

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

22 June 2007

Europe

London tube strike ballot over pensions

Thousands of London Underground workers are to be balloted on strike action over pensions. The Rail, Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) opposes planned changes it says could deprive workers of their pensions if they leave work due to ill health.

The RMT says 11,000 of its members are to vote on whether to launch a series of strikes during the summer. According to the BBC, a Transport for London (TfL) spokesperson said it had not been notified of any proposed ballot of its staff.

RMT General Secretary Bob Crow said, "This is a fundamental attack on a long-standing condition of service that would see most people who leave work through ill health deprived of their pension, and we have made it clear that we will resist it.

"They backed away when we threatened strike action last year, and these changes are just as unacceptable now as they were then."

He said a dispute could be avoided if TfL provided assurances it would abandon "a cost-cutting attempt to undermine ill health benefits."

The ballot will be finalised by July 24, a day before a meeting in which a pension fund subcommittee is to consider the suggested changes.

Nationwide UK post strike expected

Royal Mail managers held "last-ditch talks" with the Communications Workers Union (CWU) on June 20, in the hope of averting the first national postal strike in Britain for a decade.

News of the talks came as Royal Mail confirmed it had lost another business contract, an £8 million deal with the online retailer Amazon. According to the Guardian newspaper, the Amazon contract is "the latest in a series of business contract losses and Royal Mail was quick to suggest it underlined the need to modernise, which the union fears will cost up to 40,000 jobs over the next five years."

A series of one-day stoppages is expected unless there is a shift in the dispute.

Coca-Cola workers to vote on strikes

Hundreds of workers at a Coca-Cola distribution centre in West Yorkshire, England, are to be balloted on strikes in a dispute over pay. More than 500 workers at the site in Wakefield are angry at a pay offer worth 2.5 percent, according to the Unite union.

The Unite union warned that if its members took industrial action, it could have a "devastating effect" on supplies to supermarkets and pubs across the UK. Regional officer for the union Kelvin Mawer said, "Coca-Cola Enterprises (CCE) now face the prospect of a strike which we believe will have a significant impact on supplies of Coca-Cola during the hottest months of the year.

"Wakefield is one of the most productive and cost-effective sites in the UK. Yet CCE are effectively proposing a pay cut in real terms. How can a business like CCE expect its employees to accept a pay offer far below the rate of inflation when the same employees have contributed to the success of the business?"

Pay rise for Barclays cleaners following strike

According to the Evening Standard newspaper, following strike action by cleaners, Barclays agreed to increase their low pay. On June 18, the bank announced that it would increase the pay of 1,000 cleaners and other ancillary staff to £7.50 an hour.

The firm was targeted last month by the Unite union and religious groups as the worst payer of cleaners in London's Canary Wharf. Barclays' contractors include Mitie, Lancaster, Initial, Mail Source and Bannatyne's. Goldman Sachs was targeted last year by cleaners shouting "Goldman Sucks." The cleaners staged protests calling for a raise to the £7.20 an hour (which Mayor Ken Livingstone said was the London minimum "living wage").

Many of the cleaners work in the investment banking and fund management offices, where most staff earn well over £100,000 a year. Until now, cleaners at the Canary Wharf headquarters have been paid £6.40 an hour while those at Barclays Wealth Management got £6.14.

Scottish parking wardens strike over pay

Parking wardens in Scotland's capital, Edinburgh, went on a 24-hour strike in a pay dispute on June 19. The Transport and General Workers' Union (T&G) said three quarters of the city's 130 on-street parking attendants participated in the strike.

The union said it was unfair that city wardens were being paid £6.26 an hour by employer NCP Services compared with £9.19 an hour in Glasgow. NCP brought in 29 extra staff to help patrol parking in the capital during the walkout.

T&G regional industrial organiser Rab Stewart said that wardens in Edinburgh collected £7 million a year, but their wages collectively reached only £1.4 million annually. "It is a thankless task the wardens do as they are verbally abused on a daily basis, it is a horrible job for the money they get," he said.

"Their previous employer CPS gave an indication they would be receiving a rise in wage to £7.50, so when the new employer, NCP Services, came in and said they weren't, and then they heard about the wages for Glasgow parking attendants, they thought it was ridiculous. If the dispute is not resolved, then they are looking to strike again on June 29 and 30."

NCP Services was awarded a five-year parking contract by Edinburgh Council in December. Wardens in Glasgow are employed directly by the local authority.

Strikes set at Grampian Foods in Wales

Workers at the Grampian Foods plant at Llangefni on Anglesey are to hold three days of industrial action in a dispute over pay, pensions and the increasing casualisation of the company's workforce. The action is to include strikes on June 25, 27 and 29. It comes after management at Llangefni refused to allow Grampian trade union combine chair Scott Walker onto the site, or to hold talks with T&G national secretary for agriculture Chris Kaufman.

