

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

20 October 2006

Europe

UK passport workers strike

Up to 2,500 passport workers across the Britain went on strike over a pay dispute on October 13. The workforce is also engaged in an ongoing work-to-rule.

The action by the members the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) working for the Identity and Passports Service (IPS) caused "severe disruption" to passport processing across the UK.

The one-day stoppage followed by a discontinuous work-to-rule hit all seven IPS offices based in London, Peterborough, Newport, Durham, Belfast, Liverpool and Glasgow. The workers are angry at the failure of IPS management to deliver on the union's pay demands, despite giving an undertaking when it was submitted in June to deal the claim for 2006-2007 as quickly as possible. The settlement date for this year's pay was August, and with no pay offer in the foreseeable future, staff fear a repeat of last year when management dragged out the pay settlement for over a year.

The workers are also angry that whilst the cost of a passport has gone up by 50 percent in the last 12 months, many have seen their pay rise below the cost inflation by just 1 percent.

The PCS union estimated that the action prevented up to 30,000 passports being issued and resulted in most appointments being cancelled. The strike, which was backed by members by 3-1, will be followed by a week-long work-to-rule.

London's National Gallery wardens strike hits major art exhibition

One hundred forty non-shift wardens walked out of the National Gallery in London October 18 in a dispute over attempts to impose changes to their terms and conditions that would see the withdrawal of the extra three days holiday staff receive in recognition for working Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day, when the holiday falls on a weekend.

Management is attempting to replace this entitlement with two days unpaid "special leave" and a one-off payment of £100. The wardens, who protect one of the finest collections of paintings in the world, are amongst the lowest paid in the culture sector, with many earning as little as just over £6 an hour.

The 24-hour action meant that 59 gallery rooms had to be closed, almost shutting down the entire building. The wardens are to continue their action by walking out between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. every Wednesday from next week onwards.

UK clothing firm workers to strike

Around 200 workers at the countryside clothing firm, J. Barbour & Sons, have voted in favour of a 24-hour strike over wages.

The workers at the Galashiels and South Shields factories unanimously agreed to take action on October 20. The Transport and General Workers Union had sought a 4 percent pay increase, but had indicated it would accept 3 percent. The company has offered 2.8 percent. Union organisers said further industrial action could not be ruled out.

UK nuclear power plant dispute in sixth week

A dispute involving 40 employees of Balfour Kilpatrick, working as

electricians at Hunterston Nuclear Power Stations, entered its sixth week on October 17. The action was sparked by the removal of a 50-pence-per-hour enhancement that was in place for 30 years.

Despite the increasing difficulties over picketing that local authorities have forced on them, the workforce seem determined as ever in the pursuit of their demands. A striking blogger said, "We will not be broken and if we have to we will continue our action beyond the 12-week limit and risk losing our employment."

Irish airline workers stage protest

Workers at the Irish airline, Aer Lingus, staged a protest outside the Dáil October 18 to highlight their opposition to Ryanair's takeover bid. The SIPTU union has come out strongly against the move, which it says would be bad for workers, passengers and the country in general. It has also called on the government to buy back shares in the national carrier in order to block Ryanair's bid. Businessman Denis O'Brien announced that he had bought up 2.1 percent of Aer Lingus shares for €32 million in a move to prevent the takeover. He said he was making the move in support of the airline's staff and management and because he believed in competition. Speaking at the protest, SIPTU spokesman Christy McQuillan accused the government of misleading people about the Aer Lingus privatisation. "They could have always invested in Aer Lingus. They tried to tell the public for months that they were prohibited from investing in Aer Lingus under EU rules. That was a lie. "It's time they came clean with the travelling public and with the workers in Aer Lingus who turned the company around," he said.

Northern Ireland's lecturers take action over failure to negotiate pay parity

College lecturers in Northern Ireland October 16, called for strike action as teaching "virtually ceased" for the fourth time in recent weeks.

In a long-running dispute over parity of pay with schoolteachers, the strike was in addition to a withdrawal of goodwill across the colleges and a lunchtime picket outside the Department for Employment and Learning's (DEL) Belfast headquarters.

Jim McKeown, the University and College Union (UCU) regional official in Northern Ireland, said, "Our members are very solidly behind this. They are determined to ensure that they get fair pay and parity with schoolteachers. College lecturers in Northern Ireland are the only group of education workers affected by this so-called 'government pay cap.' That is unfair."

According to a statement released by the UCU, college employers have agreed with lecturers that they should have parity of pay with schoolteachers, with a proposal backdating to September 1, 2005. The employers say that they need government approval to implement the package.

Romanian health workers threaten general strike

Over 5,000 health workers gathered October 13 in Piata Constitutiei in Bucharest to protest against the poor state of the health system in the country and the low wages of its employees.

The protesters, wearing white flags with the Red Cross symbol, shouted,

“We want justice for the health system!” for more than an hour and threatened to call a general strike if the government does not increase their salaries by 70 percent and boost the 2007 health budget.

