

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

24 April 2009

The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

UK: London Tube drivers stage 24-hour strike

Tube drivers on the Victoria Line, one of the busiest on London's Underground, staged a 24-hour strike over safety concerns beginning Tuesday evening. The action was taken by workers based at the Seven Sisters depot, in north London.

The Victoria line is used by more than 600,000 passengers a day.

The Rail Maritime and Transport union said the strike was due to London Underground's failure to install equipment to prevent train doors from being open on the wrong side, the sacking of driver Carl Campbell and the alleged victimisation of union activist Glenroy Watson.

Union leaders claim London Underground's "penny-pinching" is putting lives "at risk". They said the strike was solid and that none of the line's 37 trains ran during the morning peak, leading to severe overcrowding on other routes.

According to the BBC, drivers organised by the Aslef union refused to cross picket lines.

France: Strike by energy workers cuts national capacity

Workers at France's nuclear power plants of Dampierre in central France and Chinon in southwest France extended the strike action that began on April 16, a union spokesman told the Reuters news agency.

Unions are demanding a five percent pay increase and a one-off bonus.

Workers at the state company Électricité de France voted to strike on April 21 and 23 in an ongoing protest over wages. Around 80 percent of France's electricity is produced by nuclear power stations. It is the sixth strike by EDF workers since the beginning of the year over wages and pensions.

Strike action on March 19, as part of a general strike across France, saw 28 percent of EDF workers stop work, cutting power capacity by 10,500 MW, including 9,000 MW of nuclear capacity, according to the CGT union.

Auto parts workers at Paris plant protest planned closure

According to Associated Press April 22, French auto workers "hurled floor lamps at windows and stomped on furniture as despair over the economic downturn took a violent turn". Workers at the Continental AG

auto parts production plant reacted in anger after a court refused to forbid the company from shutting down the site located north of Paris next year.

"They smashed windows at the factory in Clairoix and at a regional administrative office in nearby Compiègne, pulling up lamps and crushing desks and cabinets. While strikes and protests are common among French workers, this kind of outburst is rare," said AP.

Citing the large drop in demand in the automobile sector, Continental announced in March that it intended to shut the factory in Clairoix, which employs 1,120 workers.

On Wednesday, factory management suspended production because of the damage. Workers agreed to hold government-mediated talks with management April 29 over conditions of the factory's closure.

Hungary: Rail workers strike to protest government austerity measures

On April 14, the Free Union of Railway Workers (VDSZSZ), which represents about a quarter of all railway employees, announced an 18-hour strike on April 30.

According to union head István Gaskó in the *Budapest Times*, VDSZSZ will strike to protest the Bajnai-cabinet's austerity measures because "they will hit the working and middle classes hardest".

The following day the Democratic Union of Teachers (PDSZ) announced its support for the strike with details still being finalised. A union statement said, "We agree that the Bajnai Package must be protested against and the PDSZ is willing to support everyone trying to do that with lawful methods."

Finland: Postal workers strike

Members of the Finnish Post and Logistics Workers' Union struck for six hours on Wednesday. The action was in response to an announcement by the Finnish postal operator, Itella, that it may shed up to 400 jobs. The union, which represents 30,000 workers, said that the announcement was "in sharp conflict with state company personnel policies". It added that the strike would mean deliveries would be delayed throughout the country.

Machine workers in Russia strike over unpaid wages

On April 21, 70 workers at the TagAZ machine building plant in the city of Rostov-na-Donu in Russia struck to demand the payment of unpaid wages.

According to trade union sources, workers at the plant have not been paid for two months. Under Article 142 of Russia's Labour Code, workers have a right to withdraw their labour if their wages are overdue by at least 15 days. The TagAZ plant employs 2,600 workers and makes vehicles for the South Korean automaker Daewoo and for Citroen.

Ireland: Tesco workers support strike action

The *Irish Independent* reported April 22 that Tesco supermarket is facing strike action for trying to force workers to accept poorer conditions, despite enjoying a record 10 percent rise in profits recently.

Workers at a store in Douglas, Cork, overwhelmingly backed industrial action. The strike could have significant ramifications for the 13,500 workers employed by Tesco nationally. The result of the strike ballot was announced on the same day that the multinational supermarket group announced profits of over €3.5 billion—a new record for a British retailer.

Workers at the store described the company as “opportunistic” and claimed they were threatened with the sack if they did not accept poorer terms and conditions. They reported that the company wanted to downgrade their overtime and sick leave entitlements when they moved to a new store in the same shopping centre where they currently work.

Retail union Mandate said the company had offered to buy-out 85 workers' existing terms in recent weeks. If they refused, it said Tesco threatened that they would be made redundant by the end of the month.

Egypt: Cairo lecturers protest pay

On April 16, university professors protested at Cairo, Egypt to demand better pay. The professors at Cairo University have previously rejected a performance-related pay scheme introduced last year by the Supreme Council of Universities (SCU).

