

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.

Greece: Fuel drivers continue strike against austerity measures

On July 28, striking fuel-tanker drivers in Greece entered their fifth day of industrial action. The workers are in dispute at government austerity plans to overhaul licensing rules. The action continued after trade union talks with the government collapsed. Workers involved have vowed to continue the protests that have led to fuel shortages at many gas stations.

The measures are part of the austerity programme being implemented by the social democratic PASOK government as part of a loans agreement with the International Monetary Fund and the European Union.

The government has not ruled out ordering state employees to get gas supplies flowing. Transport Minister Dimitris Reppas said Tuesday, “[We] Will do whatever is necessary to make sure that that market is adequately supplied.”

IMF and European auditors are in Athens to inspect the progress of the austerity package that has already seen pensions and civil servants’ servants salaries slashed, along with welfare benefits. The inspection is required before Greece receives the second instalment in mid-September of loans worth up to €110 billion (\$142 billion) from the IMF and the 15 other EU countries using the euro.

Business associations recently reported a 50 percent drop in turnover for small businesses in greater Athens over the first six months of the year, compared with 2009.

Panagis Karellas, head of the Athens’ traders association, said 13.8 percent of stores and 2.1 percent of services had closed in the capital in the past 18 months.

Engineering workers strike in Coventry, England, to protest pay freeze

Staff at engineering firm Meggitt Aircraft Braking Systems factory in Coventry, England, struck on July 23 at the imposition of a pay freeze. The workers are members of the Unite trade union. The pay cut is being imposed under conditions whereby senior managers have been awarded bonuses of more than £1.5 million.

The union is calling for a 4 percent pay increase for staff and claims this “would cost the company less than a quarter of the cost of the bonuses given to just three men.”

UK: Harwich port workers strike in pay dispute

Port workers and support staff employed at Harwich International Port in Essex, England, were scheduled to strike on Thursday, the first of two 24-hour stoppages scheduled to take place in a dispute over pay and working conditions. The strike was called by the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers trade union (RMT).

During the action, staff will not work shifts or overtime from 6 p.m. and are to stop overtime in the hours leading to the strike.

The strike is set to affect services to the Hook of Holland and Denmark as well as cruise services in and out of Harwich port.

UK: Workers employed at AstraZeneca plant to ballot in pension rights dispute

Workers at the AstraZeneca drug company’s plant in Macclesfield, England, are currently balloting for industrial action in opposition to changes to their pension plan. Some 600 workers are involved in the dispute. Zoladex, a hormone treatment for cancer, is manufactured at the plant, the second largest of AstraZeneca’s worldwide.

The firm plans to freeze pensionable salaries permanently for workers who stay in the current scheme, stating that this would result in a “sustainable, equitable and affordable” pension scheme. AstraZeneca defined benefit (DB) pension scheme has been closed to new recruits since 2000 and has around 2,500 active members. The DB scheme has a deficit of £1.4 billion.

The ballot is being organised by the GMB trade union and will continue until August 16.

AstraZeneca has offered staff the option of remaining in the DB scheme or of moving to a Defined Contribution (DC) scheme.

The GMB said it regretted even having to ballot for strike. Its National Officer Allan Black said, “I very much regret that we have been forced to this course of action by AstraZeneca’s onslaught on our members’ pensions.

“Every constructive alternative we have put forward has been ignored. This is particularly disappointing in the light of the huge sacrifices recently made by our members to ensure the profitability of AZ and its shareholders. We want no more than fair treatment for our members who actually generate these profits.”

In a statement, AstraZeneca claimed that the changes had already been agreed with trade unions before being implemented. “The changes to UK pension benefits, which took effect on 1 July following an extended period of consultation with employees and trade unions, will ensure that ongoing pension provision is sustainable, equitable and affordable.”

UK airport employees to vote in strike ballot over pay offer

Thousands of workers at some of the country's biggest airports are due to start voting on possible industrial action over pay. The Unite trade union said 6,000 of its members who work as fire-fighters, engineers and support and security staff at Heathrow, Stansted, Southampton, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh airports will vote over the next few weeks over a "measly" pay offer.

Airport operator BAA is reported by the Press Association to be only offering a 1 percent pay rise, plus 0.5 percent conditional on changes to the sickness agreement.

The impending strike action threatens disruption before the end of the busy summer holidays.

Council workers in Brighton and Hove to vote in industrial action ballot

Around 4,000 public sector workers employed by Brighton and Hove City Council are to be balloted for strike action against public spending cuts, the council's decision to axe four of its most senior directors and replace them with officers from outside, and plans for job losses by April next year.

The workers in dispute include teaching assistants, library workers, social care staff, residential workers, administration employees, managers, and cover all council services.

Unison trade union branch secretary Alex Knutsen, said: "My branch may be accused of going too far, too fast, but to wait until our services are destroyed will be too late.... All right-thinking people need to act now to defend the imperfect, but at least reasonable standards of services we provide to the most vulnerable in our community."

UK: Tram workers' strike vote over trade union representative's derecognition

Supertram light rail workers in the city of Sheffield, England, are voting in a strike ballot over the derecognition of one of their union representatives. The ballot was called after Stagecoach—the company which runs the Supertram—said it could no longer deal with a Unite trade union official, claiming he had "broken an agreement" on standards.

