Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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Europe

Alitalia workers in Italy stage unofficial strike

On January 26 trade unions called on Alitalia airline staff to return to work following a seven-day unofficial strike. The call was made after the union met with government officials.

Luigi Angeletti, secretary general of the UIL union, denounced the unofficial action and said after the meeting, "Our aim was to make ourselves heard. Now we have a negotiating partner and we can change the form of our action and stop this extreme form of struggle."

The staff began strike action to protest worsening working conditions that are a product of a restructuring plan. The government, which owns 49.9 percent of Alitalia, plans to carry forward its 2004 decision to shed 3,700 jobs and split ground operations and transport activities.

The action began on January 19 and has paralyzed the airline, costing Alitalia about €20 million ($26 million) each day. On January 22, the unions called on its members to return to work, a call that was not heeded. On January 25, Alitalia was forced to cancel at least 188 national and international flights.

The government, company management and unions are due to meet again on February 1.

Airline pilots in Scandinavia strike to defend contract rights

Airline pilots employed by the Scandinavian airline group SAS ended their wildcat strike on January 26.

The strike was to protest plans by SAS to hold wage negotiations on a national basis following the recent split of the company into three national carriers covering Sweden, Norway and Denmark, and a single separate long-haul operator. Workers fear that this will lead to worsening pay, conditions and job losses as the firm seeks to undermine gains established under the previous single cross-border Scandinavian agreement.

The decision to return to work followed a move by SAS to have the industrial action declared illegal by the courts and extract damages from the pilots.

The strike resulted in many flights across the region being halted and has cost the company 30 million kroner ($5 million) a day.

Most of the strike action was held in Denmark, where the pilots called a wildcat strike. In Norway a large number of workers called in sick.

Construction workers at Heathrow Airport continue strike over pay

On January 20, hundreds of workers employed in the construction of the £4 billion fifth terminal at Heathrow Airport in London held industrial action. The strike was held over four days and included a weekend overtime ban. It was the second such action in the last two months.

Workers including scaffolders and labourers are calling for a bonus pay increase of £1 an hour. The employers, Laing O'Rourke, condemned the strike and said that its offer of an extra 67p an hour would be withdrawn if the strike went ahead.

The GMB trade union said the offer had not been received in writing. Terminal 5 is being built to the west of Heathrow Airport and is due to be completed in 2008.

Middle East

Iranian bus workers to strike again

Tehran's bus workers have called for strike action on January 28 to press for the release of their jailed union leader, Mansoor Ossanlou, and introduction of collectively negotiated contracts. A leaflet calling for strike action and signed by the union's executive has been widely distributed in the Iranian capital.

In the past week there have been increasing calls from among the 17,000-strong employees of the state-owned Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company (Sherkat e Vahed) for renewed strike action in protest at the authorities' refusal to release Ossanlou and meet their other demands.

Ossanlou has been held since December 22, 2005 without charges at the high security Evin Prison in Tehran. He was arrested, along with a dozen other union activists, during police raids at their homes. A strike—which was widely supported by the people of the capital and workers from other industries—forced the release of all but Ossanlou.

Despite promises by the mayor of Tehran during recent negotiations, all the demands of the workers remain unmet. Harassment of the bus workers continues in the form of unpaid salaries and frozen bank accounts and direct threats by the Intelligence Ministry.

UAE Limousine drivers threaten strike over wages

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Around 214 drivers of Fast Limo, the United Arab Emirates' premier luxury limousine company, have lodged a complaint with the Labour Relations Department at the office of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in Abu Dhabi that they have not been paid their salaries for December.

The drivers threatened to go on strike if the management goes ahead with what they called "its declared intention to reduce their remuneration."

Africa

Four South African transport unions threaten strike action

Meetings will be held over the coming week in every Transnet workplace to discuss the possibility of strike action. The action would be in protest against lack of consultation regarding the company's plans for the reorganisation of the South African transport industry.

Transnet is proposing to privatise some of its businesses, including Freightdynamics, Transnet Pension Fund Administration, Autopax and Blue Train. Other enterprises, such as Transfer SAA, Metrorail and Shosholoza Meyl, would be transferred out of Transnet but would remain publicly owned, at least for the present. Also there would be reallocation of staff from one branch of Transnet to another.

When Public Enterprises Minister Alec Erwin first announced the plans in late 2004, the leadership of the South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union welcomed his statement. A joint negotiating body, the Transnet Restructuring Committee (TRC), was set up to oversee the changes.

Since then Transnet management has limited its definition of restructuring to sale to the private sector only and refuses to discuss any other issues.

The unions claim that the transfer of workers from one part of Transet to another, such as moving rail-engineering workers from Spoornet to Transwerk, which will affect 30,000 workers, requires negotiations to protect the workers' present wages and conditions and Transnet is refusing to put these issues on the table.

The four unions involved are the South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union, the United Transport and Allied Trade Union, the South African Railway and Harbours Union and the United Association of South Africa.

They represent workers at Metrorail, Spoornet, South African Airways, South African Ports Authority, Petronet, Transwerk, Autopax and Freightdynamics. Industrial action by Transnet's labour force of approximately 85,000 could bring South Africa to a complete standstill.

Meetings have been held in an attempt to resolve the issue, but there has been no agreement. The national conciliator has now issued a certificate of non-resolution, which means that protected strike action could take place at 48 hours notice.

Tarpaulin makers strike in Nigeria

Workers at Zaria Industries Limited, the main manufacturer of tarpaulin in Nigeria, have taken indefinite strike action this week to protest the non-payment of their salary arrears and other benefits owing to them. Nine months of salary payments are already outstanding, as are payments of leave grants, bonuses and death benefits for employees who died whilst at work.

The strikers told the *Daily Independent* that management had refused to respond to their complaints, just as they refused to respond to their 15-month-old demand for a pay rise of 10 percent. Because of this, they have been unable to pay their rent, school fees for their children and other such bills.

Emmanuel Chidozie, one of the strikers, told the paper that management was indifferent to the needs of the workers. He said that the workforce had been working hard to ensure that the company did not close down like other textile companies in the Nigeria, adding, "But it seems the management does not recognise the fact."

Teachers on strike in Zambia for nearly three weeks

Teachers in Mufulira, Zambia, have been on strike since January 9, when the schools reopened after the holidays, in protest over the non-payment of their housing allowances.

Zambia National Union of Teachers district Chairperson Mark Mwape told the Zambian news agency *ZANIS* that union representatives had agreed to go back to work, following a promise by the education minister that the teachers would be paid their housing arrears. However, he said that the matter needed to be discussed further because teacher union bodies have no mandate to call off the strike without the agreement of the affected teachers.

The teachers are meeting on January 31 to decide whether or not to continue their strike. *ZANIS* has reported, "The labour movement in Mufulira has reaffirmed that the work stoppage by striking teachers will continue until they unanimously resolve to end their stoppage."

Some of the school students in Mufulira have sent an appeal to the government to pay the teachers' outstanding allowances immediately, so as not to further affect their studies and exams.

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