

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

25 July 2008

Europe

Pilots at Lufthansa subsidiaries strike in Germany

On July 22, a pilots' strike in Germany led to the cancellation of nearly 1,000 regional Lufthansa flights. The pilots are employed by the airline on its subsidiaries Eurowings and CityLine and struck over pay. The action was organised by the Vereinigung Cockpit (VC) pilots' union as part of an ongoing dispute.

The strike began at 10:00 GMT on Tuesday and ended at 22:00 GMT on Wednesday. Lufthansa announced that 465 flights were cancelled on Tuesday and anticipated another 525 cancellations yesterday. Flights were grounded at airports across the country including at Lufthansa's main hubs, Frankfurt and Munich. The Lufthansa group has 1,800 daily flights, and CityLine and Eurowings operate almost 700 of these.

The airline has offered CityLine pilots a 5.5 percent pay rise plus one-off payments over 18 months. It has offered Eurowings employees a 6.5 percent pay rise over 24 months, plus some one-off payments. Earlier this month, a 24-hour strike by pilots resulted in hundreds of Eurowings and CityLine services being cancelled.

Passport workers in Britain strike over pay

Nearly 3,000 passport workers at seven regional passport offices in Britain began a three-day strike on July 23. The strike is being held to protest low pay, cutbacks and threatened job losses.

It is estimated that the action taken against the Identity and Passport Service (IPS) will disrupt travel plans and delay the processing of up to 60,000 passports.

The strike was called by the Public and Commercial Services Union and is opposing a 2.5 percent pay deal, which has not been awarded to all staff. According to the union, some of the longest-serving passport workers have not received a pay increase for five years and the current deal represents a pay cut in real terms. Pay is generally low in the IPS, with starting salaries of £13,109.

The union also claims that management is attempting to end the postal applications service, leading to a further loss of jobs at the regional offices.

More than 100 jobs are set to be lost with the imminent closure of the Glasgow passport office. The union has warned that the number of regional offices could be reduced from seven to three. The seven regional passport offices affected by the strike are London, Liverpool, Belfast, Glasgow, Peterborough, Newport and Durham. As well as the strike at the regional offices, 68 interview offices are also affected by the action, as most applications cannot be processed on time.

Striking staff picketed at the regional passport offices. At the Liverpool office staff carried placards stating: "Don't stamp out our service."

The BBC quoted Rob Barton, who has worked at the Liverpool office for six years. He said, "Nobody is happy about it because the chances are a lot of us are going to be made redundant. It is going to be 50/50, as far as I understand it, whether this office stays open or not."

At Belfast on the first day of the stoppage, the regional passport office was forced to deal with emergencies only. An estimated 70 percent of the 120 workers at the office were on strike.

Firefighters take unofficial strike action at Guernsey Airport

This week, Guernsey Airport in the English Channel was closed twice due to industrial action by the airport's fire service. On July 21, the fire fighters walked off the job at 06:00 BST in unofficial strike action to demand higher pay. Later that day, the fire fighters walked out for a second time between 17:00 and 18:10 BST.

Middle East

5,000 Bangladeshi workers take indefinite action in Kuwait

On July 21, some 5,000 Bangladeshi workers began indefinite industrial action in Kuwait to protest underpayment, irregular wages and a lack of access to promised facilities.

The workers are employed by an agency firm that places them in jobs at hospitals, universities, oil companies, royal palaces and other workplaces.

In the *Daily Star*, a representative of the strikers, Shahriar Kader Siddiky, said the firm pays them only 18 Kuwaiti dinars a month instead of the 50 dinars they were promised: "The workers staged a peaceful sit-in Sunday morning but today (Monday) they are staging strike at their barracks saying that they will not join work until their company fulfils their demands."

The *Arab Times* reported workers alleging that the company had not paid two months' wages to some and had not given them a weekly holiday. One worker said, "We want the company to pay our wages through the bank, besides paying us for overtime. Most of the workers are falling sick because of the long hours of work. The company is also not allowing us to take sick leave. How can we work under such an environment?"

