

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

29 August 2008

Europe

UK coastguards strike for 48 hours in pay dispute

On August 25, coastguards in the UK staged a 48-hour walkout over pay in an ongoing dispute. The 700 staff, employed by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, struck as they are paid less than workers in the other emergency services. The coastguards are members of the Public and Commercial Services Union. The action was held over the August Bank holiday weekend, a period when many people take a short holiday in Britain and one of the busiest weekends at coastal resorts.

The union claims that the coastguards have been hit by real-term pay cuts as they have been given a below-inflation 2.5 percent wage increase for most staff, and less than 1 percent for senior personnel. The current base salary of a coastguard is about £12,500 a year, just above the national minimum wage. The strike follows five days of strike action taken this year by coastguards at the UK's rescue coordination centres.

Luggage scanners stage industrial action at Stansted Airport, England

Luggage scanners at Stansted Airport in Essex, England, held strike action on August 25 in a dispute over pay. The 33 workers are members of the GMB trade union and are demanding a pay increase of about 5 percent. Their employer, Airfield Services, is offering a pay increase of 1.5 percent. Staff set up a picket line at Stansted on a day in which about 40,000 passengers used the airport.

During the action, the union claimed that catering staff were enlisted to scan luggage, breaching safety rules. GMB General Secretary Paul Kenny said, "The company has brought in catering workers to operate security scanners, which is a clear breach of security standards laid down for this airport. We will be raising the issue with the Transport Secretary and BAA to ask when this company was given the right to lower security standards because of a trade dispute"

London Underground staff strike

London Underground transport workers at 11 Tube stations staged a 24-hour strike on August 22. The workers are in dispute with London Underground over a number of issues including ignoring procedures and alleged victimisation and harassment of staff by management. The staff are members of the Rail Maritime and Transport trade union.

The action involved more than 90 staff on the District Line who walked out at 0400 BST and some 100 staff on the Bakerloo Line. The District Line workers are employed at stations between Plaistow and Upminster and are protesting the breakdown of industrial relations. Staff claim that this is due to local management ignoring procedures. Workers are also protesting the dismissal of station assistant Sarah Hutchins, who had taken time off for pregnancy-related illnesses and after being assaulted at work.

The employees at Bakerloo are demanding the re-instatement of Jerome Bowes, a colleague who they claim was unfairly sacked. The staff on the Bakerloo Line work stations at Charing Cross, Elephant & Castle and Lambeth North.

Power workers employed by CE Electric in England strike in pay dispute

Power workers employed by CE Electric in England are set to strike in a dispute over pay after voting in favour of action. The 1,100 workers are members of the GMB and Unite trade union and are to begin the seven-day industrial action on September 5. The action is expected to have a widespread impact, as the company supplies power to more than 3.7 million homes across the North East, Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire.

Staff say that their pay has fallen in relation to employees at other utility companies. The latest offer from the company on July 16 was rejected by members of the GMB, with 88 percent voting against. A GMB official said of the dispute, "These workers are totally underpaid in comparison with other workers in the rest of utility industries. They work in a highly professional industry and keep it going day in and day out while the proceeds go elsewhere. They have had enough of this and they want to see it sorted out once and for all. The management must listen to the voice of their workers and come forward with a pay plan which will deliver comparability for these workers."

On June 25, members of the Unite trade union at CE Electric began a continuous overtime ban and withdrew standby cover indefinitely. Unite members voted 95 percent in favour of the action. The workers rejected a 3.8 percent pay offer from CE Electric. The GMB are set to hold talks with the company on August 28 over the dispute.

The company claims that it has not been informed of any possible industrial action by the trade union. CE Electric is

privately owned; its parent company is Mid-American Energy Holdings and is part of the billionaire Warren Buffett's group of companies.

