Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

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Europe

British Airways cabin crews vote to strike

British Airways cabin staff are set to strike between January 29 and January 31, following the breakdown of negotiations between management and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). It is expected that the planned industrial action will have a severe impact on the company and affect up to 700,000 passengers, costing BA tens of millions in lost revenue.

Workers are angry at new policies relating to sickness pay and claim that they are being forced to report for duty when ill. They also are protesting the imposition of lower levels of pay on new recruits.

Talks between BA and the union began last week following the overwhelming 96 percent vote by 11,000 cabin crew workers in favour of industrial action. At the conclusion of the negotiations, the TGWU said that it would resume talks if the company wished, but the airline claimed that the union was refusing to negotiate. The TGWU said that two further three-day strikes are planned to take place in February if the issues are not resolved. BA is seeking to implement £450 million in cost savings over the next two years as it prepares to move most of its London Heathrow operations into the new Terminal Five.

Trade unions at Alitalia SpA airline call off strike

On January 18, trade unions at Italian airline Alitalia SpA suspended industrial action due to take place the following day. The unions agreed to call off the stoppage in order to participate in further talks regarding the planned privatisation of the airline.

The Italian government, which holds a 49.9 percent stake in the airline, has called on the private sector and investors to tender bids for Alitalia SpA by the end of this month. The union has stated that is not opposed to the privatisation, but wants to be involved in the negotiations over the future of the company.

Health workers at state hospitals in Norway strike

On January 18, hundreds of doctors and health workers struck at four of the largest public sector hospitals in Norway, in a dispute over pay and working conditions. Some 440 doctors, technicians, psychologists and other health staff struck at the University Hospital of Northern Norway in Tromso, Ulleval University Hospital, Rikshospitalet-Radium Hospital and Aker University Hospital in Oslo.

The workers are members of the Akademikerne trade union. The action began following a breakdown in talks between the union and NAVO, an agency of state employers. The strike did not affect emergency surgery and child services. Psychiatry and cancer treatment were also unaffected, according to the *Aftenposten* newspaper. The health workers' union is calling for a pay increase of 2.5 percent. According to state mediator Svein Longa, this is unacceptable to management.

NAVO employment director Anne-Kari Bratten said that management were attempting to set a benchmark for future pay agreements, "The economic expectations from Akademikerne were so great that they were far above a realistic framework for 2007 wage settlements. We cannot risk an overly high settlement so early in the year setting the tone for other negotiations later in the spring," she said.

On January 22, an additional 550 health employees joined the action at a further six hospitals in towns including Trondheim, Bergen, Førde and Telemark.

Truck drivers in Cyprus strike for six days

Last week truck drivers in Cyprus ended their industrial action in a dispute centred on demands to change licensing provisions. The professional class A and D licence holders presented eight demands listing their grievances prior to the strike. One of the main demands was to protest the Licensing Authority's practice of issuing class C licences to employees of private companies to the detriment of professional drivers.

The strike had a severe impact on the island, halting goods deliveries and blockading the two commercial ports. The drivers made exceptions for deliveries of livestock and perishable exports.

The industrial action is estimated to have cost business $50 million with some 2,500 containers left stranded on the piers. On January 19, Finance Minister Michalis Sarris warned that the strike was threatening the economy, stating, "We are particularly concerned because the repercussions on the growth rates (and) employment will be very serious."

The government had refused to negotiate with the drivers until the action was called off. On January 20, the strike was ended when the Communications Ministry and Road Transport Department agreed to discuss the causes of the six-day strike with various truckers' associations. As part of the agreement to enter negotiations the government said it would cancel traffic fines issued to the strikers for parking their vehicles outside the ports during the stoppage.

Dublin port workers serve strike notice

This week workers employed at the port of Dublin in the Irish Republic served notice to strike to protest plans to train maintenance staff on tugboats. The action is set to go ahead on January 30.

The dispute began after nine shore-based staff were suspended after refusing to work the tugboats. The port employees are members of the TEEU trade union, which stated that the workers were being deployed on tugs without adequate training or equipment. The Labour Relations Commission has intervened in the dispute and is to hold talks with port management and TEEU this week.

Fujitsu employees in Manchester, England vote to continue dispute

This week staff employed at technology firm Fujitsu in Manchester, England voted to continue their ongoing dispute over union recognition, representation and the right to a 90-day consultation before redundancy. The workers are employed by Fujitsu on a number of the firms' outsourced accounts.

The Amicus trade union has now called a five-day strike to be held from January 29 to February 2. Earlier this month staff held a two-day strike and leafleted the firm's offices in Bristol, Crewe, London, Solihull, and Stevenage.

In an attempt to weaken any further strike action and to divide the workforce, Fujitsu has warned staff not involved in the dispute not to take leave during the five days of the upcoming action. The senior representative for Amicus at Fujitsu has been threatened with disciplinary action by the firm. Ian Allinson said this week, "We clearly think that's linked to my role in the dispute. We think one of the reasons the union was attacked in Manchester is that the company generally doesn't recognise unions. It feels like they're trying to break the union here to nip it in the bud."

Chinese textile workers strike in Romania

Some 400 Chinese women employed legally in the clothing industry in Romania are on strike in Bacau, northeast of Bucharest, to demand the doubling of their monthly after-tax pay from $350 to $700 (£255). Their demand has been rejected by the textile company, which has accused Chinese employment agencies of taking a cut from the workers' salaries. According to the BBC, textile manager Sorin Nicolescu claims that he pays each woman $450 (£229) before tax and that he has offered to reclaim the $5,000 that he says they each paid Chinese middlemen.

Africa

Zimbabwe government turns to army to break doctors' strike

The Zimbabwe government is now using army medical staff in an attempt to force an end to a month-long doctors' strike. David Parirenyatwa, the health minister, was quoted by the *South African Broadcasting Corporation* (SABC) saying, "We are mobilising the army medical corps to alleviate the situation.... We are doing our best to restore services to normal."

Doctors and nurses are on strike to demand a wage increase of more than 8,000 percent—made necessary by Zimbabwe's hyperinflation, which is now more than 1,200 percent. Junior doctors have received around 56,000 Zimbabwe dollars (US$224) per month since their previous strike in July 2006.

An article posted on the United Nations' IRIN web site noted that lecturers at Zimbabwe's state-owned educational institutions have now gone on strike, alongside doctors and nurses. The pitifully low wages in the state sector could lead to a further widening of industrial action.

Ghanaian shop workers launch sit-down strike

Workers at the Melcom household appliance shop in Tamale, Ghana, held a four-hour sit-down strike on January 23 to demand the resignation of what they called a "rude and autocratic" manager, Samir Halvadia. The staff passed a vote of no confidence in Halvadia. Their petition, dated October 6, 2006 and signed by 45 members of staff, describes how unjustified deductions had been made from employees' salaries and how those who complained about them were fired. An article in the *Ghanaian Chronicle* quoted both staff and customers criticising Halvadia's behaviour.