

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

27 June 2008

Europe

French public broadcasting workers strike

On June 18, thousands of workers conducted a second strike, which disrupted French television in a demonstration against government changes to public service broadcasting.

The demonstration called on the government to commit itself to adequate funding and to guarantee job security for workers in public broadcasting. The European Commission is currently planning to revise the European rules with respect to funding of public service broadcasting.

Shipyard workers in Baku strike over wages

On June 12, a thousand workers employed by the Caspian Shipyard Company, Ltd. in the Azerbaijani capital, Baku, went on strike for one day over poor wages and discrimination against Azeri labourers.

The Caspian Shipyard Company was established in 1997, as a subsidiary of Singapore's Keppel FELS Ltd., and repairs and upgrades oil industry equipment, vessels and floating rigs.

Bank of Ireland workers to strike

According to RTE News, Bank of Ireland (BoI) staff will stage a 24-hour stoppage July 8 in a dispute over bonuses. The action follows a 92 percent vote in favour by members of the Irish Bank Officials' Association (IBOA). It is to coincide with the bank's Annual General Meeting.

The move follows BoI's decision to halve annual bonuses for staff, agreed to in a recent restructuring deal, from 6 percent to 3 percent. The IBOA has estimated the cost to individual staff members at between €2,400 and €5,900 each.

Under a "strategic transformation programme" negotiated in 2005, workers were to receive up to 6 percent of salary in free shares under a gain-sharing arrangement. But the agreement was conditional on BoI meeting financial targets relating to earnings per share growth and cost management. The bank said recently that while its cost saving targets had been met, earnings per share targets had not.

The union's general secretary, Larry Broderick, said staff had met their side of the bargain, delivering 2,100 job cuts and savings worth €147 million a year.

Workers at UK cleaning products firm strike

Members of Unite, Britain's largest trade union, at the major cleaning products producer, Reckitt Benckiser in Derby, begin industrial action June 30 in response to the company's below-inflation pay offer.

More than 100 workers, many of whom are long-serving

employees, are involved in the dispute. Workers at the plant, including process operators and logistics workers, suspended a previous call for strike action on June 2 to take part in further talks to resolve the dispute.

Unite Regional Officer Jackie Williams said, "This derisory pay offer comes at a time when the company is boasting of its success and growth in the first quarter of 2008 and yet it cannot see fit to reward those employees who made that success a reality.

"A below inflation pay rise is in effect a pay cut and with members struggling with fuel bills and other rising costs this is a double blow," he said.

Reckitt Benckiser, which produces cleaning products such as Dettol, Vanish, Cillit Bang and Air Wick, announced hefty profits in the first quarter of 2008. In addition to the limited strike action, workers will also be mounting an overtime ban, are refusing to train new starters and agency workers, and will not cover for holidays. A further 24-hour stoppage is planned for June 9.

UK teaching assistants and school dinner personnel could strike

Unison union negotiators are recommending that teaching assistants and school dinner staff stage a 48-hour walkout next month that will launch a series of public sector strikes this summer.

Local government workers in Unison in England, Wales and Northern Ireland voted June 23, by 55 percent to 45 percent, for a series of sustained strikes over a 2.45 percent pay offer.

According to the Bank of England, inflation is "likely" to be around 4 percent for at least part of the next year. The unions' pay claim was for 6 percent or 50p an hour, whichever was the greater.

Union officials have urged staff to stage a walkout in protest at the offer on July 15 and 16. Almost 250,000 public sector workers earn less than £6.50 an hour and 75 percent are women.

Middle East

Workers at Algerian gas plant to strike

According to elkhabar.com on June 25, hundreds of workers employed at the production department of the state-owned oil company Sonatrach, in Hassi R'mel—near the Hassi Messaoud gas area in southern Algeria—have threatened to go on an indefinite walkout if their demands are not met.

The strike, over demands for wage increases and other concerns, would paralyse the gas production in the region. The Sonatrach workers timed their strike to coincide with an annual general assembly, attended by more than 1,000 workers.

Tel Aviv Stock Exchange cancels trading due to strike

Trading on the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange was cancelled June 19 after the workers' committee went on strike over disagreements with management regarding wages and its refusal to grant outsourced personnel employee status.

