

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

11 April 2008

Ireland: bus drivers strike in Limerick

The *Limerick Post* reported that school and public bus services in Limerick were disrupted on April 4 as a result of an unofficial strike by part-time bus drivers, employed by Bus Eireann.

The drivers currently earn €11.66 per hour and receive no pension, sick pay or overtime rates. They are seeking parity with other Bus Eireann drivers who receive between €13.15 and €15.23 per hour.

The strike affected public and school transport services in both Limerick and the wider mid-west region of Ireland, including Tipperary, Clare and South Galway. The operation of some city and expressway services was also temporarily disrupted.

Bus Eireann stated, "The action is contrary to the advice of their union SIPTU, who have given a number of instructions to them to work as normal. The action is also in breach of all industrial relations procedures."

The issue of drivers' wages is to be debated at the Labour Court and a hearing is scheduled for April 16.

Russia: miners stage occupation

Miners working at RusAl's Little Red Riding Hood mine, employed by the North Ural Bauxite Mining Company in the mining town of Severuralsk (Sverdlovsk) in the central Russian region, concluded a 10-day occupation on April 7 after senior company executives spent a night negotiating with local trade union leaders.

According to the *Moscow Times*, the occupation began March 26, when 107 miners completing the night shift refused to leave the mine. The main demands were for a 50 percent increase in salary over the current average of Rb18,300 per month (US\$760); for resumption of company financing of social welfare programmes which RusAl cancelled on January 1; an increase in mine investment; a halt to weekend work; and amnesty for the strikers.

Reporters said the company had halted work at the mine and put all employees on reduced pay. A local statement issued by RusAl said it was taking court action to obtain a ruling that the strike is illegal on the grounds that it is "nothing other than the capture of private property which is not excluding terrorist actions."

The company then threatened to order police and marshals to use force.

A union source, quoted in *Mineweb*, said that "we've got law enforcement, the FSB [formerly KGB], Sverdlovsk regional government, even some deputies from the State Duma [federal parliament]. Everyone is trying to pressure the workers to stop striking."

Local press reports claimed that during the occupation the strikers were being backed by other miners, and most of the town's population came out for a solidarity rally.

RusAl sought to dismiss the impact of the strike by claiming to hold substantial bauxite in reserve to feed the alumina refinery at Bogoslovsk, which in turn feeds the aluminium smelter at Uralsk. But according to *Mineweb*, "the early indications are that 20 percent of RusAl's aggregate bauxite production has been halted. That amounts to 9,500 tonnes of bauxite per day. Multiply this by the 14 to 30 days expected to delay the reopening of the mine, and the loss of production, expressed in terms of primary aluminium, ranges between 30,000 and 72,000 tonnes. At the current LME spot price, that represents a potential loss of value of between \$96 million and \$207 million."

To intimidate the striking miners, RusAl has also made it known that it may opt to mine bauxite at lower cost per tonne sites in Guinea, West Africa; in India; and in Guyana, South America. The company web site did not initially acknowledge the strike, but the dispute was on the national television news for several days.

On April 7, RusAl Vice President Alexander Livshits and Anatoly Reshetnikov, a government-relations official for the company, guaranteed that the miners would not be fined or dismissed for taking part in the protest. Negotiations on a wage increase for the miners are scheduled to begin April 14.

Alexander Kalugin, one of three union representatives, said, "RusAl said it was ready to negotiate if we came back to the surface. We decided to make that move. ...We feel that they are ready for a compromise. As for us, we can make some concessions too. We would even agree to a 30 percent increase in salaries."

RusAl is the world's largest aluminium producer and is controlled by Oleg Deripaska, described by *Forbes* magazine as Russia's richest man. The company posted a 2007 turnover of \$14.3 billion.

Finland: cleaners stage walkout over pay

NewsRoom Finland reported this week that more than 100 cleaners represented by Service Union United (Pam) staged a series of "spontaneous walkouts in the Pirkanmaa region in southern Finland" on April 8.

The walkouts came after workers rejected a 4.3 percent raise that had been agreed by the union.

Greece: journalists join national strikes against pension changes

According to the *Associated Press*, journalists joined the protest against the government's attacks on the country's pension systems by going on strike April 9. Lawyers and workers at Greece's main telecoms provider are already on strike.

The work stoppages are part of a series of strikes that have seen workers from many sectors take strike action to protest the proposed changes to pension provision. Greek workers have staged three nationwide general strikes since December.

Last month, an extended strike by workers at the country's main power company led to rolling power cuts across Greece for 17 days.

Hungarian workers stage transport strike

Two strikes shut down subway, bus, tram and train services in Budapest April 7, causing major morning rush-hour traffic jams. Employees at the Budapest Transport Co. were protesting its plan for a 10 percent cut in services.

No state-owned Budapest Transport Co. subways, buses or trams were operating for the first half of the day and many schools suspended classes because of the strikes. The bus company made some last-minute concessions to the more than 20 unions involved, but it was not enough to prevent the industrial action.

The Independent Railway Workers Union also held a 10-hour national strike on the same day. The union has held several strikes over the past few months. It is demanding a pay increase of more than 18 percent, but the state-owned railway company MAV is offering only 6.9 percent. The union also wants a one-time payment of 250,000 forints (\$1,540; €980) for each worker from the €400 million (\$625 million) sale of a MAV

shipping subsidiary to Austrian national railway OEBB.

The railway union represents 9,000 workers—about one-fourth of all MAV employees. The rail strike mostly affected Budapest and eastern and southern parts of the country.

Northern Ireland: sacked airport workers in hunger strike protest

On April 9, two of the three men who were on hunger and thirst strike protest outside Transport House in Belfast were taken to hospital. Gordon McNeill and Madan Gupta were both shop stewards who were sacked by their employer at Belfast International Airport in 2002. The three men are taking part in the protest as part of a dispute with the union Unite over the legal costs of fighting their former employer.

