Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

26 June 2009

UK postal workers strike

Over 9,000 postal workers in Edinburgh mail centre and London took 24 hours of strike action on June 19, against Royal Mail's programme of cutbacks, which contravene existing national agreements.

Around 100 striking postal workers gathered at the East London Mail Centre at Bromley-by-Bow. The London divisional representative of the Communication Workers Union (CWU), Martin Walsh, confirmed reports from around the capital indicating that the strike had been "rock-solid everywhere."

"We've had almost 10,000 members out, and I've been getting reports of big pickets all over town—bigger than we had during the 2007 strike. We want Royal Mail to negotiate, but, if they don't we'll strike again."

There is the threat of further industrial action in a couple of weeks, with an extra 4,000 members involved, if agreement is not reached.

Ireland: Tesco facing industrial action over job cuts

The supermarket giant, Tesco, is facing strike action in its Dún Laoghaire head office over plans to lay off 140 staff as key support functions are moved to the UK, reported the *Irish Times* June 24.

The Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) has notified management that it intends to ballot its members on industrial action in the coming week, unless the company agrees to enter into discussions on its restructuring plan.

The union is demanding that Tesco gives a written commitment to put the restructuring plan on hold until talks are completed.

The current strike threat is separate from strike action planned by the Mandate trade union in 19 Tesco stores next month over cuts in working hours.

Last month, the *Irish Times* revealed the company makes annual profits of about €250 million in the Republic. Profit margins in Ireland are 9.3 percent, significantly higher than in other parts of the group.

In a letter to management, SIPTU assistant branch organiser, Graham Macken, wrote, "Tesco is one of, if not the, most profitable companies in the retail sector in Ireland and possibly worldwide. The proposed restructure is simply a way of displacing jobs and forcing employees to reapply for positions with vastly diluted terms and conditions."

200 building sites in Ireland to be hit by electricians' strike

The *Irish Times* reported June 20, that "up to 200 major construction sites around the country could be hit by a threatened strike over pay involving up to 10,500 electricians."

The Technical Engineering and Electrical Union (TEEU) served strike notice June 19 on electrical contractors around the country over a pay claim that would raise the hourly rate from €21.49 per hour to €23.98. The strike could begin on July 6.

Contractors claim they could not afford to pay the increase.

Before April last year, pay in the sector was largely determined by unions and employers under a registered employment agreement (REA) based on the rates of pay at 16 companies during the previous year. However, the TEEU said that after this date, the implementation of the new REA rate of €22.54—a 4.9 percent increase—was frustrated by challenges brought by two groups of contractors.

The TEEU said some employers were threatening to cut rates to €19.34 per hour and even to reduce apprentices' rates by 5 to 10 percent.

Industrial action by the electricians could have a serious impact in sectors such as energy, manufacturing and construction.

Among the construction sites that could be affected by the proposed dispute are: Terminal 2 at Dublin airport; the new Lansdowne Road stadium; the National Conference Centre at Spencer Dock and the Point Village in Dublin's docklands; the Corrib Gas project in County Mayo and the new Intel development in County Kildare.

Irish dockers protest

"A group of protesting dock workers are causing minor traffic delays near the East Link Bridge," reported www.rte.ie June 23. Around 30 dockers gathered at Pigeon House Road, Dublin, to protest a breach of contract. They say their employers have cut their hours without negotiation.

Russia: Rail workers on hunger strike

The Russian Service of *Radio Free Europe* reported June 24 that rail workers in Russia's Republic of Buryatia have launched a hunger strike to protest layoffs and a 20 percent wage cut. At least 60 workers of the Severomui section of the major railway through southern Siberia are involved. Representatives of the Trade Union of Railway Workers told journalists that despite promises by the state-owned Russian Railways

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Corporation, 31 workers have been laid off recently. According to the union activists, more workers may lose their jobs. Unpaid workers blockade highway

Gazeta.ru reported June 23 that police in the Sverslovsk Region are trying to prevent workers from the Bogdanovich Porcelain Plant from blocking the Siberian Tract Highway. Production at the plant, which employs 700, was shut down June 22, after the gas supplying the factory was turned off due to non-payment.

A plant spokesperson said, "Workers tried to prevent gas company employees coming into the Bogdanovich plant and turning off the gas, but to no avail and the gas supply was cut."

It was the fifth attempt in the last month to turn off the plant's gas supply.

Workers then took the decision to block the highway.

This is the third instance of disgruntled workers blocking major highways in Russia this month. On June 2, workers in Pikalevo, Leningrad Region, blocked the highway between Novaya Ladoga and Vologda for seven hours. On that occasion, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin flew to the town the following day. After a partial meeting of the workers' demands the three factories that form the basis of the local economy were reopened.

On June 10, workers at a tungsten plant in the Maritime Territory threatened to block their town's highway in protest at unpaid wages. The workers were paid the following day.

Egyptian textile workers' strike continues

As of this writing, the industrial action at the Tanta Linen, Flax and Oils Co. entered its fourth week, despite state pressure to end it. The textile workers are demanding that their bonuses and incentives are calculated based on the current salary (as according to the law) rather than the salary when the company was privatised. They are also demanding the reinstatement of nine workers, including two union activists who were fired after a strike in July last year.

The Saudi investor who owns the company has so far refused any negotiations.

