

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

29 February 2008

## Europe

### Strike at UK housing charity

Staff at the national housing charity Shelter are to strike on March 5 over management plans to scrap their pay and grading structure and force them to sign new employment contracts. This week, members of the Unite trade union voted by 211 to 78 to take strike action to pressure the charity's management to change its position following several months of negotiations on the issue.

Unite regional industrial organiser Alan Scott said, "There has been an overwhelming vote for industrial action, and that must send a clear message to Shelter managers that it is time to change track." He added, "dedicated Shelter workers are legendary among homeless people across the UK and those who are affected by housing issues because they work selflessly for justice, and will always go the extra mile for those in need. But they can't live on dedication alone; they need to bring home a wage based on their union's employment agreements with Shelter, rather than have their contracts scrapped and replaced with inferior conditions."

Scott also pointed out that Shelter had spent up to half a million pounds on refurbishing its head office and employing six new "change managers," while ensuring that senior management pay was "in line with the market." He said this was money that could have been used to protect terms and conditions of the staff.

### Staff at Boots Logistic in England vote to strike

Employees at Boots Logistic in England have voted to strike over changes to working terms and conditions. More than 700 members of the USDAW trade union at the Nottingham site voted almost two to one in favour of industrial action. The changes to working conditions follow the centralisation of the Boots warehousing and distribution operation.

### UK Department for Transport workers announce one-day strike

On February 27, the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union announced a one-day strike to be held February 29. The action will involve more than 8,500 staff working for the Department for Transport (DfT) and five of its agencies.

The industrial action is in response to a recent series of below-inflation pay offers and the widening pay gaps between the predominantly female-staffed DVLA (the drivers licensing authority) and the predominantly male-staffed DfT and related agencies. The strike day will affect driving tests and regional centres controlling the flow of motorway traffic, as well as the six-monthly introduction of new vehicle number plates.

Announcing the stoppage, the PCS stated, "With salaries starting on as little as £12,528, low pay across the department has been compounded by a series of below-inflation pay offers. Pay gaps of £2,524 exist between DVLA and the DfT, raising concerns over gender segregation and prompting the union to call on the DfT to conduct a departmental-wide equal pay review, under the 2006 Equalities Act."

Commenting on the dispute, PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka said, "Pay in the civil service is a mess, no more so than in the DfT and its agencies where pay inequality and low pay are being fuelled by below-inflation pay offers. Not only are people seeing a cut in their standards of

living, but unacceptable pay gaps between women and men working in different parts of the DfT family have opened up."

The union said the one-day strike action is to be followed up by a campaign of action short of a strike. The PCS is calling for the introduction of a new common pay system across the DfT and its agencies, as well as pay awards in line with the retail price index measure for inflation.

### Irish ambulance crews vote to strike against privatisation

This week, some 1,200 Irish ambulance staff employed by the Health Service Executive (HSE) voted overwhelmingly for industrial action.

The ambulance workers are worried about the possible privatisation of the paramedic sector. They suspect a complete privatisation of the sector following the HSE's decision to privatise a number of ambulance services over the Christmas period.

The Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) says the HSE awarded contracts in December to three private ambulance providers for work that would normally be conducted in-house by SIPTU paramedics. The union has accused the HSE of going "behind their backs" by advertising the contracts on the e-tenders web site. They say any outsourcing proposal must be subject to proper consultation and negotiation.

The strike could affect emergency services all over the country. SIPTU said that it will provide emergency cover in the event of any action, as required by a staff code of practice.

Senior SIPTU official Matt Merrigan said no action will take place for at least a month, as the union is not meeting for two weeks to discuss the outcome of the ballot. If it decides to go ahead with action, it must give three weeks' strike notice.

### More than 1,000 Bulgarian steel workers protest unpaid salaries

According to the Bulgarian News Network, February 25, more than 1,000 workers employed at the Kremikovtzi steel mill gathered in front of the plant in a protest over unpaid salaries. The workers threatened management that if their salaries are not paid, they will blockade the national capital, Sofia.

According to Rusinka Gacheva, the deputy chairwoman of the National Federation of Metalworkers, the number of workers in Kremikovtzi is currently below the critical minimum. The news network reported that Kremikovtzi recently demanded urgent government involvement for a schedule, according to which the company's debts towards monopoly state-owned enterprises Bulgargaz, Bulgarian Railroad Company and the National Energy Company would be paid off. Kremikovtzi and the railroad company have come to an agreement that the factory's €12 million debt will be paid, while natural gas provider Bulgargaz decided to reduce the gas flow to the steel mill to the sanitary minimum due to unpaid debts.

Lyubomir Pavlov, of the Metalworkers section of the Prodkrepa syndicate, said, "Workers don't have working outfits or tools provided by the company"

In January, Pramod Mittal, owner of the steel mill, held talks with

Bulgaria's Economy and Energy Minister Petar Dimitrov and Deputy Minister Nina Radeva and offered them diverse options for the sale of the loss-making plant. The government holds just over 25 percent of the plant, but its approval is needed for the sealing any deal.

#### **Middle East**

##### **Egyptian doctors stage sit-in prior to national strike**

According to *Al Masry Al Youm*, dozens of doctors have announced their intention to take strike action in protest at their difficult financial and living conditions. Led by the Doctors Syndicate Chairman Hamdy el-Sayed, the doctors held a sit-in in front of the People's Assembly on February 24. They called on the government to improve wages and conditions.

Doctors said that genuine reform of the health system would start with fair wages for doctors and raised banners asking for status for doctors and "dignified life and work."

