

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

3 November 2006

Europe

UK sportswear workers strike over pay

Staff at the Greater Manchester-based JJB Sports went on strike October 30 in a dispute over pay and conditions.

The GMB union said 266 of its members were on the picket line outside the warehouse in Martland Park, Wigan, in the early hours of the morning. A ban on overtime has also been implemented.

The workers are protesting against a 3 percent pay rise. Union negotiators are seeking a higher basic rate for staff and are calling for equal access to a bonus scheme.

JJB Sports has around 430 shops in the UK and its executive director is David Whelan, owner of Wigan Athletic and its ground, the JJB stadium.

UK hospital staff balloted on strike

Maintenance workers at several hospitals in Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire are to be balloted over strike action in a pay dispute, it was announced October 29.

The Amicus trade union said routine operations at the Peterborough and Stamford Hospitals National Health Service Trust could be delayed if the strike goes ahead. The maintenance workers' duties include carrying out electrical, plumbing and heating repairs.

The workers are in dispute at being paid £3,000 less each year than staff at other trusts.

The results of the ballot are expected to be released November 10.

North Sea divers strike after deal rejected

Around 900 North Sea divers and support personnel have begun an indefinite strike after rejecting the latest pay offer from employers.

Members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union voted against the new three-year deal by 516 to 240 in a poll that closed on October 26. That poll followed a ballot in September on an earlier pay deal. The offer, recommended by union bosses, promised a 20 percent increase immediately, plus another 5 percent from April 2007.

There has been concern in business circles that any strike action would bring chaos to parts of the UK oil and gas sector.

The RMT said divers were carrying out probably the most dangerous job in the North Sea, working on wells and pipelines at depths of several hundred feet. Some divers are at home on leave, and others will return home after coming out of decompression over the next week unless a settlement can be reached.

UK bus strike action threat

Bus drivers working for Translink have said they may go on strike unless the company withdraws its new policy on attendance. The Transport and General Workers' Union (T&G) said Translink introduced the new scheme without full consultation.

If strike action is taken, it could affect services around the Christmas period. The union said it intended to ballot members if there was no resolution. As of October 23, the T&G has recommended giving Translink seven days to withdraw the policy and enter into negotiations with them, or they will ballot members.

Pay strike at two Welsh food factories

Workers at two north Wales food plants held a 24-hour strike on October 30 in protest at what they say is a pay freeze.

The Transport and General Workers' Union (T&G) says 1,000 staff are involved in the dispute at Grampian Foods, which produces fresh and frozen food. The workers voted in a postal ballot to support strike action to further their claim for more pay.

The union said the company had given a 2.5 percent rise to workers at one of its Scottish plants, at Cambuslang, south Lanarkshire, but had denied workers at its Welsh factories the same offer.

According to the union, workers voted in favour of strike action by a margin of four to one. Two hundred workers lost their jobs at the Llangefni poultry processing plant owned by Grampian last May.

Irish bank staff take strike action

On November 1 it was announced that 500 Bank of Ireland staff had voted to take industrial action in a dispute over new pension arrangements. Ninety-three percent of Amicus trade union members balloted voted in favour of action up to and including a strike.

Amicus official Colm Quinlan said that he would be writing to Bank of Ireland to inform the company of the ballot result and that some form of industrial action, involving a minimum of a one-day strike, would take place in the week commencing November 13.

The Irish Bank Officials Association, which represents around 8,000 members in banks around Ireland, has deferred a similar ballot pending a Labour Court hearing on the pensions dispute.

Possible strike ballot as British Airways pensions deal talks fail

Attempts to reach a deal over British Airways' (BA) £2.1 billion pension fund deficit failed on October 30. Management and union officials agreed to meet again on November 7, but some shop stewards believe a strike ballot is inevitable.

The airline's proposals to tackle the deficit include raising the retirement age for cabin crew from 55 to 65, and for the 2,500 pilots from 55 to 60. Pension increases on retirement for all staff would be capped at 2.5 percent, and accrual rates would be reduced.

Scottish ferry crew strike over pay demand

The 16-strong Strangford Lough ferry service was suspended on October 27 due to a one-day strike. They have complained they are paid thousands less than others doing a similar job.

The union said the crew have to navigate a fast and difficult stretch of water between the villages of Portaferry and Strangford. The Strangford-Portaferry crossing takes eight minutes by ferry, cutting out the need for a 75km journey between the villages by car.

The Strangford crew members are on a basic wage of £14,000 plus allowances of about £3,500.

Greek teachers threaten 24-hour strikes until pay demands are met

Greek teachers have decided to go back to school from October 30 after a long strike—six weeks by primary school teachers and 10 days by their secondary school colleagues. But unrest in the education sector continues.

In deciding to put an end to the indefinite strike on October 25, teachers announced two 24-hour strikes, one on November 3 and one on November

9. They have pledged to continue staging one-day strikes as long as the government will not accept their demands for a salary rise and the awarding of an agreed €105 bonus immediately instead of in six instalments, as the government now proposes.

