Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

27 July 2007

Europe

UK post dispute continues

The first part of a two-week campaign of staggered strike action throughout the Royal Mail postal service began on the evening of July 25.

Postal workers voted overwhelmingly for strike action against Royal Mail's offer of a 2.5 percent pay rise and plans to cut some 40,000 jobs and close post offices.

Each division within the firm has been allocated a different day to strike, in a move the Communication Workers Union (CWU) says is designed to cause "continuous disruption" throughout the strike period.

The first action is being taken by staff working in mail centres and cash handling.

Royal Mail called the CWU decision "hugely disappointing," but said it would not change its position. It also said it would have contingency arrangements in place. "Only part of Royal Mail's workforce will be taking action on any particular day and we will be working through the disruption to deliver letters to our customers as quickly as we can," a spokesman said.

The strikes will see each section of the company, from the sorting and collection centres to those who make the deliveries, walking out for two separate 24-hour strikes over two weeks. The CWU says the action reflects its growing frustration with the Royal Mail for its failure to take worker demands for job protection and increased pay seriously.

Union officials argue that they support "modernisation" and the introduction of new technology and automation, but not in the manner that the Royal Mail has outlined. The CWU says that automation and modernisation can still be achieved without huge job cuts.

Two 24-hour walkouts have been held in the last month—the first national industrial action at the Royal Mail for more than a decade.

Earlier this week, Royal Mail denied a report that it plans to cut the pensions of 167,000 of its staff. But according to a company document published in the *Daily Mirror*, postal staff would have to work for five more years before collecting their retirement pay.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown, when asked about the postal strike during Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons, replied; "People have got to accept settlements that make sure inflation is low in the years to come."

Strikes to hit Coca Cola in UK

The 500 employees at Coca Cola Enterprise's (CCE's) largest bottling and distribution centre in the UK are to stage a series of 48-hour strikes on July 26-27 and August 13-14. The workers will also begin a continuous overtime ban from July 23.

CCE management has asked the workers to sacrifice parts of their overtime rates and bonuses to improve a 2.5 percent pay offer. Coca Cola has enjoyed significant profits and a rise in stock market value in the recent period.

Unite (the majority union) Regional Officer Kelvin Mawer said: "It's unacceptable that one of the world's most famous brands is offering workers a pay cut this year for their hard work. Shops, supermarkets, pubs and hotels now face the prospect of shortages of Coca Cola during the height of the summer."

Unite estimates that CCE will lose 1,000 working hours as a result of the overtime ban. The Wakefield manufacturing plant produces up to 6,000 cans and 1,650 bottles of soft drink every minute. Of the workers who responded to the ballot, 82 percent voted in favour of strike action.

If the strike goes ahead, supplies of Coca Cola, Oasis, Dr. Pepper and various other Coca Cola brands to shops, supermarkets, vending machines, pubs and hotels across the UK will be severely affected.

UK airport to remain open through strike

The BBC reported July 20 that Inverness Airport, Scotland, will not be closed by strike action on July 30 after fire service staff agreed to provide emergency cover.

Firefighters, who are members of the Unite union, are to take industrial action after rejecting a 2 percent pay offer. Members of other unions, who accepted the deal, are set to provide cover.

Highlands and Islands Airports Limited (HIAL) stated that as it was government-owned, it was subject to a UK-wide cap on public sector wages. Talks to avert a strike by Unite members broke down July 18. While HIAL said Inverness would be open as normal, it is assessing the potential impact on its nine other sites in Barra, Benbecula, Campbeltown, Inverness, Islay, Kirkwall, Stornoway, Sumburgh, Tiree and Wick.

Virgin trains catering staff strike in Manchester, UK

About 100 catering staff at Virgin West Coast's Manchester Piccadilly depot mounted their third day of strike action, July 20, in support of a sacked colleague.

The Rail and Maritime Union (RMT) is demanding the re-instatement of Rachel Tombling, who sustained injuries when her head hit a computer screen in an on-board shop when the train she was working on experienced rough conditions during the journey. Tombling was sacked for willfully damaging the screen.

RMT General Secretary Bob Crow said, "The ludicrous allegation that she deliberately head-butted the screen shows a complete disregard for the welfare of Virgin employees.

"Rachel should have been given sympathy and help for her injuries, but Virgin chose instead to discipline her, and have even upheld their absurd ruling at appeal. The CCTV evidence the company presented simply does not support their absurd case that this was a deliberate act, but their unwillingness to listen to reason left us with no option but to call strike action."

London Underground's Bakerloo line strike over safety

A 24-hour strike by 150 Bakerloo Line drivers and station staff in a safety dispute over lone working, on July 20, was "100 per cent solid", according to London Underground's biggest union, the Rail

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and Maritime Union (RMT).

Reports from picket lines indicated that the company was only able to run an emergency service between the capital's Elephant and Castle and Queen's Park stations. The union renewed its call for the company to take safety concerns seriously and negotiate.