The General Syndicate of Doctors is due to hold a national strike on March 15 in hospitals, clinics and other workplaces, with the exception of intensive care units and emergency surgery rooms.

Hamdy el-Sayed said, "Doctors, especially young ones, are very much frustrated. That's why we'll go on a two-hour strike to voice our disgruntlement at this miserable situation. Many young doctors put pressure on us to resign collectively and to treat patients outside hospitals in protest against the extremely low and never-increasing salaries."

He warned that the present wave of anger might get out of control. A report in *Al Masry Al Youm* stated that el-Sayed "deplored the situation of doctors who love their profession and who have risen to international fame but live in deteriorating conditions in spite of the efforts and time they have dedicated." He called for a test every five years for doctors to make sure they had developed their job skills, "otherwise they should be banned from the profession."

#### **Africa**

##### **Algerian union threatens indefinite strike action over oil earnings**

On February 27, the Reuters news agency reported that public sector workers in the OPEC member country Algeria may stage "an unprecedented indefinite strike if the government ignores demands for a bigger share of windfall oil earnings."

The CNSAFP (National Coordination of Independent Unions for the Public Service) federation recently shut down parts of the state apparatus by organising two three-day strikes by administrators, doctors, nurses, teachers and municipal workers who rejected planned pay increases of 20 to 25 percent. The stoppages by tens of thousands of workers were denounced as "unjustified agitation" by the government, which has refused to recognise the federation.

In an interview for Reuters, federation spokesman Meziane Meriane said, "Public workers earn derisory salaries. The social crisis is acute, hence the need for rapid action to find a solution.... Repression won't solve anything."

While a "petrodollar bonanza" is being enjoyed by the nation's elite, nearly 75 percent of Algeria's under-30-year-olds are unemployed and high prices are becoming intolerable for daily life.

Although Algeria has a long tradition of political rebellion, there has never been an indefinite pay strike across several sectors of the economy. According to Reuters, "the campaign by the federation has struck a sympathetic response among war-weary Algerians desperate for work, housing and a future."

The state is currently prosecuting one of the federation's member unions in the health sector for striking illegally.

##### **Mozambican miners strike to demand compensation**

The pegmatite mines in Zambesia province, in central Mozambique, have been at a standstill since February 11. Striking miners are demanding the payment of compensation owed to them from the days before the mines were privatised, when they were run by the state-owned company

ENH.

The three companies now operating the mines, Euroexport, Tan Mining and Drusa, refuse to accept responsibility for what happened before they took over. According to their spokesman, the contracts for the mining concessions contained no clauses concerning compensation owed to miners who had worked for the state company.

According to Agencia de Informacao de Mozambique, a serious crisis at the mines was averted last November when the provincial authorities promised that the question of compensation would be resolved within three months. The three mining companies have appealed for intervention from the Zambesia provincial government.

Pegmatite is of great value because it contains tantalite, the main ore of the rare metal tantalum, which is used in steel alloys and in electronic capacitors. Mozambique has one of the world's largest reserves of tantalite.

##### **Kenyan meat workers strike**

Around 30 casual workers, in Mombassa, Kenya, have gone out on strike against the terms of service and working conditions imposed by the Kenya Meat Commission (KMC). The strikers complained that they had been working for the company as casuals since early 2007 and had yet to be offered any contract of employment. They say they have been subject to intimidation by management.

One of the strikers, under conditions of anonymity, told the *Nation* (Nairobi) that sometimes they worked only two or three days a month. He said, "Given that we are paid Sh310 [US\$4.60] per day, and with Sh200 [US\$297] National Social Security Fund (NSSF) deductions it leaves nothing to take home." According to the *Nation*, he alleged that deductions had not even been remitted to the NSSF.

Another striker told the paper that production at the factory had been affected by the post-election violence. He said that in December 2007 they were slaughtering 100 cows, and the number was now down to 30. The factory manager insisted that factory production was unaffected.

##### **Tanzanian food workers strike to protest unfair treatment**

More than 700 workers employed by Bakhresa Food Products in Tanzania have gone on strike for higher wages and in protest at their treatment by management.

Anyone who complains is suspended from his job for two or more days. The workers' identity cards say that they are employed, but for more than a year they have been paid on a daily basis.

One of the workers explained, "We are given Sh32 (US\$0.028) for every 50 kilogram bag we load, which is very little. But when we complain about the abuse, they confiscate our identity cards in order to hide the truth."

One of the strike leaders told the *Citizen* (Dar es Salaam) that government officials had visited the company several times, but "when they asked the management about our complaints they were given a few bags of flour to cover everything."

##### **Nigerian University brought to a standstill by all-out strike**

A coalition of three unions at the Cross River University of Technology (CRUTECH) began indefinite strike action February 25 in support of their seven-point programme of demands. The unions involved are the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Senior Staff Association of Nigeria Universities (SSANU) and the Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU). They had previously carried out warning strikes on January 31 and February 6 and 14.

The strikers are demanding payment of pay and promotion arrears, shift duty allowance and 22 percent examination allowances.

Vanguard reported a spokesperson at a joint press conference who said, "We are taking this irrevocable and indefinite strike because all the dialogues with the state government over the issues have yielded no fruit as it has continually exhibited insensitivity to our plight.... We insist on these demands for the health of this university because if they are not

attained, the university may collapse.”

The unions claim that the dean of the university’s College of Medical Sciences, Obudu Campus, had resigned due to poor remuneration. They passed a vote of no confidence in the vice-chancellor of the university, Ekanem Braide.



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