Egypt: Protest by unpaid tree-planters

On June 14, tree-planters from Gharbeya and Menufiya staged a demonstration outside the Ministry of Agriculture to demand overdue wages and protest the abrogation of temporary work contracts. Some of them have been employed on temporary contracts for 17 years, which allows employers to dismiss workers arbitrarily.

Agricultural and engineering workers protests in front of Egyptian parliament

Around 100 workers employed at Al-Nubaria for Agricultural Engineering and Mechanism have again demonstrated before the People's Assembly (parliament) to demand wages that have not been paid 16 months after the company closed. All workers signed a report and sent it to the parliament, calling on MPs to intervene to reopen the company and replace the owner.

South African doctors on strike over pay

On June 22, hundreds of public service doctors, dentists, pharmacists and emergency workers in KwaZulu-Natal and Free State heeded a call for a wildcat strike to protest against low pay and appalling working conditions. They are demanding that the government implements the 2007 Occupation Specific Dispensation (OSD) agreement.

Doctors claim that they are underpaid by between 50 and 75 percent, when compared to other professionals in the public sector. One of the strike leaders, Dr. Shailendra Sham, told *Health-e News Service*, "This is not just about money. If we were just here because we wanted money, we would have gone overseas or into private practice. We want to stay in public health, but we want public health to be rejuvenated so that we can give our patients proper care. The health system is on the brink of collapse and those who remain are extending themselves beyond all reasonable boundaries."

One doctor complained of having to work 30-hour shifts. Another said that at his medical centre he saw over 20,000 patients in a month and was short of equipment.

Dr. Kevin Naidu, a senior medical officer at King Edward Hospital, said, "We don't have sterile gloves. Our stretchers are filthy and falling apart. There are no ophthalmoscopes [to examine patients' eyes], not enough torches, no intubation facilities. Some of the beds in the doctors' rooms have not been changed for two months."

The doctors' union, the South African Medical Association (SAMA), has condemned the strike as "illegal". Its spokesman said, "We cannot legally condone the strike."

Negotiations between the South African Health Ministry, SAMA and COSATU on June 24 came up with a new offer, but this has been rejected by the strikers. Health Minister Dr. Sibongiseni Dhlomo said, "Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined that the tail would wag the dog; that the membership of the SA Medical Association (SAMA) would do something different to their leadership."

According to *Mail and Guardian*, the strikers have embarked on a campaign to win support for the strike from other parts of South Africa. The Health Professions Council of South Africa has warned striking doctors that that they may face suspension or be struck off from the doctors' roll if they do not return to work.

Nigerian academics launch all-out strike

On June 22 the Academic Staff Union of the Universities (ASUU) in Nigeria launched a national strike in state and federal universities. The union blamed the strike on the government's refusal to sign an agreement reached two and a half years ago.

A few days earlier, a three-day strike was held by the Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities (NASU), which brought some universities—such as the University of Ibadan—to a standstill.

On June 20 hundreds of workers in the Aba North Local Government Area of Abia state stormed Government House, Umuahia, to protest the seven-month salary arrears owed them by the council. According to a report in *Vanguard*, the protesting workers marched round the adjoining streets before ending up at Government House, where they presented their complaint to Governor Chief Theodore Orji.

Namibian pension fund staff on strike

Workers employed to run the Government Institutions Pension Fund

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(GIPF) in Namibia went out on strike June 18 following a breakdown in talks with management. The strikers are demanding a 12 percent pay increase as well as improvements in their benefits. They want a 3.5 percent increase in the employers' pension contributions, a N$150 (US$18.80) increase in transport allowance, and a 75:25 ratio for employer/employee medical aid contributions.

GIPF management has proposed a 3 percent increase in the employers' pension contributions, an increase of N$150 in transport allowances and a 70:30 ratio for employer/employee medical aid contributions.

The Namibian Financial Institutions Union (Nafin) issued a press release demanding investigations into the budget and the conduct of the general manager for human resources and the remunerations of the board of trustees. The management team has increased its own entertainment and cell phone allowances by 100 and 50 percent.

Liberian rubber workers strike over salary arrears

Liberian rubber workers at the state-owned Guthrie Rubber Plantation went on strike in mid-June to demand payment of three months' salary arrears owed by management.

The workers have engaged in several strikes and road blockades during the past four months. Three people were wounded during a demonstration at the Guthrie Rubber Plantation earlier in the year. The strikers allege that the senior senator of Bomi County, Lahai G Lassanah, was involved in the shootings.

President Sirleaf has set up a committee allegedly to investigate the Guthrie shootings. The Liberian government is planning to privatise the state-owned plantations.

Zambian government threatens striking nurses

The Zambian government has warned striking nurses that it will "consider all options at its disposal" if the strike continues. According to the *Times of Zambia*, nurses are prepared to accept a 15 percent increment awarded by the government, but are calling for improvements in their conditions of service. They are demanding 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.

Labour and Social Security Minister Austin Liato told a meeting of striking nurses in Lusaka Province that negotiations on improved allowances could not begin until there was a return to work. On the previous day, New Generation Party (NGP) President Humphrey Siulapwa said that the health workers' union leaders and the government had already signed the collective agreement, therefore the strike was illegal.

Siulapwa said, "The signed collective agreement is binding to both parties whether they are happy or not. As NGP, we therefore call upon all the striking nurses to go back for work. If they don't want, then, the government should take disciplinary action to fire them, because they have become disobedient to the law."

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