Gershon Gilman of the Histadrut Labour Federation told the *Jerusalem Post*, "It was only a month ago that we reached an agreement with the management to hold negotiations in an effort to end the labour dispute, which started nine months ago. Instead of negotiations, the CEO of the exchange preferred to disappear and fly abroad without giving any instructions to make progress on the talks."

The exchange employs a total of about 250, out of which 110 are outsourced contractors, including economists and computer technicians. Histadrut is demanding that at least 50 out of the 110 workers employed by contractors be granted employee status and included in the collective agreement.

Workers strike at Iranian paper mill

According to the National Council of Resistance of Iran website, on June 21, more than 1,300 Pars paper mill factory workers walked out and staged a sit-in outside the management office in the southern city of Shoosh.

The workers are protesting against non-payment of their wages for the past three months.

Separately, on Saturday, workers at Haft-Tapeh Sugar Cane Factory continued their strike by holding a demonstration outside the factory's management office in Shoosh. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Special Units moved in to prevent the workers from marching in the streets. Units of the IRGC were dispatched late last week to suppress a protest in Haft-Tapeh.

Egyptian garment workers on strike

Workers at the Mansoura-Espana Garments Company in Talkha are on strike. According to Arabawy/infoshop.org, June 24, central security forces and trucks surrounded the factory and water cannon were used on the strikers. State security threatened strikers with arrest and Ministry of Labour officials pressured them to suspend the strike.

The action followed the barring of Adel Hassaballah, deputy head of the Factory Union Committee, from entering the factory compound. Hassaballah had been fired earlier by United Bank (the majority shareholder) for allowing journalists into the factory to speak to the workers.

The strike comes after a week of unrest at the company. On June 15, 250 workers at the Mansoura-Espana Garments Company in Talkha staged a sit-in at the gates of the factory following the sacking of trade unionist Mohssen el-Shae'r and management's refusal to abide by the agreement brokered after a two-month-long factory occupation in 2007.

El-Sha'er was sacked on charges of "talking to the press." He had talked to various journalists about the plight of workers at the factory and the general attack on working conditions.

On June 19, Essam Zahran, director of legal affairs at the company, filed a complaint against four workers at the factory, accusing them of "agitating for industrial action." The United Bank issued a sacking decree against the four workers.

According to Arabawy/infoshop.org, management will punish

the security guard at the company gate by deducting 10 days from his salary. He is charged with "allowing journalists into the factory" and refusing to testify against a colleague accused of letting workers out after management tried locking them inside the factory.

Workers fear that the factory will be sold and they will lose their claims and see their wages cut. The suspicion is that management is not bringing in any more production orders with the aim of liquidating the business. The workforce has been cut from 1,200 in 2006 to 250 today. The average monthly salary ranges from 150 to 200 Egyptian pounds (US\$28 to US\$37).

Africa

Strike shuts down Chevron offices in Nigeria

Administrative workers employed by Chevron in Nigeria went on strike on June 23, bringing the company's offices to a standstill.

The strikers are members of the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (Pengassan) and Nigerian Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Association (NUPENG). They complain that the Nigerian staff members do not get fair treatment, especially when compared to expatriate employees. Some Nigerians have been working on a casual basis for the last 15 years without being given the rights of permanent employees.

Nigerian hospital workers strike over arrears

Members of the medical staff at Uselu Psychiatric Hospital in Uselu-Benin, Nigeria, are taking strike action from June 24 to demand payment of arrears from a negotiated salary structure. The strikers are angry that only half of the money due to them under the scheme has been paid so far.

The National Association of Nigeria Nurses and Midwives (NANNM), Uselu Psychiatric Hospital branch, alleged that the Medical Director/CEO, Dr. Ihenyen, was distorting the truth when he claimed the government had not released money to the hospital for the payment of the 50 percent arrears, as other federal health institutions had.

Namibian diamond workers on unofficial strike

About 200 workers at Lev Leviev Diamonds (LLD), a diamond-cutting company in Namibia, have said they will stay out on strike even though the company has obtained a court order stating that the workers must stay 400 meters from the plant and not contact the remaining workforce.

The strike has continued for a week and is over a range of grievances. Workers claim there is a hostile working environment and are demanding the sacking of the general manager. Their union opposes the strike and has been negotiating with management in an attempt to settle the dispute.

LLD is one of 11 firms registered with the Namibia Diamond Trading Company, a joint venture between the Namibian government and De Beers.



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