The students' school occupation movement continues to expand, with 1,012 secondary schools reported occupied as of October 28.

Over 30,000 teachers gathered in the Greek capital Athens and northern Salonika October 25, while civil servants staged a nationwide strike in support, amid mounting anger at unpopular economic reforms.

With no end in sight to the protests, the crisis has become the biggest challenge yet for the ruling conservative government. Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis met teachers on October 24 in an attempt to defuse the crisis. But with Greece under pressure from Brussels to rein in budget deficits that snowballed when Athens hosted the 2004 Olympics, he ruled out their basic demand for a pay rise of more than 40 percent.

Less than 4 percent of the country's budget is allocated to education—the lowest in the European Union.

Ryanair staff in Spain threatens strikes until Christmas

Ryanair ground staff in Spain went on a 24 hour strike October 23 at 13 airports in protest at working conditions at the low-cost Irish airline.

The workers are demanding that both Ryanair and a subcontractor, Lesma, fulfill promises made in the 2005 employment contract concerning working hours, permitted breaks and runway security.

After company representatives failed to turn up to a meeting with workers following demonstrations and limited strike action, a spokesman for the trade union threatened 24-hour strikes every Monday from the November 7 until Christmas.

Middle East

Israel: schools on strike

Schools in the Kiryat Shmona area of northern Israel were on strike for the sixth day on October 24 due to safety concerns. Parents have kept their children away from school and nursery assistants and cleaners were also striking.

A spokesman from the Kiryat Shmona parents' union said, "There are 5,000 students at home in Kiryat Shmona and no one in the state of Israel cares. During the war there were promises. When the war ended they forgot about us."

Parents said that the schools were promised additional funding during the conflict with Lebanon, to repair damage from rocket attacks. Much of the work has not been completed, and municipality cleaners have not been paid, so they have refused to clean the schools.

Israeli nurses begin strike action

More than 3,000 Clalit Health Services clinic nurses began an open-ended strike on October 24.

Beforehand, the Clalit workers' union, representing 32,000 nurses, administrative and maintenance staff and technical workers, said the walkout would "completely shut down" all the clinics and is a "first shot in the struggle to replace management."

It will be the first time in 20 years that the health fund's community nurses strike.

On declaring the dispute, the union demanded the removal of the health fund's management. Union chief Prosper Ben-Hamu claimed that the management of the country's largest health fund has been "violating the rights of the workers for months" and causing the loss of 45,000 members each year.

Clalit is "selling off property on an ongoing basis with the aim of transferring services from health fund workers to contractors and other outside suppliers to cause permanent workers to leave and many dismissals," said Ben-Hamu.

Africa

Nigerian oil workers take action over allowances

Office staff working for the AGIP Oil Company took strike action

Monday 30 October in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Strikers told *Nigerian Vanguard* that they were taking action following the failure of management to attend an arranged meeting with union representatives the previous day to discuss security allowances

The strikers are represented by the Petroleum Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria. They say the company has agreed to pay allowances but is seeking to vary the amount according to staff role. The workers want an across-the-board payment.

Doctors begin all-out strike

Doctors employed in the west Nigerian state of Oyo have begun all out-strike action. They cite their grievances as low pay, shortage of doctors and para-medical staff and the run-down state of equipment and facilities.

The doctors belong to the Association of Medical and Dental Officers (AMDO). It was reported that the state governor had previously walked out of a meeting with doctors' leaders and had threatened, "As a policeman, I know how to deal with people like you." The state government has threatened to bring forward the starting date of newly appointed hospital staff in an attempt to circumvent the doctors' action.

Kenyan university lecturers continue strike

Striking lectures belonging to the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) are continuing their strike, begun October 23, in support of a pay demand.

Management at the Universities of Kenyatta and Maseno has withheld October salary payments from lecturers in an attempt to pressure them back to work. According to the *African Standard Online*, some striking academic staff have also been refused medical treatment. As the action began to bite, authorities at Kenyatta and Egerton universities decided to close them and students were sent home. This follows similar measures last week at the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT) and Maseno University.

The government has declared the strike illegal. Fourteen academics at JKUAT have been sacked for taking part. This follows the similar sackings at Moi, Maseno, Egerton and Kenyatta Universities. Two lecturers who had been sacked, and five who had been suspended at Kenyatta have been reinstated.

Namibian mine workers strike

Over 330 miners at the Rosh Pinah mine—a subsidiary of the South Africa Kumba Resources and which produces zinc concentrate—began strike action on October 29 in support of a demand for pay increases of between 12 and 14 percent, depending on grade. The company offer is between 8 and 9 percent.

The strikers belong to the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN). Negotiations had been taking place since July but the company refused to increase its offer. A recent ballot resulted in a 95 percent vote in favour of taking strike action.



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