Recent strikes have taken place at the company's sites in Wales and across the UK. "Management has handled the situation at Llangefni very badly," said Kaufman, "and we hope that even at this late stage, they will

behave responsibly and talk with Unite about ways of making progress on our dispute.”

German telecom workers on strike

German services union Verdi announced on June 14 that strikes against Europe’s biggest telecom firm, Deutsche Telekom AG, will continue with 10,000 workers taking part. The walkouts have occurred daily since May 10.

The union is entering a sixth round of talks with the company over the transfer of thousands of jobs to a new unit with lower pay and longer hours. Deutsche Telekom and Verdi resumed the talks on June 13 following their collapse in April over the company’s plans to transfer thousands of workers to a new T-Services operation.

According to Associated Press, Deutsche Telekom wants to transfer as many as 50,000 staff from its fixed-line unit into three new service units, covering call centres, technical services and infrastructure, and intends to cut wages by 12 percent over a 30-month period in an effort to cut costs by up to \$1.2 billion. It also pledged to forestall layoffs until at least the end of 2011. Verdi merely wants to block any reduction in pay and extend the no-layoff guarantee until the end of 2013.

Flights to Belgian hub cancelled

The BBC reported that all flights in and out of Ryanair’s Belgian hub at Charleroi airport were grounded June 15, after security staff walked out in a wildcat strike over plans to privatise public sector security personnel.

The industrial action, which began at dawn, later spread to Liege airport in the east. An estimated 8,000 passengers were affected by the action. Ryanair commuters would have been most affected as the airline uses the airport as a major European hub. Low-cost airlines fly about 2.5 million people, mainly business travellers, to Charleroi every year.

Ryanair said the last-minute action called by the Ministry of Equipment Transport Union (MET) had also led to the cancellation of about 45 flights to other European destinations.

Other budget airlines, including Hungarian Wizzair and On Air, were also affected, diverting flights to French airports Lille and Paris and the main Brussels airport.

Aer Lingus workers force stoppage

Clerical workers at the Irish airline Aer Lingus staged a work stoppage on June 16. At 6 a.m., 100 clerical staff were instructed by their SIPTU shop stewards to leave their posts and attend a one-hour meeting. Passengers on most flights from Dublin Airport faced delays of up to two hours following the stoppage.

The dispute concerns staff being asked to work both on check-in and boarding flights. Aer Lingus said the stoppage was held without notice or authorisation by the airline and has threatened disciplinary action. Aer Lingus is mounting an investigation into the organisation and execution of the stoppage, and has warned it could lead to pay docked from relevant workers and disciplinary action.

The airline has also set a deadline of August 1 for full implementation of cost-cutting proposals. On June 1, the board of Aer Lingus approved the purchase of US\$2.4 billion worth of new aircraft provided management’s cost savings are implemented.

Polish health workers march for pay increase

Thousands of Polish nurses and doctors marched through the capital June 19 demanding pay rises from the right-wing government, which is already confronting a month-old hospital strike.

According to Polish police, around 4,500 people took part in the demonstration in Warsaw, in the driving rain, through the city centre. Some demonstrators held banners that read, “Enough stalling, it’s make-your-mind-up time” and “We demand a decent wage!”

Poland’s state-employed medical workers are appallingly low-paid. Anna Niewczas, a 35-year-old nurse from Radom, south of Warsaw, told AFP, “I’m demonstrating because with 1,100 zlotys [€290, US\$388] a month, I can’t feed my children.”

As they passed the palace, which is the official residence of President Lech Kaczynski, the demonstrators chanted, “We want to work, not emigrate.” Due to their hopeless financial plight, many Polish medical workers are looking for better-paid jobs elsewhere in the European Union, especially Britain, Ireland, Denmark and Sweden.

Members of the OZZL doctors’ union launched open-ended industrial action on May 21.

The striking physicians are refusing to provide all but emergency medical services or carry out administrative duties. Around 280 of the country’s 608 hospitals are still affected by the strike, according to the OZZL. In around a dozen hospitals, more than 70 percent of doctors have “upped the stakes” by handing in their notices, the union said.

The strikers say many physicians are paid less than unskilled workers in other sectors, such as cleaners. Polish doctors make a basic salary of 9.9 zlotys (€2.62, US\$3.50) an hour. The going rate for a cleaner in Warsaw is 10-12 zlotys an hour.

Construction workers in northern Germany strike

Construction workers in northern Germany walked off the job June 18, according to the Associated Press. It was the industry’s first major strike in five years.

The IG BAU union voted overwhelming for the strikes in the states of Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein after employers rejected a proposed wage settlement. According to the union, some 100 building sites were affected.

