

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

20 July 2007

Europe

Postal workers in UK stage second national strike

On July 13, postal workers in the UK staged the second national strike in two weeks in their current dispute with the Royal Mail. The action brought all Royal Mail services to a halt.

According to the Communication Workers' Union (CWU), its members were fully behind the strike with participation levels at "99 percent in big cities and all the largest Royal Mail workplaces and over 90 percent in all other areas of the country."

Postal workers are in dispute with Royal Mail over a 2.5 percent pay offer linked to the company's plans to shed some 40,000 jobs and cut back on services as part of a restructuring programme. The union also contends that Royal Mail plans to cut pay by up to 25 percent over the next period.

The CWU said in a statement this week that Royal Mail has refused to enter into serious negotiation to reach a settlement.

As part of the strike action, up to 500 workers demonstrated outside the headquarters of Royal Mail in London, demanding a reversal of the company's plans and a beginning of negotiations regarding the dispute.

On July 18, the union authorised a series of further strikes to be held over a two-week period, pending the resolution of the dispute. The strikes are set to begin on July 25.

Royal Mail said this week that it was "ready to meet the union leadership yet again at any time to explain our position and the reality of the open marketplace in which we now operate."

An unofficial wildcat strike by 500 postal workers at the Cowley postal depot, Oxford, that began Monday saw strikers reject the instruction of the CWU to return to work in a dispute over the suspension of Steven Gill.

Gill has worked at the depot for 10 years. Royal Mail has said a second worker had also been suspended. CWU representative Bob Cullen told the *Oxford Mail*, "The action of management is very antagonistic and it was primed to get a reaction. They knew exactly what would happen if they did this. They have suspended one, possibly two, people and not even laid a charge against them. If they wanted to stop it, they could stop it in 10 minutes. All we want is the two people reinstated."

Cowley sorts a million items of post every day. Managers have reportedly been drafted in from other depots to break the strike. The Cowley strikers were considering further action yesterday, unless the workers are reinstated.

A dispute also broke out on Tuesday, at the Abingdon delivery office, when 80 postal workers walked out after a member of staff was suspended for refusing to take on extra work without pay. The issue was resolved later that day.

Flight attendants at Alitalia continue industrial action in ongoing dispute

Flight attendants at Italy's Alitalia went on a 24-hour strike on July 17, called by the SDL trade union. The SDL is a smaller union representing employees in ground services as well as flight staff. According to reports the union is protesting agreements signed by several larger unions with the

airline last month, including clauses on the retirement age.

Workers are demanding that the company engage in negotiations over the future of the debt-laden airline and are protesting government plans to raise the retirement age under a reform of state pensions.

Cabin crew struck for 24 hours and ground staff for 8 hours. The action resulted in Alitalia cancelling 28 domestic flights, 50 European flights and 12 intercontinental flights. In June, Alitalia posted a first-quarter net loss of €135 million (US\$180 million). The Italian government holds a 49.9 percent share of Alitalia and is planning to sell at least a 39.9 percent stake to a buyer.

Earlier this month, industrial action by members of the Sult trade union forced Alitalia to cancel 140 flights. Air traffic controllers and flight attendants at Alitalia staged an eight-hour stoppage in May, resulting in the cancellation of hundreds of flights.

Albanian chrome miners and ferrochrome smelters end strike

Hundreds of workers at chrome mines and a ferrochrome smelter in Bulqiza, Albania, ended their prolonged strike on July 9 following an agreement between the Trade Union Federation of Industrial Workers and the Italian-based firm Darfo SRL. The workers have been in dispute with Darfo SRL over pay safety, working conditions and housing rights.

According to reports, the agreement includes a pay increase of 30 percent. The miners had originally demanded an increase of 50 percent. The agreement also stipulates that no miner would be disciplined for striking and all miners would be paid for the full period of the strike. During the dispute, hundreds of miners and their families staged a demonstration on the steps of Albania's Parliament in Tirana. Government ministers refused to meet with the miners. Another protest was held at the Ministry of Economy and Energy.

Groups of miners also held hunger strikes during the dispute, with several requiring hospitalisation.

Following the protest outside Parliament, senior managers of Darfo in northern Italy intervened and agreed to settle the dispute and to hold further talks about the grievances of employees. The Albanian Independent Miners Trade Union (SPMSH) also claims to represent the workers and said that it had signed a similar agreement with the company in early June.