Middle East

Israeli union body set to declare strike in public sector over government bill

The Histadrut Labour Federation threatened August 21 to launch a general strike in the public sector if the government approves the Economics Arrangements Bill, which was recently presented as part of the 2009 state budget. According to Histadrut, changes concerning the retirement of employees are set to lead to thousands of layoffs of government workers and will infringe rights secured by past collective agreements.

In June, Histadrut and various economic organisations had threatened a general strike in the public sector in protest over contentious government tax plans, which were subsequently withdrawn.

Strike at Israeli ports

On August 26, the Histadrut Labour Federation declared an official dispute in all of Israel's ports in response to a plan by the Treasury to bring in private contractors to carry out operations on parts of the ports.

Traffic at the Ashdod and Haifa ports continued to slow down on Tuesday. In declaring an official dispute at the ports of Haifa, Eilat and Ashdod, workers are legally entitled to launch a general strike at the ports in two weeks' time. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, the dispute follows strike action by Ashdod and Haifa port workers August 25 to protest against a clause in the 2009 Economic Arrangements Bill. The bill, recently passed by the cabinet, would allow the Israel Ports Company to manage operations at the ports in addition to the agreed role of acting as Israel's "port-property landlord," which entails managing the government's assets allocated for the facilitation of its international maritime commerce.

Egyptian teachers protest against "performance-related" pay

Around 120 school teachers took part in a demonstration August 21 on the steps of the Teachers' Syndicate in Zamalek, in opposition to government plans to link their pay increases with performance in assessment exams. The prescribed examinations test a variety of subjects not necessarily related to those being taught by the teachers.

The protesting teachers carried banners reading "No to testing of teachers...no to humiliation of teachers" and "Fair pay and free syndicate." One teacher, Mohamed Ibrahim Dessouqy, asked of a *Daily News Egypt* reporter; "Why should I be tested on my knowledge of Arabic grammar when I teach geometry? Some of the teachers who will be tested have been in the profession for over 30 years—they are the ones who taught the minister of education himself. Why after 30 years of teaching are they being tested now?"

During the protest, teachers called for promotions to be applied according to seniority rather than by examination. They

demanded that training and experience be linked to promotion rather than being linked to pay, and called for the abandonment of the academies scheme, demanding that the role of training centres within schools be improved. They also called on President Hosni Mubarak to implement the promise he made three years ago for an LE 1,000 minimum wage for teachers.

Africa

Port workers in DR Congo strike over pay

Workers at the port of Matadi, DR Congo, 300 km west of the capital Kinshasa, went on strike for four days from August 22 to demand a pay rise.

The state-owned Office National des Transports failed to adjust their salaries to reflect the increase in minimum wage, which was effected in July. The workers should have been receiving 29,210 Congolese francs (US\$52.92) a month, plus benefits for items such as healthcare. The employer has agreed to pay back the arrears in the next paycheck.

DR Congo is Africa's biggest producer of tin, and exports of this and other materials were affected by the strike.

Kenyan drivers block highway over pay arrears

Truck drivers in Kenya abandoned their vehicles on the Mombasa-Malaba highway, to protest against non-payment of their wages.

"Eleven drivers abandoned their trucks at Mlolongo area while another 16 left them at different trading centres between Mombasa and Makindu Highway," an unidentified source told the *Nation* (a Kenyan newspaper).

Kenya Long Distance Truck Drivers and Allied Workers' Union Secretary General Nicholas Mbugua said, "It is true they [drivers] have abandoned their trucks because they have not been paid their salaries for the past three years."

Mombasa police arrested 16 truck drivers outside the Hakika Container Terminal and charged them with obstruction.

In another dispute, more than 200 drivers employed by Swift Truckers and Maersk Company took strike action for six days, parking their vehicles at Malaba in Kenya.

The goods contained in the vehicles were being transported from Uganda to Kenya.

The drivers had demanded Ksh0.3 million (US\$4,520) each for salary arrears owed to them since last year. They also demanded to be paid monthly and that all employees to be made permanent. The drivers ended the strike after receiving payment of Ksh14 million (US\$ 0.21 million).



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