Gupta, 72, and McNeill, 38, say they will continue their protest until their union, Unite, honours commitments they say were made to them last year. According to the *Belfast Newsletter*, the two workers said that this “involved promises in relation to a £200,000 legal bill incurred after the pair became embroiled in a court battle with airport security company ICTS over their dismissal.”

The men plan to start their protest outside Transport House in Belfast where they staged a similar protest and rooftop demonstration last September, which was called off after the union said their demands would be met within seven days. McNeill said, “Not one of the promises they made have been kept. We have been left to pay half of our £200,000 legal bill, an impossible amount for low paid workers who found themselves out of work because we were betrayed by our union.

“We also want a public inquiry set up to examine the union’s handling of this dispute from day one until now.”

“Madan Gupta is 72 years old and suffers from diabetes,” said McNeill. “I am 38, but in poor health with a heart condition. We know the consequences of starting what this time is likely to be a protracted hunger strike, but we are absolutely determined to face the consequences.”

Spain: refuse workers strike

According to reports in the Spanish media, refuse workers on the holiday island of Tenerife have reached a deal on a pay rise with their employers. Workers have been involved in industrial action in the Adeje area since March 16.

According to a BBC report April 4, “piles of rubbish have blighted part of the popular Spanish holiday island of Tenerife.” The dispute has left 1,200 tons of rubbish littering Adeje municipality, in the southwest of Tenerife, one of the Canary Islands. Adeje includes the big Playa de las Americas resort.

Germany: union threatens post strike if no offer imminent

The German public sector trade union Verdi said on April 7 that it expected Deutsche Post to make a negotiable offer on working hours and job guarantees for postal workers on April 9 and threatened unlimited strikes if that did not happen. Verdi has previously staged warning strikes against Deutsche Post.

UK: nuclear plant workers in strike threat

Workers at the Sellafield nuclear plant in England are threatening industrial action in a dispute over pay. The Prospect trade union said that its members are dissatisfied with a 2 percent pay increase offer and are due to be balloted on strike action. Staff will also be consulted about action at two smaller sites in Risley, Warrington and Capenhurst on the Wirral.

Union representative Mike Graham said there had not been any industrial action at the plant for 19 years and that a strike would be the “last resort.” According to the BBC, managers at Sellafield have said they were offering a new pay incentive scheme of up to 2 percent on top of the rise.

General strike in Burkina Faso

Workers in the public and private sectors in Burkina Faso mounted a two-day general strike from April 8, in protest at the rising cost of living, and to demand commensurate salary increases.

Most activities in the capital, Ouagadougou, ground to a halt. The central market in the second largest city was also closed.

The unions are calling for government to increase salaries by 25 percent in the public sector, and to cut taxes on foodstuffs and fuel. A joint statement from the unions accused the government of “leniency and complicity” with businessmen.

In the last few months, thousands of people have demonstrated in towns and cities throughout the country, to protest against the rising food prices, and hundreds have been arrested. A strong police presence was maintained outside banks and government offices.

On March 27 the prime minister told parliament that the protests were futile. He said, “The people can march and march but nothing will change.” Over 46 percent of Burkina Faso’s 14 million people live below the poverty line.

Uganda: hospital cleaners strike to protest non-payment

Cleaners at the Tororo Hospital, in eastern Uganda, walked out on strike on March 30 due to non-payment of their salaries for February and March. The workers are employed by Rinnaus Company Ltd, which is contracted to do the cleaning.

The director of Rinnaus, Christine Acheng, said the company could not pay workers because of delayed payment from the hospital. She told *New Vision* (Kampala), “The hospital has not paid for the services we offered for the last two months, therefore I have not been able to pay a workforce of 40 people in time.... I have tried to look for money elsewhere without much success.”

A senior physician at the hospital warned that the lack of cleaning could trigger an epidemic.

Strike by railway workers in Tanzania

Railway workers in Tanzania began an all-out national strike on April 3 to protest the company’s failure to increase the minimum wage to Tsh160,000 (US\$135), as had previously been agreed a month before. The agreement had also stipulated a further rise to Tsh200,000 (US\$168) in August. A one-day strike on the same issue in March cost the company Tsh120 million (\$100,000).

The government has set up a commission of experts and officials from the Ministries of Finance, Infrastructure Development and Labour along with two representatives of the Tanzania Railway Workers Union (TRAWU) to scrutinize the company’s accounts and report within seven days. Workers’ representative John Ominde told *New Vision* (Kampala) that there was no need to audit the firm’s books “because management agreed to pay the contentious minimum salary.”

In September 2007 the Tanzania Railways Corporation was partially privatized, with 51 percent of shares in the newly formed Tanzanian Railway Limited going to Rail-India Technical and Economic Services (RITES) and 49 percent being retained by the government. The restructuring that followed reduced the labour force from 6,700 employees to approximately 3,000.

The current dispute is disrupting transportation from Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda, which under recently signed agreements are using the Tanzanian port of Dar es Salaam for their import and export trade.

Nigerian University on all-out strike since February 25

The indefinite strike called by a coalition of three unions at the Cross River University of Technology, which began on February 25, is continuing. 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 strike is in support of their seven-point programme of demands, including payment of pay and promotion arrears, shift duty allowance and 22 percent examination allowances. Representatives of the unions involved in the dispute told *Vanguard* (Lagos), “The mandatory period

required in law for such industrial dispute was exhausted by all unions without any response from government/administration of the institution.”

It was the unions’ view that “consciousness should have been expressed in Government’s show of goodwill in clearing the backlog of arrears owed staff over the years.”



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