A nurse from Deva told the assembled journalists that she earns 110 euros per month and that the money is not enough to pay her bills, not to mention food and clothing.

Marius Petcu, president of the Sanitas Federation, the rally’s organiser, said that during Monday’s meeting between Health Minister Eugen Nicolaescu and the trade union representatives the minister stressed he was willing to allocate 4.2 percent of the GDP for the 2007 health budget, but ruled out a salary increase.

The protesters also requested monthly meal tickets for all the employees in the health system and called on the authorities to comply with the protocol signed by the trade unions and the Health Ministry in February 2007, which included a series of positive provisions, including monthly bonuses, various facilities for the employees and the end of mass dismissals.

Once Romania joins the EU, more and more skilled doctors will chose to work in a different country, a phenomenon that will have a direct and negative impact on the Romanian health system and the lives of its patients.

Greek teachers and students protest

Over 5,000 protesting teachers and students blocked traffic in central Athens for more than two hours on October 11, as unions vowed to extend a month-long elementary school strike. The teachers are demanding higher pay and students are calling for increased state funding for education.

Chanting “Nothing will stop, we’ll last till Christmas,” the protesters marched to parliament and the Education Ministry.

Civil servants unions also declared a 24-hour strike on the same day in solidarity with the primary school teachers, who have presented Greece’s conservative government with its biggest industrial dispute since it took office in March 2004.

Most of the several thousand elementary schools have been closed across the country since the start of the academic year in mid-September. Teachers are demanding better facilities and a rise in starting salaries from €900 to €1,400 (US\$1,100 to US\$1,700).

“All we are asking is to have enough to live in a dignified way. Teachers have to be able to manage on their school salary and . . . not have to work second jobs,” said Dimitris Bratis, head of the Greek Primary Teachers Federation.

Talks between the union and Education Ministry collapsed earlier in the week.

High school students have held protests at more than 500 schools in opposition to education reforms that include stricter entrance criteria for higher education and ending the state monopoly on university education.

Next week, a parliamentary committee is due to discuss a constitutional amendment that would allow independently-run universities to open after 2008. Teaching unions are planning another public rally on the day the amendment is debated.

Government spokesman Theodoros Rousopoulos rejected any concession to the teachers’ main demand and urged high schools students to return to class. “Teachers are asking for a 50 percent increase in their starting salary. The government has made its position and has nothing to add,” he said.

Strike by Finnish airline staff

A strike by more than 1,500 Finnair cabin staff was set to begin Thursday after talks between unions and managers broke down on October 18. The strike is expected to ground most of the Finnish airline’s international flights.

“We will ground all flights out of Helsinki in the morning,” said union chairman Mauri Koskeniemi, despite an appeal by Prime Minister Matti

Vanhanen to avert the strike before a planned summit of European Union leaders on October 20. Vanhanen said the strike would be “extremely damaging” as some 1,300 participants and reporters begin to arrive in Finland for the one-day EU summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday in Lahti, about 100 kilometers (60 miles) north of Helsinki.

Finnair said it would continue to operate “some” European and domestic scheduled flights, but that “they will run on irregular schedules.”

The union called the strike to protest the airline’s plans to recruit personnel through its Estonian subsidiary, Aero, to save costs. Finnair said it was forced to hire some 500 more cabin staff to meet growing demand on Asian routes, through Aero, because salary levels for Finnair staff were 30 percent higher. The government has a 58 percent stake in the company. Finnair said that the cancellation of flights would cause daily losses of 2.5 million euros.

Middle East

Iraqi health workers strike

Health workers in Iraq have been on strike for higher wages over the past month across several areas of the country. In Kerbala, workers held a sit-in protest after their strike last week. They are calling for a raise in salary, reform to the wage system and the restoration of infection allowances.

In Nasiriya, health sector workers held four strikes and a sit-in protest in the space of one month for the same demands. The health sector strikes have spread to many provinces in Iraq, including Baghdad, Umara, Kut and Suleimania in Kurdistan.

Infection allowances were discontinued after the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

Strikes across Kurdish Iraq

Hundreds of workers in Kurdish Iraq have been on strike since October 8. The strikers, which include members of the Health Employees Union and physician and chemical workers unions in the provinces of Erbil and Sulaimania, have been demanding the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) increase their wages by a sum of a 150,000 Iraqi dinar a month, equal to US\$100, for each employee as a job security bonus.

The government had issued an order on July 24 to release these bonuses, but this has not been implemented. The prime minister’s office has not given any reason for the delay despite repeated official demands by unions. Currently emergency hospitals are excluded from the strike.

Jerusalem delivery workers strike

One hundred sixty delivery workers from Tnuva dairy company’s Jerusalem distribution centre were set to stage industrial action October 14, according to Israel Radio.

