

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

19 June 2009

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

UK: Students occupy university in defence of college cleaners

An injunction has been served against London students who have been staging an occupation against the deportation of cleaners by immigration authorities.

The BBC reported that the occupation at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) was in response to an immigration raid June 12, following which six migrant workers have been deported and two held in custody.

Cleaners at the university had been involved in a campaign over pay, and there had been recent protests calling for the reinstatement of a cleaners' union leader. The cleaners were employed by the contract company, ISS, which has denied any connection between a pay dispute and the immigration raid. Students have demanded the return of the deported cleaners and a ban on such immigration raids on campus.

UK: Energy workers to ballot for strike action over outsourcing

The Web site of the General, Municipal and Boilermakers Union (GMB) reported June 15 that the union is to implement a strike ballot at National Grid Newcastle to stop the outsourcing of jobs to India. An earlier consultative ballot over the loss of 181 jobs was 97 percent in favour.

The National Grid is involved in cost savings of £3 million, in large part by outsourcing to cheaper labour abroad. It announced global profits of £2,915 million in the year ending March 2009—a 12 percent increase on the previous year.

UK: Demonstration to defend college staff jobs

A demonstration has been called June 20 in Barnsley, South Yorkshire, in protest at the threat of 53 redundancies amongst Barnsley College staff. The protest has been called under the heading, "Save our college, defend jobs, defend education!"

Estonia: Demonstration against job insecurity

On June 16, a demonstration took place in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, by hundreds of mainly transport workers protesting against a new employment contract that undermines conditions. Called by the Estonian Confederation of Trade Unions, the workers are demanding new redundancy and unemployment insurance benefits.

Finland: One-day rail strike

A one-day strike by railway workers brought all rail services in Finland to a halt June 15.

The industrial action—called by two rail unions—was in protest at cuts such as the proposed laying off of 1,500 workers in the freight traffic sector by Finnish State Railways VR. Some 200,000 commuters, mostly in the Greater Helsinki area, were affected.

France: Demonstrations against government economic policy

An AFP report June 14 said that factory workers had led marches across France the day before in "a nationwide protest at President Nicolas Sarkozy's handling of the economic crisis."

It was the fifth day of action staged this year by France's eight main unions, to demand stronger measures to help families in the face of the global economic crisis and rising unemployment.

Earlier this year, demonstrations of around a million took place nationally opposing Sarkozy's economic policies. The latest demonstrations—which included rail workers, hospital staff and university lecturers—drew only around 150,000, according to the unions.

AFP said Sarkozy "boosted some social security benefits after the first big union-led protests drew more than a million people into the streets in January, to defuse criticism that he was helping banks and carmakers more than ordinary workers."

But the president has refused to back down from plans to cut tens of thousands of public sector jobs and has rejected calls for an increase in the minimum wage.

Israel: Excavators demonstrate in Jaffa

The Workers Advice Centre (WAC) Web site reported June 17 dozens of workers employed by the manpower contractor Brick to work at the Israeli Antiquities Authority (IAA), demonstrated in Jaffa on June 16.

The workers included “Jews and Arabs from East Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Kiryat Gat, Ashkelon, Wadi Ara and the Galilee, among whom [were] former Russian and Ethiopian immigrants,” WAC said. They were recently dismissed and are demanding reinstatement.

In accordance with labour law, as of 2008, the IAA is obliged to absorb every worker with a term of nine months of work and above, as fully-fledged employees. Instead, Brick workers arbitrarily dismissed them and recruited new labour before the nine months were up.

Rachel Ben Ezra from Holon, who has worked for the IAA for six years, said, “At Brick they thought they could fool us and always deducted from our salaries, for the sole purpose of not paying us what we deserve. Many of the workers were on the verge of hunger; some had no choice but to eat at soup kitchens.”

Zambian health workers back on strike

Nurses and other unionized health workers at Choma General Hospital, in Southern Province, Zambia, walked out on unofficial strike on June 17, only two days after returning to work from a previous national strike. Their demands include K1 million (US\$204) risk allowance, K1,925,000 (US\$392) night duty allowance, K1,500,000 (US\$306) uniform allowance and K500,000 (US\$102) overtime allowance.

According to ZANIS, the decision to resume the strike followed a meeting at the hospital held by nurses and other medical staff “at which they unanimously agreed to commence the industrial action.” The strikers resolved not to return to work until the government meets their demands, accusing the Civil Servants and Allied Workers Union of Zambia (CSAWUZ) of failing them by accepting a pay rise below their demands.

CSAWUZ branch chair, Switzer Mpuka, told ZANIS that the workers had refused to be addressed by any union leader, stating they had been betrayed enough by the national union leadership. He threatened the striking workers that they must resume work because they would get no protection from the union, “especially since the collective agreement has already been signed.”

Civil servants in different parts of the country are also extremely dissatisfied with the 15 percent settlement of their salary claims. The north-western provincial secretary of the Civil Servants Union of Zambia, Kennedy Musopelo, told the *Times of Zambia* that his members were not happy to resume work, especially seeing that the issue of housing allowance was still unresolved.

Unionised health workers in the Copper Belt, from Ndola Central Hospital, Arthur Davison Children’s Hospital and 20 clinics, dressed in black because they felt betrayed by their leaders.

The *Times* reported that in Solwezi, in North Western Province, teachers who had returned to work after a 10-day strike vowed to take on the union national leaders, who they said could have called for the adjournment of the negotiations instead of signing for the 15 percent increment without consulting the rank and file.

Strike of doctors in Benue state, Nigeria, continues

Doctors in Benue State, Nigeria, are continuing their strike to demand better welfare benefits. They have been on strike for more than three

months. Their demands include a 22 percent welfare package for which they have been waiting since 2003, parity with federal government employees, a halt to tax deductions on allowances, refund of tax deductions made since 2003 and resolving the under-staffing of state hospitals.

Sierra Leone port workers stop work over poor conditions

Sierra Leonean workers at the port in Freetown stopped work on June 16 to demand that they are employed as permanent staff. They are also calling for an improvement in their conditions and payment of their overdue allowances.

Workers complained bitterly to *Concord Times* about their conditions of work and the fact that they have been forced to remain in temporary employment for 13 years. Abdul Rahman Denton, one of the strikers, said that management had recently employed over 30 people as permanent staff.

Abdul Kanasieu, president of the dockworkers union, told the paper that the strike action had come from the workers themselves and not the union. He said, “It is rather unfortunate that such a thing is happening.”

Nigeria: Threat to jobs of academic staff at Ibadan Polytechnic

Academic Staff at Ibadan Polytechnic, Nigeria, began a one-week warning strike on June 15. They are protesting against the imposition of a new tax rate of 27.5 percent of gross salary, the non-payment of members’ nine months of Consolidated Tertiary Institutions Salary Structure (COTISS) and the reduction of the retirement age from 65 to 60.

The action followed a breakdown in talks between the union and the school authorities. Polytechnic authorities demanded that teachers jettison the strike option or face mass sackings.



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