A Supertram spokeswoman said: "We were recently forced to inform the Unite trade union we were no longer able to deal with one of its officials. It followed a number of incidents where the individual broke an agreement on the standards expected of a trade union representative and undermined the democratic voting process."

"...It goes without saying that we continue to recognise Unite as a trade union and work closely with them across many areas of our business."

Unite's John Evans responded, "We've had a good working relationship with the company over the years but unfortunately there's been a problem with this particular individual."

"There was certainly an issue that needed to be dealt with...the action that they have taken is thought to be a little bit drastic."

services

Last week refuse collection workers at Dublin City Council have voted for industrial action in a move they say is aimed at protecting waste services in the greater Dublin area. Waste collection workers in all four Dublin local authorities have now voted for industrial action.

Earlier Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council agreed to defer the signing of contracts with a private waste collecting firm in a bid to help resolve a dispute over refuse services in south Dublin. This followed talks at the Labour Relations Commission between unions and management in the county council.

The council planned to outsource part of its waste collection service to Panda Waste, but refuse workers had threatened to take industrial action in response. The union deferred the strike plan.

Ukraine: Miners threaten strike at flooded mine

Miners at the Yuniy Kommunar (Young Communard) coal mine have announced they will take strike action unless the government comes forward with payments delayed since April, trade unions said.

An underground nuclear explosion in 1979 trapped 95 percent of the radioactivity in the mine and consequently stopped coal production. Workers at the mine have pumped water out of the site every day for the past 31 years. Analysts believe radioactive material could contaminate the groundwater if workers stop pumping water from the mine.

According to United Press International, "Mine operators in Ukraine are struggling to pay employee salaries. Activists are working to pressure prosecutors in Kiev to launch legal action against the operators in an effort to force them to settle their debts."

Nikolai Kvach, the head of a miners' union, warned the news agency RIA Novosti: "There are a few days left until a social explosion at the plant."

Earlier this month, the government stepped in to ward off the threat of strikes at two other Donetsk region mines. Miners threatened to stop pumping out ground water, which could have meant flooding in nearby towns. The government pledged to make the back payments with money from its "stabilisation fund".

Egypt: Telecommunication workers and city residents protest

On July 26, dozens of workers employed by the telecommunications firm Quicktel blocked a main road in Maasara in Helwan Governorate to demand the payment of money owed them by the company.

According to *Al Masry Al Youm*, the protesting workers briefly blocked traffic before security forces "forced the workers back to their factory and promised to intervene to help them receive their remuneration."

At the same time, residents of the Alexandrian district of Tosson staged a demonstration in front of the headquarters of the Agriculture Ministry to protest the demolition of their homes.

The government says the houses were built on state-owned land.

Ireland: Dublin refuse workers vote for strike action to protect

Iran: Strike by construction workers at dams

The July 23 *Iran Labor Report* reported that Karkheh Payab Consulting workers at Dareyan Dam in the Kurdish Paveh region (located 15 kilometres from the city of Paveh) went on strike July 19. Around 500 workers working at the dam took strike action “demanding four months of back wages”, said the report.

In June, a worker at the Dam, Farhad Izadi, lost his life in an electrocution incident.

“Separately, the workers at Zhavah Dam have again gone on another consecutive strike in recent weeks over five months of their past wages,” reported *Iran Labor Report*.

boycotted a meeting brokered by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Productivity to try and resolve the strike.



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South African public sector workers set to strike

More of the 14 unions representing around 1 million public sector workers are set to strike in South Africa. Last week, the 200,000 workers in the Public Servants Association balloted in favour of strike action. They have now been joined by the National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers (NUPSAW) and the Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA).

The Independent Labour Caucus (ILC) is balloting nearly half a million workers who are expected to support the proposed strike action.

Strike action by those unions which had already voted was due to begin July 29; however, the unions instead gave the government seven days notice of strike action from July 28 in the hope the government will respond with a new offer.

The joint union demand is for an 8.6 percent pay increase and a R1000 (US\$133) housing allowance; to date, the government have responded with a pay offer of 6.5 percent and a R620 (US\$82) housing allowance.

Striking Dis-Chem workers continue action

Last Friday, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) announced its support for around 2,000 members of the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU) who have been striking against the pharmacy chain Dis-Chem. Dis-Chem has around 40 pharmacies nationwide that have been affected by the action.

The workers began their strike action May 28 in support of a 15 percent pay increase and a minimum wage of R3500 (US\$450), amongst other demands. The workers have been forced to pursue a long struggle to gain trade union recognition.

To date, the employer has refused to negotiate with SACCAWU.

Nigerian health workers strike

Doctors belonging to the National Association of Medical and Dental Officers (AMDO) and working for Oyo state hospitals began two days of strike action July 27. Their action is in protest at the state’s refusal to pay the nationally negotiated, Consolidated Medical Salary Scale (CONMESS) and against their poor working conditions.

Meanwhile, the strike by health workers in Edo state, again in protest against Edo state’s refusal to implement the CONMESS agreement, has now lasted three weeks. It is beginning to impact on patients’ care, with some patients being turned away. In spite of this, the state government has