Medics at Pirogov emergency medical centre in Sofia, Bulgaria, continue protests

On July 13, medics at the main Pirogov emergency medical centre in Sofia, Bulgaria, began indefinite strike action. Medics will treat emergency patients and will postpone only non-urgent surgery. These are requirements under Bulgarian law.

Workers at the state-run hospital, the largest in the country, claim that the health minister, Radoslav Gaidarski, violated an agreement regarding reforms in the hospital and new appointments on the hospital's board of directors. The protest is the latest action in a dispute that began in May over higher wages, demands for better equipment and structural changes in the hospital.

Dr. Svetozar Sardovski, the spokesman of the Pirogov strike committee,

said, “We are launching an indefinite strike today. We demand higher pay.” He added that hospital equipment “is 30 to 40 years old and poses a danger to patients.” The medics announced that the strike would continue until Prime Minister Serge Stanishev or his deputy, Emel Etem, signs an agreement addressing their grievances.

Health Minister Gaidarski has condemned the action as illegal, adding the workers would receive no pay for the duration of the strike. Doctors are poorly paid in Bulgaria and earn an average 500 leva (US\$350) a month, while nurses earn a maximum of 300 leva.

Staff at Greek archaeological sites strike

On July 13 staff at Greek archaeological sites began strike action in a dispute over night work bonuses and an increased bonus for working six days per week, and to demand permanent jobs for contract workers.

Workers at the historic Acropolis site were involved in the action, resulting in its closure to the public over the weekend of July 13-15. The site is also due to close the following weekend due to the strike.

Many workers at archaeological and historic sites in Greece are not employed on permanent contracts. Just 500 of the 1,900 workers in the trade union involved in the industrial action are on fixed-term contracts.

Journalists at three Scottish newspapers vote to strike

This week, journalists at the *Herald*, the *Sunday Herald* and the *Evening Times* in Scotland voted to support industrial action, with 70 percent in favour, in a dispute over proposed job cuts. The 260 involved are members of the National Union of Journalists. They are protesting the plans by Newsque, the owner of the newspapers, to impose cuts totalling £3 million, resulting in a possible 100 job losses.

Middle East

Israeli social workers strike

From July 18, judges will not receive outside expert opinions to help them decide whether to release detainees from prison, due to strike action by 450 social workers whose job it is to assess the extent to which detainees pose a serious danger.

The social workers say they are taking industrial action because their caseloads are too heavy and many of them are forced to pay work expenses, such as travel and phone costs, out of their own pockets. In addition, they say the government does not allow certain available positions to be filled—such as when a social worker goes on maternity leave or takes a sabbatical—which could help ease their work burden.

The social workers involved in the latest action also treat suspects accused of violence or sex offences and question children who have been assaulted. They are also known as Test Officers.

Itzik Perry, chairman of the social workers’ union, said, “By the nature of their work, they are forced to make house calls across the country and conduct visits to dormitories, trips to courthouses and detention centres—and that’s in their private cars.... The heavy caseloads and treatment of weak groups on the margins of society aren’t enough: They are also required to finance their work out of their own pockets.”

The base salary of a senior social worker of this type, with a college degree and 17 years of experience, is NIS 5,500 a month (US\$1,180).

Africa

Cane cutter shot while on strike in Mozambique

Twenty-three-year-old cane cutter Domingos Chanjane was shot dead on the picket line at the Mafambisse sugar plantation in Sofala, Mozambique, on July 16. Three other strikers were injured, two of them seriously.

The clash happened after around 4,000 seasonal workers walked off the job that morning on unofficial strike. They were protesting because their employer had reneged on a promise to increase wages from May 2007. The strikers had gathered at the factory entrance at about 4:00 a.m. Eyewitnesses told Maputo daily newspaper *Noticias* that the leader of the company’s security guards had fired the fatal shot. The other security guards were firing rubber bullets to force the strikers to disperse.

The strikers insisted that they had not interfered with the operations of the sugar mill.

The employers had promised to increase wages of cane cutters from 66 meticaïs (US\$2.54) per day to 100 (US\$3.85) and the wages of other plantation workers from 44 meticaïs (US\$1.69) to 62 (US\$2.38) per day. These figures do not reflect real earnings because workers, who are expected to cut for 14 hours a day and work on weekends, only get paid for 26 days per month without being paid anything for their 6 hours of overtime.

