

# 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.*

## Postal workers in the UK to strike in ongoing dispute

More than 25,000 postal workers are set to strike in Britain from August 7 to August 11. The strikes are being organised by the Communication Workers Union (CWU) as part of an ongoing dispute with Royal Mail over pay and jobs.

Royal Mail is seeking to impose a “modernisation” programme entailing further attacks on their pay, jobs and working conditions.

Postal staff nationwide have reported many grievances, among them that they are being bullied into working through breaks and into their own time. Other attacks include the tearing up of agreed attendance patterns, leading some employees to work an extra 46 days a year and others to lose up to £6,000 a year in pay. Other complaints include compulsory transfers and the forcible imposition of changes to working practices. The modernisation programme could also entail a possible 40 percent cut in staffing levels.

An indication of the growing opposition of workers to this assault was that by the last day of strike action organised by the union on July 17, almost 500 local CWU branches had demanded ballots for continued industrial action.

A number of towns and regions of the UK will be affected by the latest industrial action including London, Scotland, the West Country, East Anglia and the Midlands.

As with the July 17 “national day of action” in which just 12,000 postal workers took strike action on a localised basis, from a national membership of 160,000, the Communication Workers Union has again organised the action on a local “unit by unit” basis.

The strike action will begin on Friday when drivers in London, Birmingham, Coventry, and Essex will stage a 24-hour strike. Staff at the Northampton national distribution centre and Peterborough delivery office will also strike Friday.

The following day postal employees in the Bristol, Somerset and Edinburgh areas are to strike. Postal workers employed in the county of Suffolk are set to strike on Monday. Employees in Stoke-on-Trent will strike on Tuesday.

Royal Mail said of the planned action that 90 percent of its staff would be working during the action, and that most of its services would operate as normal.

The Labour government of Prime Minister Gordon Brown plans to privatise part of Royal Mail and has proposed to sell off up to 30 percent of the company. The plan has been temporarily suspended due to the government being unable to find a buyer willing to pay an agreeable price,

given the current economic crisis.

## UK: rail workers strike at National Express East Anglia over pay, jobs and conditions

Rail workers employed by the National Express East Anglia franchise began strike action at midnight on August 5. The 48-hour stoppage will cause disruption on train services in Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex, as well as to rail transit into London. The company announced that it would run a very limited service, and that most of its trains in and out of the mainline Liverpool Street station in London would be cancelled on Thursday and Friday.

The strike is centred on the issues of pay and working conditions of rail workers.

The action, involving members of the Rail Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) and Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (Aslef) trade unions, went ahead following the breakdown in talks between the unions and National Express East Anglia. The unions said that the company had not made its staff, “any kind of meaningful pay offer.”

Further 48-hour strikes have been called for August 13-14 and 20-21 with members of the Transport Salaried Staff Association set to join the planned action next week.

Members of the RMT and Aslef staged a two-day stoppage last week over the issue of pay. Services were severely disrupted as National Express East Anglia ran 100 trains during the strike action on July 30 and 31, instead of its usual 1,800 a day. Some two million journeys a week are made on the train lines run by National Express East Anglia.

## Vestas applies for a warrant to remove workers occupying Isle of Wight plant

On August 6 Vestas, the wind turbine firm on the Isle of Wight, applied for a warrant to remove the remaining six workers who are occupying its plant. The protesters at the Vestas wind turbine blade factory on the Isle of Wight are continuing their action despite a court granting a possession order on Tuesday. Up to 25 demonstrators and workers barricaded themselves inside the plant 15 days ago in a protest at plans to cut 625 jobs.

Under UK law, the bailiffs must give the protesters 24 hours notice. The BBC reported that the forced removal of the occupying workers is “likely to take place on Friday.”

“If they have to get this warrant we will be happy to stay until they do

it,” a worker occupying the plant was quoted as saying. “Vestas has bullied us for too long, so we will give them some of their own medicine. If and when we do have to come out we will do it peacefully but not before then.”

