

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

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

## France: Ferry workers strike over pay cuts

A strike took place last weekend of ferry workers, protesting wage cuts of 100 euro. The workers also complained of a lack of crew for night crossings as a result of new working practices.

The employees of SeaFrance ferries held up three ships, the *Rodin*, the *Moliere* and the *Berlioz* at Calais, since Friday.

SeaFrance had to cancel all Dover to Calais sailings during Easter weekend, one of the busiest travel periods of the year. The ferry company normally operates between 16 and 19 crossings a day.

In southern England, Operation Stack—where lorries waiting to cross the Channel park on the M20 in Kent—was put in place throughout the day on Friday as traffic built up around the port and lifted later in the evening.

The company said it had 23,000 reservations for Friday and 12,000 for Saturday, resulting in a loss of about 260,000 euro in ferry tickets and another 186,000-euro loss in sales on board for the Friday crossings alone.

SeaFrance has suffered a fall in its freight traffic. The company announced plans in December to cut 482 jobs from its 1,580-strong workforce.

## France: Rail strike over job cuts

On April 6, French rail workers went on strike over job cuts.

The industrial action led to the cancellation of all domestic overnight routes, but international trains remained on schedule, officials said.

France's state railway operator SNCF said it expected traffic to be disrupted for two days, possibly longer in some areas. All 12 night trains serving national destinations were not expected to be in service, though international night service was to continue, according to SNCF. Around 70 percent of all high-speed trains were expected to be affected.

The strike is the third by rail workers this year.

SNCF last year said it would invest a billion euro in a plan to overhaul the freight business between now and 2015, making no reference to the number of jobs that might be affected. CGT union official Didier Le Reste said recently that the company wants to cut 8,000 jobs before 2012.

Each day of the strike is expected to cost 20 million euro for the company, which saw a net loss of 980 million euro last year.

## France: Laid-off auto workers threaten to blow up plant

On April 2, workers at a car accessories plant north of Paris threatened to blow up the factory unless they were given better redundancy compensation.

According to AFP, employees at the Sodimatex plant, where 92 jobs are expected to go, placed petrol bombs near a large gas tank and were threatening to set them on fire. One employee is reported to have said, "The plant is going to go up in smoke, if that's what they want."

Managers and union leaders met at the town hall in Crepy-en-Valois. Eric Lemoine, a union official said, "The workers have high expectations about this meeting. There has to be a concrete result or else anything could happen. They are very determined."

"Even if we tell them not to do it, some of them might not listen," said Gerard Declair, from the Force Ouvrière.

Staff set fire to pieces of plastic and rolls of carpet at the factory. Police deployed outside the plant's gates.

Workers are demanding compensation of 21,000 euro each. All that is currently being offered by management is 15,000 euro.

At 10 percent, France has its highest unemployment rate in a decade, with the car industry (which employs 10 percent of the national workforce) among the hardest-hit by the global economic crisis.

Sodimatex, which produces car carpets, announced 12 months ago that it planned to shut down its plant in Crepy-en-Valois and began talks on compensation. Months of negotiations hit an impasse and workers last week decided to occupy the plant after police used tear gas to disperse a protest they were holding near the factory. About 40 workers spent the night at the plant, sleeping on the factory's just-produced carpets.

Workers contend they are seeking the same package as Sodimatex employees from another plant, who were given 21,000 euro each when their factory was shut down in 2006.

The current stand-off comes a year after workers threatened to blow up the New Fabris car parts plant in Chatellerault, central France, in a similar dispute. France has also been witness in the past two years to workers' action in the form of a string of 'bosnappings' over pay and job security.

## UK: teachers threaten strike action over cuts

On April 5, teachers in the UK's largest classroom union, the National Union of Teachers (NUT), voted to ballot for strike action at its conference if ministers cut services or freeze pay and pensions.

Ed Balls, the schools secretary, warned last month that unless schools make cuts of almost one percent between 2011 and 2013, frontline services will be hit.

George Osborne, the Conservative shadow chancellor, has threatened to introduce a public sector pay freeze for workers who earn more than £18,000 a year.

The last teachers' strike was in April 2008, in a dispute with the government over a pay deal. It was the first national teachers' strike for 21 years. Teachers at the conference said they feared the next government would make "savage public spending cuts" of tens of billions of pounds,

which would hamper the ability of schools to recruit qualified staff.

### **UK: College staff strike over jobs**

The University and College Union (UCU) web site announced April 1 that Northumberland College staff voted overwhelmingly in favour of both strike action and action short of a strike in defence of their jobs.

Over 90 percent of members who voted supported strike action while 99.1 percent agreed to action short of a strike. The union said the high turnout—68.3 percent—was indicative of the strength of feeling among UCU members across the country over savage funding cuts and damaging job losses.

Northumberland College intends to make 67 academic staff redundant and massively increase the working hours of those who remain, resulting in a pay cut for all lecturing staff of up to £10,000.

The UCU said that those who survive the jobs cull will see their teaching hours increase from 825 to 900, with a huge rise in preparation time and marking. A reduction is also expected in how much staff can earn, with the top grade for lecturers dropping to £27,000.

Northumberland College is the only general further education college in the county and provides education to students from Berwick to Hexham, including at the Kirkley Hall Agricultural College in Ponteland.