AP said the union hopes to pressure employer groups in the two states into an agreement proposed last month by arbitrator Wolfgang Clement, a former German economic and labour minister. Clement proposed a 3.5 percent wage increase for the country’s 680,000 construction workers that would have taken effect June 1. This proposal required unanimous approval from all employers’ associations, but was rejected by employer groups in the two northern states. Citing an upturn in the construction industry, the union had initially called for a 5.5 percent increase in this year’s wage negotiations.

German/Swedish ferries cancelled due to dockworkers’ strike

Strikes by German dockers led to ferries between Germany and southern Sweden being cancelled June 15. The strike has affected TT-Line boats between the German port of Travemünde and Trelleborg in southern Sweden.

Unions called the strike at 7 a.m. on June 15 in protest at plans by the Lübeck Council to privatise the company that owns Travemünde Port. Nordö-Link’s freight ferries between Travemünde and Malmö, which also carry some passengers, have also been cancelled.

Middle East

Israeli union body declares general labour dispute

Histadrut Labor Federation head Ofer Eini declared a general labour dispute on June 19 in protest over the Finance Ministry’s refusal to raise civil servants’ salaries. Public employees have demanded a monthly addition of nearly 13 percent of their salaries. Negotiations on public employees’ rights began nine months ago.

Civil Servants Union head Ariel Yaakovi said that public employees have not had a collective agreement with the public sector in five years, Army Radio reported.

“I don’t understand why the Treasury doesn’t think that a clerk who barely makes NIS 4,000 [US\$945.00 a month] doesn’t deserve a raise like government ministers. We’re talking about a few dozen shekels,” he said.

Tel Aviv bus drivers stage strike

On June 19, around 1,250 Dan bus company drivers went on unannounced and unlimited strike after talks with management over a new collective contract reached an impasse.

According to Haaretz, as a result of the unexpected strike, commuters lined up on the streets in Tel Aviv trying to board Egged buses and taxis, while passengers who had already boarded Dan transports were asked to

disembark.

The strike was called after Dan bus drivers' union head Dudi Yunger, Histadrut Tel Aviv area chief Gershon Gelman and Dan Director-General Refal Shmueli failed to reach an agreement over the bus drivers' pay rise. A bus driver said, "Bus drivers' salaries have not risen over the past five years, and under the new agreement it's time to rectify the injustice."

According to Dan drivers, their wages had been reduced when Dan changed from being a cooperative into a privately held company.

Africa

Nationwide strike in Nigeria over fuel price

Most of Nigeria's workers began a nationwide strike on the evening of June 19 in opposition to a fuel price increase. Several major cities, including Lagos and Kano in the north, were reported to have been severely affected. Barricades were erected in many cities. Police removed the strikers' barricades in the capital Abuja.

Many Nigerians had been angered by the measures decreed by Olusegun Obasanjo in the last days of his presidency before giving way to his successor. The price of petrol was increased from 65 naira (US\$0.51) a liter to 75, while Value Added Tax (VAT) was increased from 5 percent to 10 percent. Both measures involved a big cut in living standards for the majority of Nigerians who live on less than US\$2 a day, while benefiting the wealthy elite.

Some transport fares have doubled as a result of the fuel price hike.

Oil and transport workers were already out on strike, as of June 15, leading to long queues at petrol pumps.

The strike is also against the sale of the Port Harcourt and Kaduna refineries, which are currently state-owned. Nigerian ports have been shut down by the strike. According to a shipping line manager in Lagos, quoted by Reuters, "There are no marine services so there are no vessels coming in or going out."

The increase in VAT from 5 to 10 percent was said to have been rescinded by the government in an attempt to avert the strike. The increase in the price of petrol, already in effect, was reported to have been reduced by half, from 10N to 5N. However, the unions described the concessions as "too little, too late."

World oil prices rose to a nine-month high, mainly due to uncertainty about Nigerian oil exports. They later fell back after oil exports continued in spite of the strike. Peter Esele, head of the PENGASSAN oil union, said on June 20, "Essential operations are continuing this morning." However, if the strike continues, oil production could begin to be affected.

Nigeria was the fourth-largest source of US oil imports during the first four months of 2007, according to the US Energy Department.

Kenyan university lecturers still on strike to oppose decline of pay and status.

Lecturers at the six main universities in Kenya have been on strike since October 2006, the third such strike in the last 12 years. State support for universities has declined in recent years, and staff salaries have declined relative to other professions.

According to an article by the Voice of America, a Kenyan teaching assistant earns around US\$192 a month and a lecturer around US\$217. A full professor gets about US\$423. Compared to a vice-chancellor's salary, that of a top professor has declined from 75 percent to 14 percent.

The lecturers' union, the University Academic Staff Union (UASU), has been demanding a 500 percent pay increase to redress the decline, but this has been rejected out of hand by the government. There has been a prolonged "brain-drain" of academics from Kenya to Western countries, where they can earn much higher salaries.



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