He said those inside had packed their bags after hearing news of the possession order, but these were then unpacked. Four of the workers left after the possession order was granted.

The *Guardian* reported August 5 that the workers have called for a national day of action to support their attempt to save it from closure, calling on supporters nationally to demonstrate in solidarity on August 12 by walking off the job for an hour, holding a rally or displaying a banner.

Meanwhile five people have started a rooftop protest at Vestas’ Venture Quays building in Cowes on the island this week. The four men and one woman displayed hung banners reading, “In solidarity with the Vestas workers” and “Fight for green jobs.”

### **Ireland: police break-up sit-in by Thomas Cook workers**

On August 4 at 5 a.m., around 15 police officers removed and arrested 28 staff from the Grafton Street offices of the Thomas Cook travel company in Dublin. The police entered the premises by breaking down the door. The employees had been occupying the building for four days after being informed on July 31 that the firm’s Irish operations were to be closed with the loss of 77 jobs.

The Grafton Street shop and another, Direct Holidays, a nearby city-centre subsidiary, were both due to close on September 6, but the closure date for the Grafton Street branch was brought forward, and it was announced on Friday that it would be closed immediately.

The staff of Thomas Cook immediately occupied the building in pursuit of an improved redundancy deal that would give them eight weeks of benefits per year of service. They rejected the initial offer from the company of five weeks as “derisory.” According to some estimates the offer from the company was as low as €9,000 in some cases.

Prior to the raid, the workers had defied two court orders demanding that they vacate the building that has been occupied since Friday. During the occupation staff were fed by nearby restaurants whilst customers donated money to their cause.

One of the workers went into labour following her arrest and gave birth in the local Coombe Hospital.

Later a judge at the Irish High Court released the staff without charge after they agreed not to resume the sit-in. Some 100 supporters of the arrested workers protested outside the court to demand their release. Releasing the workers Mr. Justice Michael Beart warned that the rule of law “cannot be broken” as this would be a “recipe for anarchy.”

Since the raid, press reports have suggested that Thomas Cook will pay out an enhanced severance package for the redundant staff equal at least six weeks’ pay per year of service. Last year the firm paid out over £7 million to its CEO Manny Fontenla-Novoa.

### **Ireland: Strike threatened by Dublin Airport staff**

Fingal-Independent.ie reported August 5 that a dispute “is brewing at Dublin Airport among workers who are being transferred from Aviance to Sky Handling Partners, a ground handling operation on the airport campus.”

The SIPTU trade union has mooted the possibility of a major dispute

affecting ground handling operations at the airport. The union has said that Sky Handling Partners have yet to give commitments required under “transfer of undertakings” procedures to honour existing terms of employment for the transferring workers.

Sky Handling Partners currently handles Lufthansa, Aer Arran, City Jet and Air France ground handling operations at Dublin Airport and accounts for around 40 percent of total ground handling operations at the airport.

### **Egypt: cotton workers strike in pay dispute**

On August 1, the Nile Cotton Ginning workers began industrial action in the company’s branches in the towns of Mahalla, Zefta and Kafr el-Zayat in the Nile Delta.

Last week cotton workers in Menya clashed with police during street protests after management failed to meet assurances regarding the payment of long overdue social bonuses.

### **Iraq: strike threat over oil contracts to foreign companies**

The Federation of Oil Unions of Iraq and the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq have condemned the Oil Ministry’s decision to award a foreign consortium the contract to develop Rumaila, the country’s largest producing oilfield.

Contracts are also being considered with the UK’s BP and China’s CNPC.

Faleh About Amara, a leading official with the Federation of Oil Unions, said, “We have written a letter to BP and the British consul in Basra, warning them against entering Basra as it will be illegal.... If they do, we will protest and strike.”

The Oil Ministry plans to award foreign firms contracts for as many as eight oil and gas fields in Iraq’s first major energy auction that began last month—a centrepiece of the government efforts to more than double output of around 2.5 million barrels per day (bpd). One field was awarded in the June 30 auction.