Tnuva, which produces the majority of Jerusalem’s dairy products, will not be delivering to any stores in the area. The strike was called after Tnuva sold its Jerusalem distribution center for NIS 169 million and declared that deliveries would be made via a substitute center in Kiryat Malachi until January 2007

Africa

Nigeria: Strike to oppose sell-off of Unity schools

A strike by the Association of Senior Civil Servants of Nigeria (ASCSN) was stepped up to its second phase on October 16. The action was against government plans to privatise over 100 Unity schools.

The schools currently have around 121,000 pupils. The Nigerian Trades Union umbrella organisation, the Joint Public Service Negotiating Council, called on parents to remove their children from the schools. No lectures had been given since October 9 and from October 16 all services provided by the schools, such as catering, ceased.

The Unity schools had previously enjoyed a good reputation and had been the means for some working class and lower middle class children to receive a decent education. Solomon Onaghinon, secretary-general of ASCSN, said the proposed privatisation was retrogressive.

A report in the Nigerian *Guardian* of October 18 described the facilities

in the Unity schools—under-equipped laboratories, outdated libraries, with underpaid teachers—as mirroring conditions in other Nigerian schools. The paper continued, “Conscious neglect of [the] educational sector...[by] the thieving ruling class...[means] the ruling class and rich now send their wards abroad for education and very expensive private schools locally.”

Nigeria: State doctors take action in pursuit of unpaid allowances

General duty doctors employed by Ogun state began strike action over non-payment of allowances amounting to N480 million (US\$3.7 million) over three years. The doctors belonging to the Association of Government General Medical and Dental Practitioners (NAGGMDP) condemned the state commissioner of health, Dr. Iyabo Obasanjo-Bello, for ignoring their pleas.

General Secretary Dr. Omolulu Sokoya told the Kenyan newspaper *This Day*, “We have had to go extra miles to curb the restiveness of our members who are mostly in pain and agony. You will not see any smile or joy in the faces of any of our members.”

Namibia: Textile workers win small concessions

Following two days of strike action textile workers at the Malaysian owned Ramatex factory have returned to work. The action began on October 13. The 3,000 workers at the factory took near unanimous action demanding a doubling of the hourly wage rate of N\$3 to N\$4 (39 to 52 US cents).

Following negotiations between the Namibian Food and Allied Workers’ Union and management, during which workers demonstrated outside the factory, the company agreed to increase the hourly wage rate by N\$1.10 (15 US cents). In addition the company agreed an annual bonus of 60 percent of a month’s salary, a monthly transport allowance of N\$100 (US\$13), a monthly housing allowance of N\$150 (US\$20) and to help fund employees’ medical aid.

This is the first wage increase granted by the company since it opened the factory in Windhoek in 2001. The Malaysian-based company set up the factory in Namibia to take advantage of the African Growth and Opportunity Act. Seventy percent of its duty free exports are to America.

Kenya: University lecturers plan strike action

University lecturers belonging to the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) are due to begin strike action October 23.

The 3,500 lecturers in Kenya’s six universities are demanding salary increments and have so far rejected an offer of by the government of between 10 and 29 percent.

The proposed strike action follows the decision Kenyan Labour Minister Newton Kulundu to put the pay claim to the Industrial Court.

Uganda: Kampala teachers begin further strike action

Teachers in Kampala took strike action beginning October 17 over non-payment of their September salaries. The teachers staged a three-day strike last month following delays in paying their August salaries.

Vice chairman of the Uganda National Teachers Unions, Joseph Sewungwa, told a mass meeting of teachers October 17, “We have resolved to again go on a sit-down strike until authorities address our concern. If nothing is done, all city teachers will camp at City Hall on Thursday (October 19) to express their dissatisfaction.”

City Education Secretary Ann Galiwango explained the city council had received two thirds of the Sh900 million (US\$497,238) to pay the teachers and expected to pay them this week.

Ghana: Teachers in Tema join NAGRAT strike action

Members of the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT) in the city of Tema have joined in strike action with their colleagues in the rival union, the Ghana National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT).

The strike of NAGRAT members, to demand salary increases, began a month ago. The Ghanaian government only recognises negotiating rights for the GNAT union. Speaking at a recent rally, NAGRAT Deputy General Secretary Stanislaus Nabome said, “Teachers must not wait until poverty reaches a level where a teacher would wear only one shirt and beg

before eating.”

Zimbabwe: Trial of union members delayed

The trial of 31 trade unionists due to begin October 17 in Harare has been delayed for a second time. The workers have been charged with holding an illegal protest, which included “carrying placards and shouting political slogans” while ridiculing President Robert Mugabe and members of the army and police—a contravention of Zimbabwe’s strict security laws.

They were arrested September 13 when protesting against low wages and lack of access to HIV/AIDS drugs. Lawyers for the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) accused the police of assaulting some of the trade unionists.

The trial has now been scheduled for 30 October.



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