Egypt: Non-teaching staff at Ministry of Education demand pay increase

Non-teaching staff employed by the Ministry of Education demonstrated in Cairo on July 23 to protest the decision to deny them a 50 percent pay increase.

The workers are demanding pay parity with teaching staff and

held placards stating, “We demand a decent wage and equality” and “A minimum wage is the right of all.”

The action was organised by a workers committee, established in July 2007. This followed a promise by the Ministry of Education that administrative staff would receive a 50 percent pay increase. The promise was subsequently retracted by the Finance Minister.

Atef Hassan Mohamed, who is involved in the strike, told the *Daily News Egypt*, “The Finance Minister claims that administrative staff are not entitled to a pay increase because we receive an examinations bonus equivalent to a pay rise. But it isn’t something we can rely on. It’s not paid if we’re sick, for example. It’s incorrect to classify it a fixed part of our wage.

“We live in a remote area and the children have to take the school bus every day. This alone costs me LE 150 a month. On top of that I have to pay for their private tuition. How do I make ends meet? I have to work a second job in the evenings to try and make a bit of extra cash. Of course I’ve thought of leaving my job but where could I go? What alternatives do I have?”

Bus drivers in Bahrain end unofficial action

On July 24, an unofficial strike involving 52 bus drivers in Bahrain ended following an agreement over pay. The drivers are employed by the Cars Transport Corporation. The action led to bus services throughout Bahrain being disrupted.

On July 21, 52 employees refused to work, instead demanding an 80 Bahraini dinar pay rise. Drivers at the firm said they currently earned around 200 dinars a month.

Following the action, the Labour Ministry condemned the strike as “illegal.” In response, most of the drivers continued the action, with just five drivers returning to work the next day.

The remaining 47 drivers returned to work following a July 23 agreement between management, government officials and General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions officials at the Labour Ministry. Drivers will receive a pay increase of 30 dinars, significantly lower than they had demanded. The terms also include three new categories of pay for bus drivers—260 dinars for those who have been with the company for less than a year, 280 dinars for those employed for less than five years, and 300 dinars for five years’ service or longer.

Africa

South African workers protest increasing cost of living

Thousands of South African workers went on strike on July 23 to protest rising power, fuel and food prices, as well as the job losses that resulted from the recent power crisis. The strike covered four South African provinces: Eastern Cape (where most car manufacture takes place), Limpopo, North West and Gauteng. Automotive plants owned by Ford, Daimler, General Motors South Africa and Volkswagen were closed down for the day. Miners at Anglo Platinum, Impala Platinum Holdings, Harmony Gold Mining and Gold Fields were also on strike.

Demonstrations were held in 11 towns including 25,000 in Johannesburg and 7,000 in the Eastern Cape city of Port Elizabeth.

The South African energy regulator recently allowed the state-owned Eskom Holdings Ltd. to raise electricity prices by 27.5 percent, almost triple the current inflation rate of 10.9 percent. The strike was called by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

Ivory Coast workers on general strike over rising fuel prices

Most unionised workers in the Ivory Coast went on a general strike on July 17, bringing the capital city Abidjan to a halt. The strike was in response to recent hikes in the price of gasoline and diesel by 30 and 44 percent.

One major union, regarded as close to President Laurent Gbagbo, told its members to ignore the strike call.

Thousands of port workers strike in Kenya

Around 4,000 workers employed by the Kenya Ports Authority (KPA) carried out a go-slow from July 21, followed by a strike. The workers are angry about their employers’ refusal to pay overtime. This results from a change to conditions of work due to the introduction of an unpopular seven-day work schedule, which was given the backing of the courts in Mombassa.

Only 15 containers were unloaded and moved away from Mombassa port on July 21. The managing director of the KPA warned the striking workers that they risked dismissal and denounced the strike as illegal.

Air traffic controllers hold one-day strike in Gabon

Air traffic controllers went on strike in Libreville, the Gabon capital, for a day as part of a long-running dispute over pay arrears. The workers are demanding payment of overdue premiums.

The Agency for the Safety of Air Navigation in Africa and Madagascar (ASECNA), responsible for airport operations in most of French-speaking Africa, has recently been hit by financial and technical problems. The workers held a similar one-day strike at the end of May.



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