Mozambican labor law stipulates a working day of eight hours, with anything over this paid at time and a half and double time after 8:00 p.m. Overtime is officially limited to 4 hours per day, except under exceptional circumstances, and even then, the maximum working week is supposed to be limited to 56 hours.

The workers had attempted to negotiate an increase but had been refused, and this triggered the decision to call an unofficial strike. Since the shooting, the company has offered to increase pay for the cutters by 39 percent, to pay for overtime and to provide protective clothing. The cutters have refused to return to work because there is no agreement about the pay for other plantation workers.

The largest shareholder in the Mafambisse company—with 75 percent of the shares—is the Tongaat-Hulett Group based in South Africa, whose net profits in 2006 were 724 million rand (US\$104 million).

Zambian miners on strike to oppose underpayment

Zambian miners began strike action on July 11 at the Kansanshi Mine in Solwezi owned by First Quantum Minerals Operations (FQMO). The strike was the result of a company attempt to renege on an agreed pay increase.

An agreement for a 21 percent increase was made in June, of which 12 percent was to be paid immediately and the remainder was to be delayed until July 10. But before the increases were paid, the company introduced a new structure reducing all salaries before implementing the increment.

After talks, union officials led by Mineworkers Union of Zambia (MUZ) branch chairman Dustan Kalebwe and the human resources superintendent, Joel Chakana, went to speak to the miners gathered outside. According to *Times of Zambia*, Chakana asked the miners to resume work so that further talks could take place, but the strikers rejected this. Some of the strikers shouted, “The union has failed us, and we are fed up of your lies!”

Nigerian local government workers strike over pay

Local government workers in Ondo state, Nigeria, began an indefinite strike on July 17 to demand a pay rise of 15 percent and a minimum payment of N10,539 (US\$84.30). According to *Vanguard* (Lagos), the action was total and “all government activities were paralyzed.”

The strike went ahead in spite of a restraining order served in the High Court banning it from taking place. Chairman of the Nigerian Labor Congress Mumodu Braimoh claimed that the injunction had not been served correctly and workers had first heard it on the state radio and television. He added that it was the Industrial Court and not the High Court that had jurisdiction on industrial matter.

The state government has since increased its offer from the original N8,941.25 (US\$71.50) to N9,500 (US\$76). This is still far short of the strikers’ demands, and the action is continuing.

Series of strikes in South Africa

Workers at six large tyre-manufacturing plants are planning to down tools today (July 20), according to the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). The action is in support of a demand for a wage increase of 10 percent across the board. The employers are offering 7 percent. Goodyear, Continental and Bridgestone plants at Port Elizabeth will be seriously affected.

Thousands of workers at the Bridgestone plant in Brits in the North West and Dunlop plants in Durban and Ladysmith are also preparing to

join the strike.

A strike of 1,500 employees of the Road Accident Fund (RAF) is continuing, whilst negotiations take place. The workers are demanding an across-the-board increase of 8 percent plus housing allowances. RAF has increased its original offer of 6.3 percent to 6.5 percent.

Emergency health workers employed in the Port Elizabeth area walked out on strike on July 16. Xolile Vena, regional secretary of the National Allied and Health Workers' Union, told the *Herald* that workers had been stretched to the limit in the last two months as only six emergency workers had been forced to service the entire Nelson Mandela Bay area—with a population of more than 1.3 million—with only three ambulances. He explained that the “gripes” date back as far as 2004 and include staff and vehicle shortages, overtime payments, the training of paramedics and ambulance response time.

A strike of South African metalworkers is likely to be called off after the union Solidarity accepted a three-year pay agreement. The strike, which began on July 9, involved 70 percent of the 260,000 workers employed in 8,500 companies in the industry. The employers' new offer includes a 9 percent wage increase for the lowest paid and 8 percent for more skilled workers for the first year, backdated to July 1. This will be followed by increases of 7 percent for higher-paid workers for the next two years and 8 percent for the lower-paid. A number of other concessions have also been won, including improved severance payments and an agreement that leave enhancement would not be affected if workers engage in “legitimate strike action” during the year.

Although Solidarity has agreed to the new offer, NUMSA and the United Association of South Africa have to consult their members.



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