### **UK: Rail workers to be re-balloted for strike action following high court injunction**

Rail workers are to have a fresh strike ballot after the High Court ruled in favour of an injunction last week, brought by Network Rail against the rail workers taking strike action in defence of their jobs and working conditions.

Executive members of the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) are believed to be setting out a timetable to re-ballot 5,000 signal workers and 12,000 maintenance staff.

It is not known when new strike action could take place.

The TSSA union, which called off a simultaneous strike by Network Rail supervisors, is also planning to re-ballot its members.

### **UK: Strike action by automobile recovery service workers**

Patrol staff employed by the motorists' recovery service, the AA (Automobile Association), voted to go on strike in a dispute over plans to cap employee pensions.

In a turnout of 87 percent, the Independent Democratic Union (IDU) said its members voted 57 percent in favour of industrial action. If the action goes ahead, the union said it would be the first walkout in the motoring body's 105-year history.

No strike dates have yet been set and the union is asking the AA to hold more talks. The AA said it had drawn up contingency plans to ensure a good service, should the strike go ahead. Management has said it wants to put a ceiling on annual rises in pensionable salaries, to raise employee

contributions and to reduce the maximum annual rise in pensions paid to 2.5 percent a year.

The AA is part of Acromas, which owns Saga, the travel and financial services company.

### **Finland: Broadcasting employees on strike**

Technical and support staff at the broadcaster YLE's regional offices, in Vaasa, Lappeenranta, Oulu, Turku and Jyväskylä, began a three-day strike on April 6 to protest ongoing layoff talks, according to YLE.

The action affected the transmission of some programmes, such as news magazines.

Production personnel claim YLE management has gone back on promises to maintain current staffing levels.

**Finland: Food workers take industrial action**

A three-day strike by food industry workers concerning wages and working hours began April 7.

The previous day, the Finnish Food Workers' Union turned down a settlement proposal put forward by National Conciliator Esa Lonka.

The strike action involves a dozen large food production facilities and 4,500 workers across Finland. It may leave some store shelves empty, with bread and ready-made meals are likely to be the first items to run out.

The Food Workers' Union said the proposal would have paved the way for employees to work 10-hour days and six-day work weeks without overtime pay. A three-day strike starting April 21 is set to take place if no resolution is reached.

### **Spain: Costa del Sol hotel workers end three day strike**

Three days of strike action by workers at the Incosol Hotel in Marbella and the Byblos Hotel in Mijas, over unpaid back pay, ended April 3.

Between them the two establishments owe more than €2 million in back pay, with the Incosol owing the last four months and the Byblos the last ten.

The Byblos, owned by the Aifos property company, is currently under bankruptcy protection. Demonstrations have been held at both hotels since April 1, but one in Marbella was broken up by the National Police.

### **Nigeria: Civil servants serve notice of strike**

Civil servants in the north western state of Zamfara have given the state government an ultimatum of strike action. The strike threat is in response to the failure of the state government to pay leave grants for the year 2009. Following a joint meeting between the Nigeria Labour Council, the Public Service Negotiating Council and the Trade Union Congress a communiqué was issued giving 21 days strike notice from the 29 March.

Union leaders had previously met with state government on several occasions but with no result.

## **Nigeria: Port workers set to strike**

Workers belonging to the Maritime Workers Union of Nigeria (MWUN) and the Senior Staff Association of Communications, Transport and Corporations (SSACTAC) who work for the Nigeria Port Authority (NPA) gave 14 days notice of strike action last week.

Amongst the workers grievances are the non-implementation of an agreed minimum standard for dockworkers, non-payment of outstanding severance benefit to dockworkers, non-payment of money arrears and the non-implementation of the new NPA Conditions of Services for workers.

The presidents and general secretaries of the two unions stated that the failure of the NPA to address the grievances would mean the launching of strike action affecting all sea ports throughout Nigeria. Last year the NPA handled 66 million tonnes of cargo.

A petition put out by the unions stated, "We...can no longer tolerate this, having exercised patience for years...failure (to meet the demands)...within the given time frame will lead to total shut-down of the ports..."



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## **Kenya: Lecturers press for action over pay arrears**

Three unions representing lecturers and non-academic staff at seven universities and 13 colleges throughout Kenya have given notice of strike action. A delegates meeting was due to take place in Nakuru on Wednesday 7 April to ratify the decision. The action is in response to the failure of the government to release a final tranche of the Sh 2 billion (US\$26 million) in pay arrears owed to the university workers.

Union officials had met with the permanent secretary for higher education but had failed to get any commitment from the government to release the money.

## **Namibia: Meat processors in wildcat strike action**

Around 250 workers at the Brukkaros Meat Processors (BMP) facility near Keetmanshoop took unofficial one-day strike action last week in pursuit of a pay increase. They picketed the main gate. The workers are demanding a 10-13 percent rise whilst the company offer was around 4 percent.

Management gave the workers an ultimatum to return to work. The company is threatening to take disciplinary action against the workers who took part in the strike action. Pay negotiations are due 13 and 14 April.

## **Zambia: Power workers down tools in demand for union recognition**

Workers at El Sewedy Electric in Ndola, Zambia walked out last week, frustrated with the pace of talks between the company and the National Energy Sector and Allied Workers Union (NESAWU) over recognition rights for the union to represent the workers. They were seeking union recognition to push their claim for salary and allowances increases.

The company is a joint venture between Zesco Ltd and El Sewedy of Egypt that manufactures electrical transformers.