

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

9 June 2006

Europe

UK rail workers vote for strike action over pensions

Rail and Maritime union (RMT) members have voted by more than three to one for strike action to secure the future of the industry's pension scheme.

In a ballot held June 6, 16,203 voted for action (76.46 percent) and 4,989 against (23.54 percent). There was a 50 percent turnout.

The result will now be considered by the RMT executive and a further statement will be issued.

Conference votes to extend strike on regional UK rail lines

Delegates at the ASLEF (the train drivers and operators union) conference in Scarborough, England, agreed June 5 to ballot employees of South West Trains (SWT) for industrial action.

Until recently, only trains out of Waterloo had been affected by the action, which concerns the breaking of a local agreement about the use of taxis to get drivers to work.

ASLEF members at Waterloo took two days industrial action last week and a further two days of strikes are planned for this week.

The escalation of the dispute resulted from the fact that managers were taking out trains to break the strike.

Conference delegates condemned the "blatant use of managers for strike-breaking." There are agreed conditions for managers driving trains, which are basically because of health, safety or the threat of civil unrest.

One manager who had not driven a train for a decade was identified as a strike-breaker.

Ballot papers will be issued over the coming weeks, and the action is likely to disrupt rail journeys into London in July.

One-day strike by bus drivers in County Durham

A 24-hour strike by bus drivers in County Durham could be repeated unless an agreement is reached, according to the union and employers.

The strike, which began at midnight on June 5, is over the pay difference between drivers in County Durham and those in Northumberland.

Northumberland drivers are paid about £1 an hour more, according to the Transport & General Workers Union.

The bus company, Arriva, has refused to offer the rise union members are requesting. The company's stance could lead to further action. Almost 900 drivers who work for the bus firm took part in the walkout.

Darren Johnston, branch chairman of the TGWU, said, "We've been in talks with the company since October last year and the membership have rejected the company's final offer in the ballot that took place a couple of weeks back.

"An 8.5 percent offer might sound reasonable, but when you're starting from such a low hourly rate any percentage will seem high."

UK university lecturers dispute over pay

The main lecturers union, the University and College Union (UCU), has reached an agreement with employers over a long-running pay dispute and have suspended its examination boycott. Union members had refused to mark exams or coursework since March in pursuit of a pay claim for a 23

percent increase over three years.

Earlier this week, the UCU accepted a 13.1 percent rise over three years with the employers.

The deal had earlier been rejected by the union, and hundreds had participated in a march to the headquarters of the Universities and Colleges Employers' Association (Ucea) in London on June 3.

Members of the union had been boycotting the marking of coursework and exams, with some also refusing to set exam papers. Some lecturers were threatened with having their wages docked by university bosses. Glasgow University had announced that members of the UCU who refused to mark students' exams would have 30 percent of their pay withheld.

According to press reports, the deal involves a review of the money available for pay, which the union says "might" mean a bigger rise in 2008. There is a slightly bigger overall percentage rise—15.5 percent—for the lowest-paid cleaners, porters, security staff and other non-academic university workers.

Union members will be balloted on the deal amid reports of widespread opposition to the agreement and calls for the resignation of union leaders.

Finnish construction workers strike against "mafia tactics"

Construction workers in southern Finland are to strike this week to protest what they say is the use of "mafia tactics" by a subcontractor. Workers at around 60 Skanska Construction sites are to walk off the job for four hours.

The Construction Trade Union says that a chief shop steward and a union representative were threatened for calling a halt to work at a site in Espoo. The threats were allegedly made by the subcontractor in charge of the site. The work had been halted due to labour law violations by the subcontractor.

French energy workers plan strike to thwart merger

Three of the main French energy unions announced June 5 that they planned a strike on June 20 to protest against the planned merger between Gaz de France and Suez. The unions said the government had failed to listen to their protests against the merger, which will in effect further privatise GDF.

Two other unions, the CFDT and the CFTC, have been approached to join in the action.

The last strike to hit production was on April 11, when energy workers cut 1,260 megawatts of EDF's production capacity of over 100,000 MW, but did not disrupt gas supplies, the CGT said.

Protests over exploitation of migrant labour by UK ferry operators

A demonstration on May 25, involving UK and Irish unions, took place outside the Wales Trades Union Congress (WTUC) annual conference in Llandudno. It aimed to highlight the continuing exploitation of employees from Eastern Europe and parts of Asia by ferry operators on UK-Irish routes.

The protesters were demanding that Stena Ferries withdraw its decision to sack British seafarers and replace them with low-cost Eastern European crews. They were also outlining the plight of foreign workers on board

Irish Ferries vessels operating between Ireland and Pembroke or Holyhead, whom it is alleged were still being denied basic union rights.

A number of foreign workers had been removed by police from vessels after complaining about conditions.

WTUC conference delegates backed the protesters, passing resolutions on social dumping and supporting calls for UK legislation to provide seafarers on ferries running between the UK and other EU member states with the same protection as shore-based workers.

Staff at Irish hotels chain poised to strike

Staff in the Great Southern Hotels in Galway will go on strike if the sale of the hotels goes ahead without agreement, union officials have warned. The sale of the eight Great Southern hotels will be carried out by public tender. The deadline for receipt of tenders is 12 noon, June 23.

Meanwhile, the removal of paintings from some of the hotels has led to much scepticism about the official suggestion that one of the options for the future of the hotels is their sale as a going concern.

The yield from the sale of the artworks will reportedly go towards the capital costs of the new runway of the Dublin Airport Authority.