“But Oil Minister Hussain al-Shahristani is likely to pull out all the stops to make sure the Rumaila deal, in which BP and CNPC promise to increase the field’s output to 2.85 million bpd, almost three times its current capacity, goes ahead,” *Reuters* notes.

Ali Abbas Khafif, head of the Worker Councils and Unions’ branch in Basra, said the Rumaila deal would “violate” Iraqi law because it was brokered in the absence of new national energy legislation.

### **Israel: protests over children deportations**

The *Jerusalem Post* reported August 3 that protests took place two days earlier in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem the following day to oppose the deportation of 1,200 children of “illegal” foreign workers.

More than a thousand people demonstrated in Levinski Park in Tel Aviv.

“Interior Minister Eli Yishai convened a meeting [August 2nd] with the heads of the Immigration Authority and the Oz enforcement unit to discuss how to proceed with the crackdown on illegal migrants and their employers,” according to the newspaper.

The protesters held signs and shouted slogans calling for an end to the deportation of children and their families.

“As the demonstration was reaching its end, inspectors from the Oz unit burst on the scene and took 10 people into custody,” the *Post* reported. “According to Sigal Rozen from the Migrant Workers Hotline, the inspectors used force while arresting the foreign workers and called the police to arrest the Israeli protesters who sat in the road and blocked the bus carrying the foreign workers away.”

On August 2, 40 children who were born in Israel to migrant workers attended a demonstration outside the weekly cabinet meeting in Jerusalem.

### **Telecom workers strike in South Africa**

On August 3, over 3,000 members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) began two days of strike action against the South African telecommunications company, Telekom. The action covered the areas of Gauteng, Kwazulu-Natal and the Western Cape. Workers demand a 12 percent pay raise and an end to discriminatory salary disparities. The company had offered a 7.5 percent increase and a promise to introduce new salary bands by October 1. The strike action took place after talks between the employer and union, overseen by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), failed to reach agreement.

According to the CWU General Secretary Gallant Roberts, the industrial action had an impact on Telekom services, hitting maintenance and new line installations.

Talks are continuing between Telekom and the CWU. A national march has been planned for August 11 if there is still no agreement. COSATU, the South African trade union congress, has pledged support for the march and called on other unions to support it.

### **Tanzanian rail workers strike in dispute over pay arrears**

A strike by Tanzania Railways Ltd (TRL) workers shut down the national rail network this week. “All passenger and cargo trains are stranded across the country,” an official told *Dow Jones* newspapers. On August 4, around 500 railway workers at the Dar es Salaam main station stopped work for a second day.

The general secretary of the Tanzania Railway Workers’ Union said this week that the union has been attempting to get TRL management to agree to talks since last month. The union is demanding a review of workers’ contracts, a pay increase and better redundancy term.

The strike ended on August 5 following an agreement reached between the union, the TRL management, and the railway ministry.

TRL is a joint venture between the Tanzanian government and Rail India Technical and Economic Services. The railways provide an important transport route for mineral exports from Zambia and Katanga, in the Congo, to the port at Dar es Salaam.

### **Nigerian health workers seek improved conditions**

Medical and health workers, members of the Nasarawa State section of

the Joint Committee of Medical and Health Workers Union, began strike action on August 3. The stoppage renewed a previously suspended strike that had been held up pending a response from the state government.

Workers demand improved conditions. The union urged implementation of a report by government representatives and health officials, which it says will improve working conditions for medical and health workers.

### **Nigeria: Ibadan state education workers stage industrial action**

Academic and education workers belonging to six unions in the town of Ibadan, Nigeria, have been engaged in strike action for the last 3 weeks. The stoppages are in opposition to a new tax regime introduced by the state government.

The state government has set up talks led by the Commissioner for Education, Professor Taoheed Adedjoja, in an attempt to resolve the dispute.



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