

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

31 August 2007

Europe

Council workers in Edinburgh, Scotland strike against cuts and redundancies

On August 23 thousands of council workers in the Scottish capital Edinburgh held a one-day strike to protest budget cuts and threatened redundancies. The workers are members of the public sector trade union Unison and voted to strike by a margin of more than two to one. The union has nearly 8,000 members employed by the council.

The action resulted in the closure of many council services, including schools, community centres, social work offices and housing services. Council workers also struck to coincide with events at the Edinburgh Festival. The council is seeking to impose budget cuts of up to £16 million and has failed to guarantee that there will be no redundancies. The union said last week that it would authorise further actions if the dispute is not resolved.

Pilots at Belgium ports strike

On August 27 pilots at ports in Belgium held a partial strike to protest low pay, poor working conditions and to demand trade union recognition. The strike had a widespread impact, with more than 41 container ships held up outside the ports of Antwerp and Ghent by the afternoon. The workers began a work to rule on August 24 to demand the regional government recognise trade union organisation among the pilots.

The main shipping companies affected by the strike were the privately owned Mediterranean Shipping Company, Orient Overseas, Gearbulk and Grimald. The Mediterranean Shipping Company announced that it had been forced to divert some ships to other ports, including Felixstowe and Le Havre.

Liverpool museums strike

Staff at museums in Liverpool, in northwest England, held a further one-day strike August 22 in a dispute over pay. The workers are members of the Prospect and Public and Commercial Services trade unions and are

in dispute with National Museums Liverpool.

More than 250 workers participated in the industrial action, setting up picket lines at five museum sites. They are striking in protest of the imposition of a pay raise offer worth 1.8 percent for 2007 and 1.3 percent for 2008—less than half the rate of inflation. The unions have called on management to re-open negotiations on a new pay offer.

Mental health workers in Manchester, England strike to defend suspended shop steward

Hundreds of mental health staff began a three-day strike on August 29 to protest the suspension of a shop steward. Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust suspended Karen Reissmann, a psychiatric nurse with more than 25 years in the profession. Unison members voted by a majority of nearly 90 percent in favour of industrial action in a ballot result announced last week.

As a result of the strike, the Trust moved a number of patients to other centres up to 100 miles away, while others were sent home. The Trust admitted that some patients had been moved from the North Manchester General Hospital to Alpha Care in Bury and to Affinity Health Care in Darlington. The *Manchester Evening News* stated that the cost of moving the patients was estimated at £36,000. Many of the patients suffer mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, manic depression and dementia and, according to some strikers, had been traumatised by being moved with hardly any notice or planning.

Reissmann was suspended from her job in June for allegedly bringing the trust into disrepute and misusing her time as a community psychiatric nurse. In opposition to this claim, Reissmann, a member of the Socialist Workers Party, has stated that she was suspended due to her union activities as a shop steward and because she has consistently opposed cuts in mental health services in the city.

Earlier this year 260 members of the union struck for

two days against cuts in services and jobs and the threat of privatisation of some of the community mental health teams. According to the union, the trust was proposing to cut 33 community nurses and eight occupational therapists from mental health services.

Journalists' union in Sweden calls strike in pay dispute

Last week the Swedish journalists' union, the SJF, called a one-day strike at a number of publications, to be held on September 4. The strike is directed against the Swedish Association of Newspaper Publishers.

The ongoing dispute is centred on the issue of pay. The union has so far instructed its members to carry out limited actions such as overtime bans and bans on changing work rotas. According to the union, the strike will affect a number of newspapers including the *Helsingborgs Dagblad*, *Ystad Allehanda* and *Trelleborgs Allehanda*. Journalists at the *Gefle Dagblad* are set to take industrial action on September 5.

Africa

South Africa: stadium workers take strike action

Construction workers building the Green Point stadium in Cape Town took unofficial strike action on August 27 in a dispute over travel allowances. The site is one of the stadiums being built for the 2010 World Football Cup. All 800 workers on the site were involved in the action.

Following talks between the unions and the main contractor Murray and Roberts, the workers were expected to return to work. However, Congress of South African Trade Unions spokesman Tony Ehrenreich said that if the workers' demands were not met by Thursday, official all-out action would begin today.

Following an unannounced visit by Labour Department inspectors to the Durban football stadium construction site, they ordered work to be stopped over safety concerns. Siyanda Zondeki, of the Labour Department said: "We found that the scaffolding was not erected according to safety regulations and was a danger to workers."

In the last 15 months, there have been 76 accidents in the KwaZulu-Natal region on construction sites, with 16 workers losing their lives. A total of five new stadiums are being built in South Africa for the FIFA World Cup in 2010 and are under tight work deadlines.

South African police attack striking workers

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was seeking a meeting this week with the Safety and Security Minister Charles Nqakula. They requested the meeting following police attacks on striking workers.

On Monday August 27, police fired rubber bullets at miners picketing the Lonmin Platinum mine in the North West Province. COSATU also wanted to raise the case of workers belonging to the Food and Allied Workers Union. Police were accused of firing rubber bullets at 120 members taking action at Oranjerivier Wine Cellars in Upington.

Nigeria: Oyo Civil Servants strike action

Civil servants in Oyo state began strike action Monday August 27 against the government's refusal to pay the minimum monthly wage of N 9,400 (US\$75). They had taken strike action at the end of June, which lasted 35 days, in pursuit of their claim and, following promises from the state government, had returned to work.

When the minimum wage levels were only applied to workers on higher grades, the civil servants resumed their action. The state government resorted to court action to try to stop the strike, but the judge dismissed the state's submission.

Egypt: Suez Fertilizer Company workers sit in

Three hundred and twenty workers at the Suez Fertilizer company organised a sit-in on August 20. They were threatening a hunger strike. The workers accuse the firm of making illegal deductions and having a poor health and safety record.

This second sit-in follows one at the beginning of August supported by 420 workers. The workers ended that first sit-in after being promised by the district Governor that their concerns would be met. The factory deals with sulphur and sulphuric acid.

Kamal El Banna, who has worked at the factory for three years, told an Egyptian newspaper, "The company does what it likes. Work conditions are terrible, we suffer from safety hazards such as pollution and other factors that could lead to impotence."



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