

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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

France: Rail workers in nationwide strike

On May 26, rail workers participated in a nationwide strike in protest at the government's handling of the economic crisis.

The strike was smaller than previous stoppages. According to *Associated Press*, the SNCF train authority said fewer than 20 percent of employees were involved in the strike, while unions put the participation rate at 27 percent.

Three out of four high-speed trains were running and the Paris Metro system was operating almost normally, said AP.

The recent action was the fourth strike in recent months by French workers against the government of Nicolas Sarkozy, which they accuse of not doing enough to save jobs and defend wages in the face of the financial crisis. More than a million took part in strikes in January and March.

Another round of strikes is planned for June 13.

France: Pilots threaten summer of strikes

Trade unions representing airline pilots are to strike over the four weekends between July 10 and August 3, threatening major flight disruption, the economic daily *La Tribune* reported May 22.

According to *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, a new law means that "a trade union can no longer represent workers in an enterprise, and therefore will not have the right to negotiate labour agreements, if it does not receive 10 percent of the votes of all the employees in the company."

To vote on the agreement, a union will have had to obtain 30 percent of the votes during union elections.

According to *La Tribune*, only pilots belonging to the national union confederations could achieve such numbers. Because pilots only make up a small part of the workforce of an airline, the SNLP is demanding that the French parliament vote an amendment into the law on the 10 percent threshold.

Germany: Strike by child care workers spreads to eastern states

On May 26, an ongoing strike by child care day workers over better working conditions and wages spread to include states in eastern Germany for the first time.

The online *thelocal.de* said May 26: "Educators and social workers at kindergartens in the states of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Thuringia, Saxony-Anhalt, Saxony, Bavaria and Hamburg did not show up for the early shift." Public workers' union Verdi had estimated that around 20,000 workers would take part in the strike. In the event, around 45,000 workers took part in the last week. Russia: Flight attendants continue hunger strike over unpaid wages

According to *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's* Russian Service, May 21, flight attendants at KrasAir (Krasnoyarsk Airlines) in Siberia are continuing a hunger strike to demand the payment of unpaid wages. The flight attendants say they have not been paid for eight months.

The hunger strike began on May 14.

One of the hunger strikers was hospitalised on May 20 due to poor health, according to KrasAir trade union head Yury Zandarian. This was the second of 17 flight attendants forced to end their hunger strike due to poor health. UK: Ballot for strike action at Pinewood studios

The *Stage* newspaper reported May 22 that around 70 employees of the Pinewood Studios Group are to be balloted over strike action following a dispute over working terms and conditions.

In a statement, the Bectu union said its members working across the group's sites at Shepperton, Teddington and Pinewood would be balloted over industrial action, because of the "repeated failure by management to observe the recognition agreement with Bectu."

The recognition agreement provides staff with the right to representation over pay and terms and conditions of employment.

The *Stage* said that Bectu has claimed management at the Pinewood group have "sought to impose changes to terms and conditions on staff without reference to the agreement" and that it is also seeking to achieve compulsory redundancies without consultation.

Studio production as well as day-to-day studio operations would be affected in the event of a strike.

Ireland: Ferry strike over wage cuts

Crew members on the Cape Clear ferry Naomh Ciaran II—one of the busiest ferries on Ireland's south-west coast—have served a one-day strike notice on June 4 over wage cuts.

The ferry service—whose crew are protesting over pay cuts ranging from 22 percent for deckhands to 27 percent for the ship's master—operates between Baltimore and the island on a daily basis throughout the year. The *Irish Examiner* quoted union SIPTU branch organiser Eddie Mullins, on May 27, as saying: "The company also expects the employees to work four extra weeks between May and September, for nothing. The reasons it

gives are that the ferry is running at an alleged loss and the falling levels in the cost of living. If the employer was losing money, it would sit down and talk to us. It is purely a vindictive approach by the company. The company is saying that because the cost of living has gone down and because mortgage repayments are lower, that it is justified in reducing their wages. That is ridiculous.” SIPTU also claims it has been writing to the owners of the vessel repeatedly for a number of months. Ireland: Peat workers strike over changes in procedure

Workers at Bord na Móna—one of the world’s largest peat producers—have voted for industrial action, reported *irelandon-line* on May 27.

Bord na Móna workers voted overwhelmingly in favour industrial action in protest at production changes introduced by management.

The three unions, UNITE, SIPTU and the TEEU, say notice of the action will be served over the next week if the company doesn’t change its position on the proposed changes.

Egypt: Striking textile workers protest outside parliament

The *Daily News Egypt* reported May 24 that around 200 striking workers from the Nile Cotton Ginning Company protested outside the People’s Assembly the day before, demanding that PA members intervene in their ongoing pay dispute.

According to the paper, some workers held up signs reading “save us from the injustice of the investor” and blamed deputy company chairman Sayyed Abdel-Alim El-Seify for the company’s “deteriorating performance.” One worker said that El-Seify is “killing 1,000 families.”

