

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

28 November 2008

## UK drivers stage 24-hour strike

Over 90 lorry drivers took part in a 24-hour strike over pay, November 26, after the breakdown of conciliation talks, according to the Transport and General Workers Union (T&G).

McPherson of Aberlour, which distributes spirits for the drinks industry, has offered a 4 percent pay rise. But workers and members of the Unite T&G union are demanding an increase of 8 percent.

## UK port workers walk out over privatisation

Kent port workers have begun a second strike over the threatened privatisation of their jobs. The three-day industrial action by port workers at Dover Harbour Board started on November 27.

Last week, over 300 members of the Unite union took part in a 48-hour strike. Managers worked to prevent the strike fully disrupting ferry crossings.

Port of Dover management said that the restructuring was needed ahead of the building of a second terminal. The harbour board wants to turn the former Hoverport at the Western Docks into a second ferry terminal with a new marina and four new berths.

## Strike ends at UK car parts firm

Weeklong strike action at a Coventry factory which makes components for car engines ended on November 25. Around 190 staff out of a workforce of some 300 at Federal-Mogul walked out on November 17 over claims that they were asked to work three additional hours per week, an extra 132 hours each year, without a pay rise.

Unite union officials said workers would maintain overtime bans while

the union attempted to hold further discussions with the company.

## UK meat inspectors vote for strike action

Meat hygiene inspectors across the UK have voted in favour of strike action in a row over work patterns and overtime payments.

The Unison union, which has around 1,000 members who are inspectors, said the workers had given two-to-one backing for industrial action over proposed cuts to overtime payments as well as the introduction of new work patterns that threaten to disrupt family life. Further details of the action would be decided next week, it added.

Unison has warned that the planned 72-hour walkout by the government employees will “seriously disrupt” the supply of traditional meat in the run-up to Christmas.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA), which runs the Meat Hygiene Service, said it had plans to limit the strike’s impact.

## French TV and radio broadcasters strike over new law

French public sector broadcast staff went on strike November 25 over proposed changes they say will benefit private television stations and increase President Nicolas Sarkozy’s power over the media.

The plans will end advertising on publicly-owned France Television. It will also give the government the power to appoint the head of France Television, who had previously been named by the CSA, an independent audiovisual supervisory body.

Opposition ministers say the law will mainly help France’s biggest private television broadcaster TF1, owned by Martin Bouygues, a close friend of Sarkozy’s, and place the nominally independent public sector media under direct state control.

Radio and television programmes were interrupted or shortened during the day of the strike.

The move will create a funding gap for the four main state television

channels which will be largely filled by a levy on private broadcasters and Internet providers and by government support.

### **French energy workers' strike cuts 5,000 MW national capacity**

EDF Energy workers in France took 24-hour industrial action, November 24, cutting a total of 5,000 megawatts of national power. Although the action over salaries and pensions pushed intraday power prices sharply higher, it stopped short of triggering general outages, a CGT union official said later.

The energy workers cut 4,000 megawatts of nuclear capacity and 1,000 MW of thermal capacity. France has a total power output capacity of 102,000 MW.

A union official said: "The strike has cut a total of 5,000 MW, this is a very positive outcome for us," adding that strikers had been told by EDF not to cut more capacity to avoid endangering the "supply/demand balance".

Reuters reported that the power capacity cuts were taking place at the Belleville, Blayais, Chinon and Penly nuclear plants, as well as at the Blenod thermal power plant.

A total of between 30 and 40 percent of EDF workers took part in the strike, an official said, a figure EDF were not able to confirm.

### **Airbus plants in Germany hit by wildcat strike**

Workers at three Airbus plants in Germany staged wildcat strikes November 20 over plans by the European jet maker to spin off the factories into a new subsidiary, a company spokesman said.

The industrial action hit the Varel and Nordenham facilities in northern Germany, coming on the same day as strikes at a plant in the southern city of Augsburg belonging to the parent company EADS.

Airbus sought a court injunction against the strikes in Varel and Nordenham.

The company aims to group the three sites with around 6,000 staff in the new EADS unit Premium Aerotec at the end of the year.

Management has asked staff to contribute to savings of €30 million (\$38 million) in its operations, amounting to some €5,000 per worker. The works council has called the terms of the deal for employees "unacceptable."

