

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

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

Spanish air traffic controllers vote to strike against pay cuts and increased hours

Spanish air traffic controllers, members of the USCA trade union, voted this week to strike for at least three days later this month, in protest against attacks on pay and conditions. The staff are protesting a decree ratified last week that increased the number of hours they work, reduced overtime pay and shortened breaks during shifts. The workers are employed by the state run Aeropuertos Españoles y Navegación Aérea (AENA)

USCA represents around 95 percent of the air traffic controllers. The ballot returned an almost unanimous vote (98 percent) in favour of industrial action. According to the union, the decree means that the controllers will be forced to work under "the worst conditions for the profession in Europe".

No date for industrial action has yet been set by USCA. Were the action to go ahead, it would be the first official strike held by air traffic controllers. All previous strikes by controllers have been wildcat actions.

AENA has sought to demonise the air traffic staff by claiming they are vastly overpaid. Prior to the latest decree, in February the government passed legislation cutting controllers working hours and slashing their wages by what amounted to 40 percent. Shift patterns were imposed that led to controllers working continuously for 28 days. Even before these changes came into effect, between 2004 and 2006 five workers dropped dead at their work stations.

Workers strike at Ferrexpco iron ore mine in Poltava, Ukraine

On Wednesday iron ore workers at the Ferrexpco Poltava GOK mine in Ukraine began industrial action. Reuters reported that "three out of four furnaces of Ferrexpco's pellet factory had been suspended, resulting in a 75 percent drop in pellet output".

The company claimed, "The scale of the strike is relatively small, there have been no shutdowns and production continues".

England: Prison education staff strike in dispute over pay and working conditions

On August 4 education staff at more than 70 prisons and young offender institutions took strike action in a dispute over new contracts. The workers are members of the University and College Union (UCU) and fear that the contracts will increase working hours and impose holiday and sickness entitlement cuts.

The UCU said that some staff could lose up to £7,000 a year under the new pay scales in the proposed contact. Alan Whittaker the UCU president said, "It is deeply concerning that Britain's largest prison education provider is trying to force through new contracts that will seriously jeopardise prison education in this country".

Workers struck in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Isle of Wight, Kent, Lancashire, Merseyside, Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Surrey, Sussex, Warwickshire, West Midlands, Winchester, Worcestershire, Yorkshire and the north east of England.

England: Lancashire County Council staff oppose cuts in pay and employment conditions

More than 10,000 staff employed by Lancashire county council have voted for action short of a strike to protest changes to their employment conditions and pay cuts. The workers are members of the Unison trade union. The action is to consist of staff refusing to work overtime, not using their own cars for work and not covering for absent colleagues or vacant posts.

The action follows an "equal pay review" in which thousands of workers now receive lower pay and are forced to work under worse terms and conditions. Cuts include no overtime pay for weekends and an end to car allowances. On August 3 the council also implemented a charge of £2.50 a day for staff wishing to park at the county council's Preston headquarters.

The GMB trade union, which has some 800 members employed by the council, is also planning to take some form of action.

Billingsgate Markets porters in London stage protest to oppose plan to end their licensing

Some 140 porters employed at Billingsgate Market in London held a protest on August 2 in opposition to plans of the City of London Corporation, who are seeking to end the system of licensing porters as part of the abolition of bylaws. Under their present contracts the porters earn a guaranteed £403 a week.

The bylaws date back to 1876, and their proposed abolition has been endorsed by the London Fish Merchants Association in the name of “modernisation”. The City Corporation said, “This bylaw is obsolete, out-of-date, irrelevant in modern times and could be criticised for bureaucratically restricting freedom of employment”.

In a *Financial Times* report, a Billingsgate porter with more than 20 years seniority said, “This will destroy the heritage of the market and end the livelihoods of people who have been doing the job for many years. It will be a drive to the bottom in terms of pay and conditions”.

Billingsgate is Britain’s largest inland fish market dating back to 1327. It began trading exclusively in fish following an Act of Parliament in 1699 and today sells up to 25,000 tonnes of fish a year with a turnover of £200 million.

Tour guides at Tolpuddle Martyrs Museum in Dorset, England, begin strike action

Tour guides at the Tolpuddle Martyrs Museum in Dorset, England, are on strike in a dispute over pay. The 11 staff are employed by West Dorset District Council and are demanding negotiations to increase their pay £50 a day. They are currently paid just £30 a day, including travel expenses, which is well below the industry recommended rate of £75.

Under their contract the guides have to carry out two 45-minute tours a day. The Tolpuddle Martyrs Museum documents the famous case of six farm workers who were sentenced to transportation to Australia for seven years in 1834 for joining a trade union. Tours of the museum usually take place daily between mid-July and mid-September. However the industrial action means they will only take place throughout August this year.

One of the guides, Derek Price said, “I am very disappointed not to be doing it this year because I enjoy doing it but it is a point of principle over the money. There has been no attempt by the council to negotiate with us. We aren’t prepared to do it for £30. That amount for an afternoon’s work isn’t a viable fee”.

Nigerian college workers strike in national action

A strike of members of the Non Academic Staff Union (NASU) in Colleges of Education throughout Nigeria commenced this week. The strike is over the federal government’s refusal to address the unions’ demands including a 53.73 percent salary increment, together with seven months arrears.

Speaking to the Nigerian *Sun News*, the branch Chairman of

NASU Judgewell Johnson at Akoko, Lagos, Federal College of Education (Technical), explained that a letter sent to the government on July 12 had received no reply.

“Strike is the only language government understands, and it is the last tool by unions to get government’s attention. All NASU members in FCE (T) are on strike, it started yesterday (Monday)”, said Johnson.

Administrative and technical services will be suspended at colleges during the dispute. The strike was for seven days but would become indefinite if there was no response from the government.

Also in Nigeria, health workers in Edo state are continuing their month long dispute. They have rejected the state government’s request that the strike should be called off before negotiations could begin. They are protesting at the state’s refusal to pay the nationally negotiated Consolidated Medical Salary Scale (CONMESS).

South Africa public service workers’ dispute escalates

Public sector workers in South Africa turned down a call from Public Service and Administration Minister Richard Baloyi to accept the government’s final wage offer of a 6.5 percent increase and a R630 (\$87) housing allowance.

The Public Servants Association union, representing some 200,000 employees, decided to continue strike action and the South African Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu), representing 243,000 teachers, announced it would begin lunchtime pickets building up to full strike action next week.

The Democratic Nurses Organisation of SA (Denosa) is also expected to strike this week. Altogether 1.3 million state employees including teachers, nurses, police and administrators are affected.

Unions are calling for an 8.6 percent salary rise, and a R1000 (\$137) housing allowance per month.

Pointing out that the proposed housing allowance increase was from R620 to R630, Sadtu General Secretary Mugwena Maluleke said, “A R10 improvement to the allowance is ridiculous and makes a mockery of the collective bargaining and cannot be taken seriously”.

The African National Congress (ANC) government claims that increases above the inflation rate would “cripple” the country’s economy. “Our interest is to see the strike being averted to avoid any collapse of public services. At this stage we would like to give the negotiation processes a chance”, said an ANC spokesman.



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