Accountant Ashraf Kishk told *Daily News Egypt*: “Wages haven’t been paid and we haven’t been given a full annual raise.”

Workers from the company have been on strike since April 29, following the decision to reduce incentive payments.

At press time, the *Daily News Egypt* said that the police had started to break up the protest.

In addition to not paying them for the last two months, workers say that company management has also transferred workers from one factory to another without covering transportation costs.

The current industrial action is the second strike in less than a year.

Workers at the Nile Cotton Ginning Company also believe that the firm is intentionally winding down operations in order to sell up and take advantage of the valuable land on which the factories stand.

In August 2008, Nile Cotton was estimated to have total debts of LE 344 million.

Egypt: Postal workers’ struggles

According to a statement published by the Center for Socialist Studies, quoted by *Egypt and Beyond* on scandegypt.blogspot.com on May 18, Mamdouh Faza’e, a postal worker from Ismailiya, was detained on charges of “inciting a strike threatening the national economy.”

Mamdouh Faza’e, the statement explained, “was arrested by state security after sending a fax to his bosses in Cairo in which he threatened a strike unless temporary workers were employed on permanent contracts.”

The prosecutor ordered Faza’es’ detention for 15 days.

Labour lawyers maintain that Faza’e hasn’t broken any law, as going on strike is a constitutional right, and that threatening to strike cannot be considered “incitement.” Faza’e was released on May 25.

Meanwhile, on May 24, postal workers in Kafr el-Sheikh called for a nationwide strike after the manager of the Egyptian Post Authority refused to meet a delegation of postal workers from several governorates despite the fact that “he himself had fixed the time for the meeting,” reported *Egypt and Beyond*.

Zambian teachers and medical staff on strike over pay

Teachers in state schools in Ndola and surrounding districts began indefinite strike action on May 22 to back their demand for a pay increase of K1.5 million (US\$298) for all teaching staff. Teachers are also demanding full and immediate payment of housing and other allowances in full.

The unions involved are the Zambia National Union of Teachers, the Secondary Schools Teachers Union of Zambia and the Basic Education Teachers Union of Zambia.

Health workers in the region are also taking industrial action, on the same increase across the board and an additional K800,000 (US\$159) as housing allowance. They have rejected the authorities’ offer of an 11 percent pay increase.

The dispute has affected Ndola Central and Arthur Davison Children’s hospitals and more than 20 clinics in the city.

Zimbabwean civil servants threaten strike action

A mass demonstration of civil servants took place through the streets of Harare on May 23. The marchers were demanding to be paid “real salaries,” warning government that they would take strike action if their demands were not met. They carried placards that read, “We are working for salaries and not allowances,” “US\$100 is not enough” and “Bills are more than our allowances.”

According to the *Herald*, riot police were deployed “to stop the placard-waving disgruntled workers from marching to the offices of the ministries of Public Service and Social Welfare.”

The *Herald* reported that a number of government officials, including Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai and Finance Minister Tendai Biti, have implored workers to be patient with them as they work to improve working conditions.

The Public Service Association had issued the government a 14-day ultimatum, which expires on June 8.

Striking Zimbabwean municipal workers accuse management of corruption

Striking municipal workers gathered outside the head office of Israel Marange, mayor of Chitungwiza, near Harare, on May 21, accusing the mayor of corruption, bribing senior management and neglecting general workers. The demonstrators told the *Herald* that they had not been paid for three months and after being told that their salaries had been paid into their bank accounts, “when they went to the bank they found nothing.”

The paper reported that the strikers barricaded the gate to the head office and burnt tyres in front of the building, preventing their reporter from talking to the mayor and senior management.

One of the strikers told the paper, “We do not want you to talk to them because they always lie in the media. You have to listen to the real story from us.” Another said, “Right now, we have not had a cent for three months. If you complain, the management will threaten to fire you.”

The workers were also demanding that the Anti-Corruption Commission investigate the council over the allocation of “stands”—which are essentially residential plots, to be used for house building or which can be sold on the market. The demonstrators told the *Herald* that management had been misdirecting funds and allocating themselves “multiple stands.”

Chitungwiza is a densely populated area of more than a million people on the outskirts of Harare. It first appeared in 1980 at the end of the war of independence.

Not very long ago, President Mugabe’s government drove more than 700,000 residents out of the cities in Operation Mrambatsvina (Clear out the rubbish), claiming that they were living in “illegal structures.” Consequently, the possession of a “stand” is of crucial importance to workers in Chitungwiza and elsewhere in Zimbabwe.

All-out strike of teachers in Gabon

Teachers in Gabon took all-out strike action on May 26. They are demanding the immediate implementation of accords that were agreed when a three-month teachers’ strike ended in January of this year.

A spokesperson for the main teachers’ union, Conasysed, told AFP that the government has failed to pay a €90-€150 bonus promised in January and has also failed to unblock €30 million to pay promised salary arrears.

The current school year has been extended to August in a bid to make up for lost time. But teachers told AFP that if the current strike lasts more than two weeks, there will be no school exams.



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