Speaking to the *Daily News*, staff stated their concerns about low pay and a fall in the numbers of employees. Ali Barakat, a professor in Alexandria University's faculty of engineering, said, “I'm a professor, and I'm 60 years old, but I earn the highest possible salary which is LE 3,600. A new graduate gets at least 80 percent of my salary in his first appointment.

“Normally we used to get the top of the class appointed to universities. Now they run away. At the time that the [higher education] minister himself was a member [of Alexandria University's faculty], there were 1,600 members of staff. Now there are 400. The number of staff is diminishing because of the bad situation and the number of students is rising. So we can't talk about quality.”

Professor Laila Soueif said, “This protest is about what we have been demanding for the past two years. We need a proper salary raise, not incentive payments, and we also need a raise in the university budget.”

Egypt: Education administrators protest in pay dispute

On April 15 hundreds of education sector administrators held a protest at the Ministry of Education to demand a 50 percent salary increase.

The administrators are also demanding better government housing facilities. The 50 percent pay increase had previously been approved by

the People's Assembly in 2007.

Iran: Ahvaz Pipe manufacturing workers protest their sacking

Workers made unemployed at the Ahvaz Pipe Manufacturing Company in Iran have continued to protest. The factory is based in Ahvaz city, in Khuzestan in the south-west.

The 2,000 employees who were on temporary contracts were laid off on March 12. At the time they were dismissed the workers were still owed two months wages. Since then they have been holding daily protests and demonstrations.

On April 14, 300 of the workers took part in a march through Ahvaz city from the factory gates to the office of the governor.

Open University staff strike in Israel

Staff at the Open University in Israel began strike action on April 16. The strike is the culmination of a four month dispute over working conditions for junior faculty members. It is the first institution-wide strike to be held. Some 40,000 students are enrolled at the Open University.

Speaking about the dispute to the *Jerusalem Post*, Yaniv Bar-Ilan of the *Koach Le'Ovdim* association, who organized the strike, said, “It is unacceptable that throughout the entire semester, a lecturer at the university doesn't know whether he will be employed the following semester.”

During the first semester junior faculty members took industrial action at three of the university's learning centres.

Swazi farm workers on strike for eight percent increase

Twenty-one workers at Usuthu Poultry Farm near Manzini, central Swaziland, have been on strike since April 15 in support of their demand for an 8 percent pay increase and free transport to work. On the first day of strike they arrived at the farm to find that the gates were locked.

The Swaziland Manufacturers and Allied Workers Union (SMAWU) has been negotiating for a review of wages since July 2008. Branch Chairperson Pamela Dlamini said the employers had been insisting there was no money, but this was not true. “They do have money because they have since hired 12 people to do the jobs that we were doing with effect from today.”

Mortuary workers join medical workers on strike in Nigeria

Mortuary attendants at the Ebonyi state University Teaching Hospital, Nigeria, have joined an indefinite strike of doctors and nurses.

The strike started in response to the sacking of 14 doctors and 18 nurses, and the state governor's refusal to pay the new Consolidated Tertiary Institutions Salary Scheme (CONTISS).

The Medical and Health Workers' Union (MHWU) insists that there is a firm agreement with the employers for salaries based on the

consolidated salary scale to begin in January 2009. The union states that the sacking of the hospital workers is “in contravention of the provision of the Nigerian Labour Law 2005.”

In Imo state, Nigeria, health institutions have also been shut down by indefinite strike action by state health workers. Leaflets issued by the unions involved in the action pointed out that the strike was provoked by the “failure of the state government to assent to the agreements reached on December 9, 2008, by the enlarged negotiating team set up by Governor Ikedi Ohakim.”

Vanguard printed a list of the grievance of the strikers, which include “non-implementation of the consolidated health workers salary in line with the NDDC states, non-restoration of call duty, shift duty and rural posting allowances to health workers in the local government areas.

“Others are the demand on government to stop the delay in releasing the 2008 promotion; implementation of the 22 percent salary increase to health workers as approved by the Federal Government since 2001; improvement of the poor infrastructure and inadequate equipment in government hospitals, and lack of current reference materials in state owned hospitals.”

Nigerian tanker-drivers’ strike called off

An all-out strike of Nigerian petrol-tanker drivers was suspended on April 20 after four days. The chairman of the National Union of Petrol and Natural Gas workers (NUPENG) at Orile-Iganmu Terminal, Patrick Onwubuke, told *USANext* that the action was linked to a clash between tanker drivers and officials of the Lagos State Traffic Management Authority (LASTMA), “coupled with the shooting of a tanker driver by a naval officer at MRS fuel depot at Tin Can, Apapa, on Friday”.

Onwubuke explained the problems faced by drivers: “A vehicle can break down anywhere; it may not be the fault of the driver but these LASTMA guys come and tow the vehicle without listening to reason. NUPENG has been complaining bitterly over this.”

He added that the punishment meted out to them is not commensurate with their offence. “How can you tell a tanker driver to pay N250,000 (\$US1,702)?”

Twenty-seven tankers were impounded by LASTMA during the action. The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation had to pay out a N2.7million (\$US18,336) fine to secure the release of the vehicles so that petrol deliveries could be resumed.



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