

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

4 July 2008

## Europe

### UK council workers set to strike

More than half a million local authority workers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are to stage a two-day walkout on July 16 and 17 after rejecting a 2.45 percent pay offer. In addition, up to 100,000 civil servants in several government departments could also take industrial action on one or both of the same days because of long-running disputes over pay. The workers involved include those employed by the Department for Work and Pensions, the Transport Department and Home Office. Workers are in dispute with around 14 departments over pay and jobs and have already held a number of strikes. The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) will ballot its entire membership later this year for a fresh round of industrial action, but it already has mandates to call strikes in a number of departments.

Social workers, housing benefit staff, teaching assistants, dinner ladies, cooks, cleaners, architects, traffic wardens and refuse collectors will join the strike in the biggest show of industrial unrest for years.

Prosecutions in Scotland's courts are likely to be brought to a standstill. Crown Office staff also may join the industrial action. Property transactions, art galleries and payments to farmers are also likely to be affected. Jobcentre and benefit office workers and other civil servants could take industrial action later in the year in separate disputes. The chancellor, Alistair Darling, has repeatedly urged unions to push through low pay deals, citing inflation that has risen to 3.3 percent, the highest level in more than a decade. Unions are calling for 6 percent this year and state that rises in food and fuel prices mean their members cannot survive on low pay increases.

### Postal workers in Oxford vote for strike action

Postal workers in Oxford, England have voted to take industrial action. Members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) at two Royal Mail offices in the city met July 1. A BBC brief said that the delivery staff insist their workload has increased sharply because of cuts in the number of workers.

Royal Mail has said changing duties to match workloads over the summer was included in a national agreement after strikes last year.

### Rubbish workers take wildcat action in Peterborough, England

According to libcom.org, July 1, dozens of city refuse collectors called a wildcat strike in Peterborough and are refusing to work until their pay dispute has been resolved. Around 70 workers have walked out amid claims their city council paymasters have gone back on an agreement to pay them thousands of pounds in back pay.

The workers say they are owed compensation as a result of a salary restructure by the authority. The strike initially involved around 40 workers, but by 9:30 a.m. the majority of the council's rubbish collection workforce had joined them.

The impromptu walkout was sparked after the council implemented

a wholesale review of salaries among its 6,500 employees. One striker said, "People are financially stuck because the council has messed us about. We have loans and overdrafts to pay and need to know when we will be compensated. We are not going to do any work until further notice, until things are sorted out."

Strike organisers say further industrial action will be taken on a day-by-day basis until the pay dispute has been resolved.

### London Underground cleaners set to repeat strike

According to a BBC report, hundreds of cleaners on the London Underground are to launch further strike action in the ongoing row over pay and conditions. More than 700 cleaners employed by four sub-contractors are demanding that hourly rates be raised from £5.50 to £7.20, as well as improved holidays and pensions.

The 48-hour industrial action by members of the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union follows a 24-hour walkout last week.

### Workers at UK electronic firm strike to oppose jobs losses

The workforce at a Fujitsu electronics component factory in Solihull have taken industrial action after confirmation that 140 jobs will be lost in a transfer to a US factory. Officials at the West Midlands' plant said it needed to move its printed circuit board operations to a plant in Texas.

Factory staff took part in a four-hour walkout on July 1, according to the BBC, which disrupted two shifts. A 24-hour strike was held last month. Altogether, 700 people are employed at the Solihull site.

An official of the Communication Workers' Union (CWU), Andy Kerr, said, "If this work leaves the Fujitsu plant in Birmingham it will be another nail in the coffin of manufacturing in the West Midlands."

### Irish Bank workers picket company HQ as part of strike

Around 600 members of the Unite trade union are to place pickets at the headquarters of the Bank of Ireland and at the ICS Building Society head office July 8 as part of a one-day strike over the implementation of a stock issue scheme. The finance union IBOA has already said its 6,000 members at Bank of Ireland will stage a one-day stoppage next week as part of the same dispute.

The industrial action by both unions is being timed to coincide with the annual general meeting of Bank of Ireland on July 8.

The *Irish Times* reported that the Unite union said that there was 91 percent support in a ballot for industrial action, up to and including full strike action at Bank of Ireland, over a broken agreement to pay a 6 percent staff stock issue. It said that in May the bank had announced unilaterally that it was halving the agreed staff stock issue for 2008 from 6 percent to 3 percent of salary.

Unions have said that as part of a productivity deal agreed in 2005 staff should receive up to 6 percent of salary in stock and a reduction of the working week, in return for co-operation with major changes. Unite said this programme had led to more than 2,000 job losses and

cost savings, which generated a 48 percent growth in profit before tax between 2005 and 2008.