In the case of the two Galway hotels, many of the works are very significant and important for the West of Ireland. The paintings include, for example, the earlier work of Brian Burke.

Norwegian bank workers to strike

A strike by workers in Norway's finance sector threatens to escalate into a lockout situation that could affect banking across the country.

The Finance Sector Union of Norway threatened this week to expand the strike that involved 6,000 employees in the insurance business at the end of last month. The main issues in the conflict are pensions and insurance.

If a solution is not negotiated by June 12 the strike is to be extended to include 1,573 members in 76 savings banks, the so-called Terra banks. The Norwegian Employers' Association for the Financial Sector has responded by threatening a lockout. A failure to reach a settlement by June 12 will also mean that the *Handel og Kontor* (Business and Trade) and Norwegian Post and Communications unions will join the strike in a sympathy action.

British mapmakers in strike vote over pay

Members at Ordnance Survey (OS) are being balloted on industrial action as frustration mounts at the failure by management to agree a pay deal that is already 10 months late.

Nearly 1,000 Prospect members in the government agency are to vote on whether they are prepared to strike or take industrial action short of a strike at OS sites in Southampton, London and most other major UK cities.

OS members of Prospect's sister union, the Public and Commercial Services union, are also being balloted on industrial action, the first in Ordnance Survey's 200-year history. The result is due on June 9.

The move comes against a background of dissatisfaction over a number of pay issues felt by staff over several years. These include, in particular, the substantial amount of members who have endured a succession of below inflation pay increases, often non-consolidated, and the lack of a coherent mechanism for new staff to progress to the "rate for the job."

A joint management and union pay review was established in 2003 with the aim of identifying and implementing a fair and equitable pay system. However, in November OS management presented their "final offer" to union negotiators.

The total headline value of the offer—3.8 percent in year one, 3.6 percent in year two—still meant large numbers of staff receiving consolidated increases worth less than inflation.

The offer was rejected in a ballot of staff—fewer than 12 percent of union members voted to accept in an 80 percent ballot turnout.

Scottish teachers threaten strike action for smaller class sizes

Teachers have threatened to go on strike unless the Scottish Executive

does more to cut school class sizes.

Members of the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), the country's largest teaching union, will debate calls for a ballot on industrial action at their annual conference in Dundee next week.

This year's motion, which has been tabled by the union's Glasgow and Edinburgh associations, says a ballot should be held in October if an imminent report by a ministerial working group does not contain a "clear commitment" to reduce class sizes.

An amendment by the union's ruling council will attempt to water down the motion by removing the October deadline.

The impact of class sizes on education standards has been a long-time concern of teachers, and the Scottish Executive has pledged that by 2007, primary one classes will be limited to 25.

Meanwhile, the conference will also hear calls for a ballot on industrial action if there is any deterioration to teachers' pension rights.

Middle East

Thousands of migrant workers protest over pay in Qatar

Over 2,000 workers, including many Indians, struck work and protested at their labour camp in Qatar on June 5 demanding an increase in salary.

Saif Al Khayarin, a labour inspector, said 2,028 workers of an engineering company in the Doha Industrial Area were involved in the action, which he termed "illegal."

"They were demanding an increase in their wages since Sunday and refused to report for work yesterday. These workers were from Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Egypt and India," the official was quoted as saying in the *Peninsula* newspaper.

According to a worker, the "agitators" included carpenters, plumbers and other semi-skilled and skilled employees who draw a salary of QR 690 (Rs 8,707) per month.

Africa

Chadian workers on one-week strike

Chad's biggest union federation, the Union des Syndicats du Tchad (UST), has begun a week-long strike in pursuit of a 5 percent pay rise, according to the United Nation's web site. The UST said that an increase had been promised for 2005, but it had never materialized.

Chadian workers have held a series of strikes this year to protest against low pay and poor conditions. Civil servants had previously stopped work to press for the release of months of salary arrears, while retired government employees were denied their pensions for more than a year.

Chad is one of the 12 poorest countries in the world, although it has oil reserves that are now being exploited.

Telecommunications workers strike continues in Nigeria

Employees of the Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (NITEL) began strike action last week to demand payment of unpaid salaries and allowances.

Banks, hotels and many communications companies have been affected by the strike, according to the local media. On June 2, strikers turned off the power supply to the Private Telecom Operators House, preventing Nigerian telecom companies from interconnecting. International telecommunications have also been affected.

Algerian auto workers launch a protest strike

Around 3,200 autoworkers took part in a three-hour strike on June 3, to protest against the worsening of their conditions. The trigger for the strike at the factory in Rouiba was the increasing number of thefts of mechanical components, but other issues include management plans to run down the factory and the company policy on promotions.

The previous week around 15,000 workers marched through Rouiba despite a heavy police presence. They were demanding opposition to factory closures and redundancies, increased pay to keep up with inflation and an investigation of management practices.

Disputes in Zambia

Nurses, paramedics and health sector workers at Ndola Central Hospital

(NCH), Arthur Davison Children's Hospital (ADH) and other clinics in the Copperbelt region of Zambia took strike action over working conditions, payment of allowance arrears and the demand for the introduction of an education allowance.

Davy Chiyobe, Civil Servants and Allied Workers Union of Zambia (CSAWUZ) Copperbelt secretary, said that the workers were demanding a meeting with Zambia's Health Minister, Sylvia Masebo, on their situation.

About 800 coal miners at Maamba, in the south of Zambia, had running battles with the police after they had demanded removal of management and payment of three months salary arrears. They had prevented management from entering the mine and were then attacked by police firing teargas canisters. Police arrested 15 of the miners.



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