

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

1 December 2006

UK strike threat over Independent Television pensions

The possibility of industrial action was raised following a meeting in London on November 21 of three unions involved in Independent Television (ITV). The broadcasting union BECTU, the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and Amicus met to consider the company's plan to close its defined-benefit pension scheme to its existing 1,500 contributing members, and transfer them into a less generous "career average" scheme.

If the broadcaster closes its current pension scheme to existing members as planned next April, it will be the second company in the FTSE 100 share index, after Rentokil, to take such a step.

Management hope to introduce pension changes from April 2007. ITV recently advised the unions that it intended to look at changes to its pension scheme, including replacing the final salary scheme with a career average scheme; harmonising the retirement age at 63; and, finally, increasing members' contributions.

Anger at the proposals was increased amongst staff by rumours that the departing chief executive, Charles Allen, will collect a pension of £500,000 a year when he leaves ITV in January 2007.

Strike at leading London film laboratory

Following an overtime ban from November 24 at the leading film laboratory and post-production house Soho Images, employees are to work only their basic hours in protest at a below inflation pay offer, which is also late in payment.

The London-based company, owned by Ascent Media, has offered only a 2 percent rise this year, and proposes to pay increased salaries from July 2006, instead of the traditional April anniversary date.

Management refused to budge from the offer and members voted by a majority of 86 percent to take industrial action short of a strike. An overtime ban is likely to affect the service available to broadcast customers at weekends, including the British Broadcasting Corporation and independent production companies.

UK's largest civil service union could strike over job losses

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) Union, the largest civil service union in Britain, has warned it will call a national strike in the New Year over the prospect of compulsory job losses and creeping privatization.

The PCS is to ballot its 280,000 members who work in over 200 government departments across the UK.

The government plans to axe over 80,000 posts as part of an "efficiency drive." Key services delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions are to be farmed out to private business and the voluntary sector. Job fears have risen following the announcement of the first compulsory redundancies in the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Trade and Industry.

London City cleaners protest in pay dispute

Cleaners who work for major financial firms at London's Canary Wharf are continuing a campaign to end low pay. Members of the Transport and General Workers Union are demonstrating outside offices of businesses who use cleaning contractor ISS (which is part-owned by Goldman Sachs).

The union, which is demanding a pay rise for cleaners, claims workers often receive no sick or holiday pay. The cleaning workers have targeted

the offices of Goldman Sachs, PriceWaterHouseCooper, Nomura, Linklaters, Lovells, Marsh Ltd. and CitiGroup.

The cleaners receive different wages from building to building for doing the same job. Many earn the minimum wage of £5.35 per hour despite the high living costs in the capital.

On November 28, some of the cleaners staged a protest at the Fleet Street offices of Goldman Sachs. Around 40 cleaners, some carrying placards reading "Goldman Sucks," blocked the investment bank's entrance and there were scuffles with security guards.

Goldman Sachs recently appointed 100 new partners, a quarter of them based in London, who can expect to earn more than \$10 million (£5.3 million) from annual bonuses on top of their seven-figure pay packets.

UK 24-hour postal strike confirmed

Christmas post in the southwest of England is set to be delayed following a decision to hold a 24-hour strike at a mail sorting centre in Devon. The Communication Workers Union said members at the Exeter Mail Centre had balloted to walk out in a dispute over flexible working hours. The industrial action is due to take place on December 4, with up to 400 staff expected to take part.

Members voted two to one to take strike action unless the Royal Mail offers workers an improved deal for flexibility in shift patterns. The Exeter centre processes an estimated 1.2 million letters and parcels every day and can handle up to 5 million deliveries over the Christmas period.

UK Fujitsu workers walk out

IT workers at Fujitsu Services, Central Park, Manchester, took strike action this week over what they claim are worsening pay and conditions within the company. Workers voted three to one to take strike action and staff at the West Gorton site also joined the walkout.

The workforce walked out after they became fed up with management "moving the goalposts" and blaming the union, Amicus, for a breakdown in discussions. Workers are also complaining about erosion of redundancy rights and delays to pay rises.

Around 850 people work at the site, providing call centre services and IT services to government departments—including Revenue and Customs, the Home Office and Department for Work and Pensions—magistrate's courts and the NHS.

British NHS blood service staff prepare for strike ballot

The union Amicus has warned the NHS Blood Service that it is preparing to ballot its members for industrial action following a consultative ballot showing that 81 percent of Amicus members working at the centres are in favour of industrial action.

The ballot was held following an announcement that the NHS plans to close 14 blood centres across the country. After a three-week formal postal ballot it is possible there could be strike action over the Christmas period unless the National Blood Service backs down.

The existing centres are to be replaced with new super centres in Bristol and unnamed locations in the Southeast and the North. The unions say that closing centres in Leeds, Newcastle, Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Bristol, Plymouth, Southampton, Tooting, Colindale, Brentwood, Oxford and Cambridge threatens the loss of hundreds of highly skilled technical and scientific staff from the NHS and will leave major cities without facilities for the testing and processing of blood.

Care workers in southern England could go on strike

Care workers in Southampton have been told they are to lose their extra pay for working unsocial hours. The workers have been offered a deal which cuts weekend and evening allowances in return for a general pay rise. The public sector union Unison said staff that refuse the deal have been told they will be sacked without redundancy pay. The union is organising a ballot on strike action.