The dispute centres on London Underground's (LUL) attempt to impose lone-working at Queen's Park, Willesden Junction and Harrow and Wealdstone stations, thus increasing the risk of assault for station staff and drivers.

There was a 95 percent vote for strike action.

Journalists in Scotland strike over compulsory redundancies

According to the *Scotsman*, journalists at three of Scotland's leading newspapers went on strike July 20 against compulsory redundancies. The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) members at the *Herald*, *Sunday Herald* and *Evening Times* as well as Caledonian Magazines walked out in the first such strike in more than 25 years.

The NUJ said more than 200 people joined the industrial action, and a further one-day strike was called for July 25. The dispute began over budget cuts and most recently concerned the fate of four members of staff at the *Evening Times* who face redundancy.

NUJ organiser Paul Holleran said; "Newsquest [the owners] management questioned support for the strike, but it has been overwhelming."

Despite the company continuing to make profits, it has refused to rule out compulsory redundancies in an attempt to axe up to £3 million from its budgets.

NUJ members voted 87 percent in favour of strike action.

Glasgow care workers strike over jobs

Social care workers in Glasgow went out on strike July 24 to defend their jobs in a dispute over grading. The dispute involves nearly 600 UNISON members who work with children at risk, vulnerable adults and offenders, as well as the entire city's significant number of methadone users.

The workers had previously voted for action short of a strike, but their hand was forced after Glasgow City Council threatened to mount a legal challenge. UNISON's Glasgow convenor, Mike Kirby, said the union had tried to resolve the dispute, but that the council was forcibly downgrading care work.

A ballot has been scheduled for July 26 for other members of the council's social work teams on the issue of supportive strike action if the strikers' work is allocated to them instead.

Strike at UK Pirelli tyre factory

Around 700 workers at Carlisle's Pirelli tyre factory are to go on strike on August 3, 4 and 17 after the company announced it was to outsource five jobs.

The present dispute will see the majority of the factory's 1,000-strong workforce walk out for only the second time since opening in Carlisle in 1969—the only other strike being in the late 1970s. The factory produces about 10,000 tyres a day.

The Transport and General Workers Union balloted all of its 700 members at the Dalston Road earlier this month. The votes returned a two-thirds majority in favour of strike action.

Strike looms at Fiat Poland

The car company Fiat SpA (FIA) agreed July 18 to pay close to €1 million in new bonuses to workers at the plant in Poland where it is producing its showcase new mini, the 500.

But the Turin-based firm hasn't addressed a claim for a 100 percent increase in basic minimum wages that threatens to escalate into a strike in September, potentially disrupting production of the 500, which Fiat has projected will make a major contribution to future profits.

The chairwoman of the NSCC Solidarnosc union branch at Fiat's Polish auto operations, Wanda Strozyk, told Dow Jones Newswires July 18 that Fiat proposed paying each worker at the plant a total of 1,000 zlotys, or about €267, in new bonus payments. Fiat employs more than 3,500 workers at the factory in Tychy, southern Poland.

"But we again asked for management to provide a strategy for increasing the basic minimum starting salary for workers to PLN2,800 from PLN1,400," said Strozyk.

Earlier this year, Volkswagen AG's (VLKAY) Czech unit Skoda Auto agreed to a 12 percent across-the-board pay increase for Skoda Auto staff, ending months of talks that culminated in a one-day strike at Skoda's three plants in the Czech Republic. Unions had sought a 17 percent raise.

Africa

Nigerian sanitation workers protest non-payment of salaries

Worker the Bayelsa State Sanitation Authority in Nigeria brought the offices of some state government officials to a halt on July 25, in protest against the non-payment of salaries for the last two months. The state government claims it is verifying the identities of its workers and rooting out "ghost workers" (false names that appear on the payroll).

The demonstrators bore placards with slogans such as "We are hungry, pay us our salary," and "Why must we be singled out among civil servants?"

Riot police used tear gas canisters against the demonstrators. The police have now stationed themselves inside the government buildings to act more quickly against any future demonstrations by the unpaid workers.

Nigerian civil servants say "no" to deal struck by union

Union leaders are calling for an end to the 28-day strike by civil servants in Oyo state, Nigeria, after they signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the state government. The strike began on June 26 when the incoming state government broke an agreement made by the outgoing administration and cut wages from N9,400 (US$75.00) a month to N6,500 (US$51.70).

Strikers have voiced opposition to the call for a return to work, and said they will refuse to return until the state government pays the agreed salary.

More than 3,000 South African miners dismissed for striking

Around 3,250 workers at two South African platinum mines have been dismissed following an unofficial strike. The mines are owned by Aquarius Platinum, and the dismissals were made by its main underground mining contractor in North West province, Murray & Roberts Cementation (MRC).

The strike on July 15 was held to press forward a demand for a bonus for the mineworkers, after the dismissal of 108 dumper operators in May 2007. The workers of the other contractors went on strike in solidarity with the MRC employees.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was reported to be working with MRC to recruit replacements for those dismissed.

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