With the creation of the new subsidiary, Airbus plans to create the world's biggest supplier for aeronautic structural components.

Airbus had originally intended under its vast Power 8 restructuring plan

introduced last year to sell the three plants. But talks with the German company MT Aerospace failed earlier this year, as did attempts in France to sell the Saint Nazaire Ville and Meaulte factories. Plans for the new EADS unit Aerolia to assume management of the two sites has also met with resistance from staff there.

### **Egyptian train drivers threaten strike over pay**

Train drivers are threatening to strike unless the Egyptian Railway Authority (ERA) implements a promised increase in an incentive payment deal.

According to the *Daily News Egypt*, around 50 train drivers assembled in central Cairo's Ramsis station November 20 before a delegation of four drivers attempted to meet ERA management in order to discuss their demand that drivers receive an allowance paid according to the number of kilometres travelled.

Drivers want the "kilometre allowance," which currently stands at 11 piasters, to be increased to 25 piasters, and say that the ERA's administration has failed to implement this demand.

The delegation of four drivers was told that no one from ERA management was available.

When the entire group of train drivers went to the office accompanied by journalists, a member of the building's security attempted to forcibly take photographer Hossam El-Hamalawy's camera from him, but was prevented from doing so by the train drivers.

Train drivers had threatened to disrupt train services by staging a sit-in on the railway tracks, but suspended their protest after they were told that a meeting to discuss their demands would be held with ERA officials on November 24.

*Daily News Egypt* says that ERA blue-collar workers have long complained about poor wages and working conditions. In February of this year, hundreds of train drivers staged a sit-in on the railway tracks. Last December, train safety technicians held a protest during which they warned about the appalling safety situation on the Egyptian railways.

During the recent protest train drivers showed journalists conditions inside a train engine. The dilapidated engine was filthy, missing equipment and covered both inside and on its exterior by what drivers say is flammable oil.

Train driver Mohamed Gamal said that the state-controlled official union has had little success in realising drivers' demands. "Members of the union can't do anything for us. They can't do anything except try to calm things down between us and the management," he told the press.

Gamal, whose basic salary after 10 years of service is 170 Egyptian pounds (\$US30), said that drivers were at "boiling point."

## **Ghanaian port workers strike**

Ghanaian port workers in Tema took all-out indefinite strike action on November 24 over their right to leave the Maritime and Dock Workers Union (MDWU) and join the rival National Union of Harbour Employees (NUHE).

The *dailyguideghana.com* reported allegations made by striking workers that their employers, the Ghana Dock Labour Company Limited (GDLC), interfered in the affairs of the MDWU, including the selection of its leaders. They also alleged that “workers were maltreated, dismissed wrongfully and remunerated inadequately”.

The protest began with a sit-down strike after attempts to find a solution through negotiations had failed.

The web site cited the case of one GDLC employee, Alex Osei, who claimed that he had been physically abused by MDWU officials after voicing his desire to join the NUHE. Managers froze the pay of another worker for six months as punishment for persuading colleagues to join the NUHE.

## **Nigerian boat drivers strike**

Boat drivers belonging to the Maritime Workers Union of Nigeria (MWUN) in Bayelsa state took indefinite strike action on November 20.

According to *Vanguard* (Lagos), the strike was provoked by “the brutalisation of their chairman, Sylvanus Egele, who narrowly escaped death in the hands of some rampaging men of the [government controlled] Joint Task Force”. Egele is the vice chairman of the Bayelsa state chapter of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC).

The union official claimed that he was verbally abused by a private soldier last week demanding transport on a private boat at Swali jetty at 12.48 a.m. When Egele warned the soldier that the waterway was unsafe the soldier took him to the Government House Jetty where he was brutalised and tortured. “I called the vice president and the state governor who intervened, other things would have happened [otherwise].”

The strike left hundreds of commuters stranded at jetties across Bayelsa.

## **Health workers on week-long strike in Burundi**

Doctors and nurses began a national week-long strike in Burundi on November 24 in protest over delays in conferring them special status, which had been agreed by the government in 2004.

According to *Africa News*, the new status would lead to improved living

conditions for all concerned, especially nurses who are very poorly paid.

The president of the physicians’ union said that the campaign would continue until the government acceded, and issued a warning against attempts to arrest those on strike.



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