Southampton City Council said the service will be lost to private contractors unless cuts are made. It said the current enhanced payments for unsocial hours are above industry standard and must be made "cost-efficient."

A ballot is to be held in December and if members vote in favour of industrial action a strike will be held in January.

British Army trainers threaten strike

The Public and Commercial Services union is to hold a strike ballot over a £10 billion programme to privatise military training. Its action could disrupt government plans for the largest-yet defence PFI (Private Finance Initiative) deal.

The PCS has polled more than 2,000 of its military instructional officers who train servicemen to repair equipment such as tanks and operate radar and missile systems in the field over proposals to outsource the work to private firms. It says that 80-95 percent of members are against the move, which would take the form of a 25-year contract. The government is expected to announce preferred bidders on phase one of the Defence Training Rationalisation programme, which includes aeronautical and communications engineering, probably early next month.

Union objections include plans by the bidders to move training from more than 30 sites to one or two locations. One consortium, Metrix, which includes Qinetiq and Land Securities, is proposing to move all training to St. Athan, in South Wales. The other, MC3, includes BAE Systems, VT Group and Carillion, and plans to locate all work at Bordon, in Hampshire, and Cosford, in the West Midlands.

Glasgow council workers to strike over pay

Thousands of workers at Scotland's largest local authority are to strike in a bitter row over pay. The three-day action, set for early December, would hit all of Glasgow City Council's services including day-care, nurseries, schools, refuse collection, street cleaning and social work. Public sector union Unison says the strike is in response to changes to the council's pay structure that could cost some workers up to £9,000.

A strike over similar issues is also likely in Falkirk. Unions are preparing a strike ballot over the pay and conditions deal due to be imposed by the council on December 18. Ballot papers go out next week and the result will be announced on December 11.

Irish refuse collection workers to strike in January.

Refuse collection workers who are members of the Mayo No. 2 branch of Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) are to enter into official industrial action on January 8, 2007.

The workers have officially announced their intention to strike from that date following their November 6 rejection of the Labour Court's recommendation that their jobs be outsourced.

Following on from the recommendation of the Labour Court, management of the Local Authorities in Mayo announced it will cease to collect refuse from January 8.

Croatian teachers strike continues

Croatia's professors joined high school and elementary school teachers on strike for better pay on November 24, paralyzing the country's education system. By its third day some 80,000 teachers were on strike.

Teachers are demanding a pay increase of 21 percent over several years, which would put their salaries on par with the national average in industry. But the government is offering a rise of just 6 percent over three years.

At the moment, elementary and high school teachers are paid between

4,025 (\$725) and 5,420 kuna (\$977), while at the university an assistant receives 4,638 kuna (\$835) monthly and a full professor 10,800 kuna (\$1,945).

Warning strikes ground 14 flights in Germany

Thomas Cook AG's airline Condor said that warning strikes temporarily grounded 14 of its flights on November 27. A spokesman for the Ver.di labour union, which initiated the strikes, said the action was intended to put pressure on Condor management to resume wage negotiations.

A 1.5percent gap separates union and management wage increase proposals. Thomas Cook is a 50-50 joint venture of Deutsche Lufthansa AG and Karstadt Quelle AG.

Benue assembly staff strike action

Staff working at the State House of Assembly, in Benue, Nigeria, began indefinite strike action on November 25. The dispute is over the non-payment of arrears of clothing allowance amounting to N21million (US\$165,000).

Staff took similar action at the end of 2002 over non-payment of allowances.

Nigerian Polytechnic staff threaten strike action

Staff belonging to the Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics at Auchi Polytechnic in Edo state, Southern Nigeria, have threatened strike action beginning December 1.

This is a response to mergers and reforms being pursued by the National Board of Technical Education (NBTE)—a federal government body. The union says it has not been consulted or its position sought on the proposed reforms.

The union also states that the NBTE has yet to accredit the polytechnic's 18 programmes, which has meant students have not been admitted for the 2006/2007 session.

Kenya lecturers' strike action enters second month

The strike action by academic staff at Kenya's public universities is now in its second month. The strike by members of the Universities Academy Staff Union (UASU) began on October 23 in pursuit of a pay claim. Five of the six public universities remain closed.

On November 22 the UASU officials and the Inter-Public University Councils Consultative Forum (IPUCCF)—the employers' body—were due to meet with Education Minister George Saitoti to try to resolve the dispute. However the employers' representatives failed to attend.

On the following day, Justice Charles Chemtut of the Industrial Court once again issued an order calling on the lecturers to resume work. The order also directed the UASU secretary general, Dr. Muga K'Olaile, to submit the union's application of memorandum to the court.

Afterwards, the union said it will not abide by the court order. It is hoping that the education minister will intervene in the dispute.

South African miners stage underground sit-in strike

About 80 miners at the Spring Lake Colliery, near Dundee in KwaZulu-Natal province, staged an underground sit-down strike on November 28. The action was in support of other miners who had been suspended after raising objections to changes in their shift pattern without consultation.

According to Bonginkosi Mncwabe of the National Union of Mine Workers in KwaZulu-Natal, the union sent a representative to the mine to negotiate an end to the sit-in. There was concern for the welfare of the miners who not had food and water for 24 hours and some of whom had missed regular medication.



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