. *Business News* commented that the unions had "consistently settled for modest wage hikes over the past few years as the airline had faced enormous financial problems because of the strong rand....and now obviously believed that with the airline's fortunes improving, 'it was payback time.' "

Three-day national strike by South African municipal workers

Hundreds of thousands of municipal workers began a three-day national strike on July 22, in support of a demand for a wage increase of 9 percent or Rand 400 (US$60) and a new minimum wage of Rand 3,000 (US$449) per month.

The South African Local Government Association (Salga) is offering 6 percent and inflation plus 0.5 percent in 2006 and inflation plus 0.4 percent in 2007, which the South African Municipal Workers' Union (Samwu) describes as "ridiculously low." According to the website *DUMA PEWA*, Salga is also proposing to reduce the minimum wage from Rand 2,500 (US$374) to Rand 2,300 (US$344).

Unions have called on all their members, including those who render essential services like health, traffic, fire, water, electricity and sanitation to support the strike, as there is no agreement in place that forbids them from taking action.

Salga has announced it will go ahead and apply the 6 percent increase across the board.

An all-out strike was also due to begin on July 27 at South Africa's Steel & Vanadio, in support of a wage demand of 8 percent. The company, which is majority-owned by mining giant Anglo-American, had offered 5.5 percent.

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