

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

16 November 2007

Europe

UK Mental health workers strike over unfair dismissal

Around 150 community psychiatric nursing staff in Manchester, who care for 1,000 seriously ill patients, began an indefinite strike on November 8.

The action follows the dismissal of senior mental health nurse and union leader Karen Reissmann, who was suspended in June for bringing a health trust into disrepute, after she gave an interview in which she explained why UNISON opposes the use of voluntary sector “social enterprises” to provide NHS services and why her branch has taken strike action to prevent any such privatisations.

Reissmann was found guilty of gross misconduct by Manchester’s Mental Health and Social Care Trust on Monday November 5 and sacked on four counts:

- * That when she was interviewed in December 2006 criticising the transfer of NHS work to the voluntary sector, she brought the Trust into disrepute.

- * For telling people that she was suspended and why.

- * For protesting her innocence.

- * For allowing the press to print allegedly misleading information about her case.

A fifth charge of misusing time was dropped. Reissmann worked in the city’s health services for more than 20 years and was promoted to specialist practitioner, the most senior nursing post under management, on the same day she was suspended.

Speaking from one of four picket lines outside trust sites across Manchester, Reissmann said, “People feel angry they have to be taking this stand, they are angry they have been put in this position and they are angry I have been sacked for speaking out. But they are determined to do this, to ensure I am reinstated.”

A UNISON spokesman said the union will appeal the decision. Since June, up to 700 union members have staged 14 days of industrial action over Reissman’s suspension.

UK train drivers stage third strike

Midland Mainline train drivers staged a third one-day strike in a dispute over pensions on November 8. No trains were scheduled from Leeds, Wakefield Westgate, Sheffield, Luton, Chesterfield or Nottingham on the third of six planned strike days. Only five trains ran between Derby and St. Pancras, with another five going in the opposite direction.

The train drivers’ union Aslef has said the dispute involves disagreements over pension provisions after a pay deal agreed in 2001. Further action is planned on the following three Thursdays.

British journalists protest in Amsterdam

Fifteen members of the Netherlands Branch of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) protested at the Argopress offices in West Amsterdam November 5, demanding decent pay, and standing up for “independent quality journalism.”

Argopress is the publisher of the *Holland Times*, an English-language paper distributed by multinational corporations, upmarket hotels and

airlines. The NUJ says the paper pays its journalists poverty wages. Currently, the paper is not using freelancers, but when it did, they often had to wait a long time before they received payment.

According to Guy Thornton, from *News from Amsterdam*, there are similar issues at other English-language publications such as *Amsterdam Weekly*.

Argopress was singled out for the November 5 protest to “set an example.” The protest was part of the European “Stand Up for Journalism” campaign, initiated by the British/Irish NUJ. Thornton said he hopes there will be a follow-up to the action, possibly in collaboration with Dutch journalists’ union NVJ.

The NUJ’s members in the Netherlands include journalists for English-language publications and correspondents in the Netherlands for British media, as well as translators.

Gaelic Players Association votes for strike

The BBC reported November 9 that members of the Gaelic Players Association (GPA) had voted overwhelmingly in favour of strike action over an impasse on the issue of grants and the method of distributing payment.

A 95 percent vote in favour of strike action was returned in a ballot of more than 1,800 players. The result could mean a removal of players from inter-county action in 2008 if the issue is not resolved in the coming weeks.

The National Leagues start in early February, although other competitions could also be affected. The GPA is to ask players to continue training for their counties during the strike. GPA chief executive Dessie Farrell said that the “overwhelming majority” vote showed resolve on the issue. “Seventy-one per cent of the membership responded to this ballot and I believe this type of postal ballot, that’s deemed to be an excellent response,” said Farrell

Dublin Bus drivers protest outside company headquarters

On November 14, around 300 drivers at Dublin Bus marched from Parnell Square to the headquarters of the company on O’Connell Street protesting new rosters for drivers assigned to operate two new cross-city routes.

The drivers are also opposed to new scheduling that means they will have to start, break and finish work in the city centre.

More than 100 drivers at the north Dublin garage began industrial action on November 12 after a female driver, who refused to drive a bus on one of the new routes, was suspended by management.

Leaders of the National Bus and Rail Union (NBRU) and management met at the Labour Court for talks. But there was no sign of a resolution as talks ended, and bus services are expected to see further disruption.

The services most affected are in the north and west Dublin areas with up to 40 routes partially or totally disrupted.

Northern Ireland classroom assistants to resume strike action

The NIPSA union’s 3,000 members will be out on picket lines two days a week until Christmas, and many special schools will be affected across Northern Ireland.

The classroom assistants are taking action in a dispute over pay and conditions after a unanimous vote at a meeting of its strike committee in Cookstown on November 8.

Education Minister Caitriona Ruane said she was “extremely disappointed” at the plans to restart the strike. Last month, more than half of special schools were shut during 10 days of strike action. The new walkout will begin November 15 and 16, continuing on the following Monday and Tuesday.

The general secretary of NIPSA, John Corey, said that the union has consulted exhaustively with members at meetings across Northern Ireland over the past fortnight, and that they had “made very clear their determination to resume strike action.”

Workers vote for strike action at Liverpool John Lennon Airport

Staff at Liverpool John Lennon Airport (JLA) have voted overwhelmingly to strike from November 22 after refusing a pay offer.

If the workers go ahead with the walkout, it will effectively shut down the airport. More than 80 percent of staff, including firefighters, engineers, airside safety and air traffic control staff, have backed a ballot calling for industrial action.