#### **Hungarian rail workers to resume strike action**

The heads of the Free Union of Railway Workers (VDSZSZ) announced June 30 that rail workers will go on strike again July 12.

The union, representing around a quarter of MÁV workers, staged brief strikes early this year to demand that staff working for companies outsourced by the state railway company receive a further 10 percent pay increase and that all MÁV employees be paid Ft 250,000 each from the proceeds of last year's sale of MÁV Cargo.

According to *caboodle.hu*, union deputy chairman Balázs Bárány told *Népszabadság* that the union had trusted the new leadership at the Transport Ministry, but they have now run out of patience.

#### **Middle East**

##### **Israeli pharmaceutical workers stage work stoppage**

Workers at the Teva Pharmaceutical Industries Ltd. subsidiary, Teva Tech, staged a three-hour work stoppage July 1 at the company's plant at Ramat Hovav. The action, supported by the Histadrut Federation of Labour, is over delays in negotiations on a new labour agreement.

According to the business *Globes* online, the workforce shut down production at all the plant's production facilities, including the one that produces the company's flagship MS drug, Copaxone.

Teva Pharmaceutical Industries failed to report the strike to the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange (TASE), just as it reported that it had obtained US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval to begin marketing one of its generic drugs.

The dispute began over a week before, when staff locked the plant's front gate, preventing the delivery of raw materials.

According to *Globes*, the Teva Tech staff are seeking to create a precedent, as far as labour relations within the Teva group are concerned, by instituting a table of fixed salary bands that will allow staff to be promoted automatically according to their job and tenure. This is currently the accepted system in the public sector, but Teva management is strongly opposed.

##### **Renewed strike at Tel Aviv Stock Exchange shuts trading again**

*Reuters* News Agency reported July 1, that the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange would not function due to strike action. *Globes* online reported, "There will be no trading on the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange (TASE) today, as employees renewed a strike that was called two weeks ago. The workers committee of the TASE will not open the exchange at all."

The TASE workers committee said that "in the month since the meeting with the Histadrut chairman, TASE management has been delaying negotiations, and despite various and repeated entreaties by employees, TASE CEO Esther Levanon has avoided the crisis into which the stock exchange has fallen. This week she flew overseas without authorizing an alternate to reach agreements or end the crisis."

On June 19 the bourse did not open for trading due to a similar strike by support staff, who are demanding a wage increase.

#### **Africa**

##### **Nigerian teachers on strike over pay**

Thousands of teachers at state schools all over Nigeria have been taking indefinite strike action since June 30 in a pay dispute. The Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT) has accused the government of reneging on an earlier agreement and is demanding implementation of the new Teachers Salary Structure (TSS). The government offer of holding a "stakeholders' forum" was rejected by the NUT on the

grounds that this would be a diversion.

The Radio, Television, Theatre and Arts Workers Union (RATTAWU) has stated that its members would join the NUT in its strike, unless the government resolved the issue within a week.

The government is attempting to back away from the TSS, advising the NUT to seek "enhanced allowances" at local state level rather than implementing a national agreement.

##### **Striking Swazi textile workers attacked by police**

Striking textile workers in Swaziland were hospitalized after being attacked by police during their recent strike, according to an article in the *Swazi Observer*.

Nhlanhla Nkambule now has a bullet lodged inside the muscle tissues above his right knee. He was reported to say he can hardly stand or walk, but has no choice but to force himself to work to feed his family and pay for painkillers. He had considered suicide several times since the attack. "I just wish to die, than see my children go to bed hungry."

Nkambule continued, "I still need an explanation because we were engaging in a legal industrial action. If police reacted so harshly during a legal strike, how many could have been killed if it were an illegal strike?"

He added that there was no way the police could justify such brutality because the strikers were acting peacefully and in an orderly fashion. "The union leadership would warn us against violence because that could cost them heavy penalties according to the Industrial Relations Act as amended."

The Swaziland Manufacturing and Allied Workers Union (SMAWU) stated that its members had sustained several casualties during the recent strike.

##### **Sierra Leone lecturers conduct sit-down strike**

Junior staff at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, have begun an indefinite sit-down strike over management's refusal to pay four months salary backlog, together with incentive payments they are due.

The junior staff association have held several meetings with university management and the government ministry of education to press their case.

Junior staff member Rosamond Thompson said they were not taken seriously by the college administration. "This is not the first time college authorities have failed to meet our demands. It is also affecting students on campus," she told the *Concord Times*.



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