Staff had been balloted by the GMB and Unite unions, who refused to accept a deal from airport management that would have been worth 3.8 percent backdated to April, rising to 4 percent, back-dated from the beginning of October. The two unions—who say a deal should have been finalised in April—are demanding at least a 5 percent rise.

Despite the ballot result, union leaders confirmed talks would continue. Union chiefs also warned bosses not to escalate the situation by bringing in outside cover. GMB regional organiser Eddie Parker said, “The company have sites at Teesside airport and Robin Hood airport and are probably looking at contingency. But if the company brings in people to use the fire engines, we would not use them again.”

UK Cadbury workers to vote on strike

Staff at Cadbury’s four chocolate factory sites across the UK have voted in favour of holding a ballot on strike action. In October, the company announced it was closing its factory at Keynsham near Bristol and transferring production to Poland and Birmingham—resulting in the loss of 500 jobs at the site by 2010.

Workers in Keynsham, Bournville in Birmingham, Chirk in North Wales and Marlbrook in Herefordshire voted 1,363 to 130 against the proposals. They also voted 1,090 to 312 for a ballot on strike action.

A further 200 jobs would also be cut at the Bournville plant.

According to the BBC, Steve Preddy, regional industrial organiser for the union Unite, said its chocolate workers did not accept the decision to shut the site.

“We felt we needed a mandate from the workforce on two elements. Firstly on the decision affecting the Sommerdale site (at Keynsham) and secondly whether to progress to an industrial action ballot.”

Unite has said it would continue in talks with Cadbury and hoped to avoid any strike action. The union is to ask the company to “reverse the closure decision” as well as plans to restructure production and Bournville transferring work to Poland.

Middle East

Egyptian tax collectors stage general strike

On November 14, almost 7,000 real estate tax collectors resumed their mass protests of November 13, following the Egyptian minister of finance’s refusal to include them in the finance ministry and equate them in terms of financial compensation with public tax collectors.

Nearly 7,000 tax collectors from Cairo and 13 other governorates picketed the main headquarters of the general workers union on el-Galaa Street in Cairo, while others went on strike in other governorates.

The protesters accused the police of provoking clashes by assaulting a number of picketers as they marched and held placards. Picketing workers called on President Hosni Mubarak and Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif to

issue a ministerial decree reversing decrees 136 and 137, according to which they claim they are financially discriminated against.

The tax collectors say the strike and the sit-ins come in response to statements by ministry officials to the effect that Minister of Finance Youssef Boutros Ghali has rejected their demands. The protesters also called for the dismissal of Director of the Real Estate Taxes Department Ismail Abdel Rasoul.

Africa

Industrial action paralyzes construction of 2010 Football World Cup stadium

Work on the 70,000-seat Moses Mabhida stadium, in Durban, South Africa, in preparation for the 2010 Fifa World Cup, has been brought to a complete standstill by a strike of construction workers. The strikers, who are members of the National Union of Miners (NUM), are demanding a project bonus of R1,500 (US\$221) for each worker and at least the minimum wage for the civil engineering sector.

The strikers are calling for the right to elect a full-time safety compliance worker because they are not satisfied with the 15 safety compliance officers provided by the consortium building the stadium.

On November 14, more than 1,000 strikers took part in a march from the site of the World Cup Stadium to Durban’s City Hall to hand over a memorandum to the City Manager and a representative of the Local Organising Committee. Police from the Crime Combating Unit, the Police Emergency Services and the Motorbike Squad, all in riot gear, lined the route of the march.

The 2010 World Cup Organising Committee is extremely concerned about the growing impasse between construction workers and employers at all its sites. According to *The Star*, the building of the 68,000-seat stadium in Cape Town has been disrupted intermittently over wage demands. The paper reported that on November 14, the NUM issued all major employers, across all the five new stadiums for the 2010 football tournament, with a notice for secondary strike action.

The dispute at the Durban site has erupted only days before 3,000 delegates, including top officials from football’s world governing body, are due to arrive in South Africa for the preliminary draw.

South African platinum miners strike over pay

Ten thousand South African platinum miners walked out on strike on November 11, in a dispute over pay. Two of the biggest platinum producers have been affected by the strike.

Workers at Anglo Platinum, Impala Platinum, African Rainbow Minerals and other mines on the West Rand in Johannesburg are taking part in the strike. Ecliff Tantsi, an NUM spokesman, told Reuters, “The strike started yesterday afternoon and it is continuing today and all these companies are affected.”

The strikers are contracted at the mines through JIC Mining Services.

Factory closed in response to Kenyan sugar workers’ strike

The sugar processing plant owned by the Nzoia Sugar Company was forced to close on November 6-7 because of strike action by 200 drivers. The strikers are hired by private contractors to ferry sugar cane from the fields to the factory.

The drivers are demanding the right to join a trade union. They also want to be insured and receive leave allowances, and they insist that their pay should include risk allowances because of the dangerous conditions under which they work.

The striking drivers brought the factory to a standstill by camping outside the main weighbridge, preventing tractors from entering the factory yard.

On November 8, the *Nation* (Nairobi) reported that the strikers “vowed not to resume work unless allowed to join the factory workers’ union despite opposition from their employers.” The company’s board of directors recently rejected a proposal to increase salaries for supervisory staff.

Also in Kenya, 300 sugar cane cutters in the Mumias sugar belt went on strike on November 8, to demand a salary increase and the supply of protective clothing such as boots, aprons and gloves.

A report in the *Nation* pointed out that Mumias had awarded an increment last year when it started dealing with the cutters. But one of the strikers told the paper, “We were also promised increment in payment rates up from the current Sh165 [US\$2.49] per tonne of sugar harvested, but nothing to that effect has been done.”



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