

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

20 August 2010

Germany: Air Berlin pilots threaten strike action over pay dispute

Air Berlin pilots are to take industrial action during the busy holiday month of August if the major airline fails to meet their demands in an ongoing dispute over wages and benefits, the pilots' union Cockpit said on August 16.

A recent vote for industrial action among the pilots was almost unanimous, with 99 percent voting in favour at Air Berlin and 97 percent at subsidiary LTU. In March Cockpit called off a planned strike.

According to *The Local*, "Pilot complaints include daily changes to schedules and the failure to provide a third pilot on long-haul flights—a practice that is standard for other airlines, according to Cockpit".

Air Berlin reported earlier this month that the number of passengers it transported in July rose to 3.7 million: an increase of 6.4 percent over the same period last year.

According to Reuters, "The company agreed to join the Oneworld alliance last month, whose members include American Airlines, Qantas, Cathay Pacific, Japan Airlines and Lan Chile. It is the first discount airline to join one of the three main global groupings.

"Frankfurt airport, German's busiest, has encouraged the airline to refocus its operations in Frankfurt, in order to provide better connections with its Oneworld partners. All of them operate services to Frankfurt, the country's main financial centre, but no direct flights to Air Berlin's current base in the German capital."

France: Port workers set to strike at oil terminals

The August 18 *Port World* reported that workers at the Fos and Lavera oil terminals at the port of Marseilles, France, are to hold a 24-hour strike. The strike is to begin on August 20 at 6 a.m. Loading, discharging and berthing/unberthing will all be severely affected during the industrial action.

The workers are members of the General Confederation of Labour trade union, which has called on port workers to strike over government plans to reform state-run ports. Staff took industrial action previously on August 2 and July 27.

Ireland: Thousands of demonstrators oppose hospital cuts

The latest in a series of demonstrations to oppose the downgrading of hospital services in the west of the island took place in Ballinasloe, County Galway, on August 16.

"The organisers of the protest said they believe services at Portiuncula Hospital are under 'serious threat' arising from growing budget overruns. More than 2,000 hospital staff, former patients and members of community groups formed a human chain around the hospital at lunchtime, reported RTÉ.

Portiuncula is a 197-bed hospital serving east Galway and south Roscommon. It is faced with an end-of-year budget overrun of between €5 million and €7 million. Action Committee Chairman Padraig Mulligan said it would be impossible to axe €7 million from a €50 million annual budget without seriously impacting services and patient care.

More than 8,000 demonstrated in Roscommon at the weekend over concern for the future of the hospital there.

Cobh Community Hospital in Cork said it is facing a shortfall of €235,000 a year, due to a cut in funding and the decision that its future funding will be via the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF), rather than the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

In a statement, the hospital board of management said that the NTPF was offering to pay €960 per bed per week, compared with €1,240 per bed, which was being paid by the HSE up to November last year.

Ireland: Electricians strike at hospital over outsourcing

The *Irish Times* reported Monday that electricians at a Dublin hospital were staging a one-day stoppage that day in a dispute over responsibility for fire alarms.

According to the paper, "members of the Technical Engineering and Electrical Union (TEEU) are in dispute with management at St James's Hospital in a dispute over outsourcing.

"Union leaders confirmed emergency cover will be provided during the industrial action, but warned the technical services department will be affected".

Previously the dispute resulted in two half-day stoppages at the hospital. No agreement was reached following talks at the Labour Relations Commission last week.

The TEEU said the dispute involved outsourcing and moves by management to reduce the role of electricians on site. It said outside contractors had been brought in without prior agreement and in breach of agreed procedures. The union said that the first step was the handing over of fire alarms to outside contractors.

UK: BBC's "EastEnders" crew strike in expenses dispute

Bectu trade union members, working on the broadcasting of BBC soap opera “EastEnders”, took strike action August 12 following a dispute over expenses.

A group of 27 staff on the programme, working predominantly as camera operatives or in the sound department, took industrial action following the BBC’s decision to remove their entitlements to travel time and expenses.

Their entitlements were withdrawn following the BBC’s decision to change their central base from Television Centre in west London to Elstree, where “EastEnders” is taped, meaning they no longer can claim for travel between the two sites.

As a result of the strike action, Bectu said the BBC had been forced to pay to hire casual staff to cover the union’s members on strike.

Three further days of strike action was scheduled for August 20, 26, and September 1. On Wednesday the union suspended these strikes to resume talks with studios and post production management. In a website posting, the union said, “For clarity this [the suspension of action] includes the proposed continuous strike action, action short of strike action and the discontinuous strike action”.

UK: Pharmaceuticals workers in Macclesfield strike over pensions

Dates for a strike over pensions by staff at AstraZeneca’s Macclesfield Pharmaceuticals plant will be announced by the end of the week. The BBC reported, “Workers voted in favour of strike action after being told that their pensionable salaries would be frozen forever if they stayed in the current scheme”.

The company’s defined benefit (DB) pension scheme has about 2,500 active members and has been closed to new recruits since 2000. Since then new joiners have been offered membership of a defined contribution (DC) pension scheme instead. The company said that despite putting in £645 million in extra contributions over the last 10 years, the DB scheme still had a deficit of £1.4 billion.

AstraZeneca is planning to give members of the DB scheme the choice between continuing to pay in, but with their pensionable salary frozen at current levels from now on, or of moving to the DC scheme.

The Macclesfield plant is the company’s second largest world-wide and produces the anti-cancer drug Zoladex, used in the treatment of prostate and breast cancer.

Egypt: Workers’ strikes and protests continue

Workers in several Egyptian governorates staged protests and strikes on August 8. According to *Al Masry Al Youm* action was “most notably in the Gharbiya Governorate, where workers from the Nile Cotton Company protested the company’s failure to pay out bonuses since 2005.

“Demonstrators tied themselves up and threatened to throw themselves in front of oncoming trains if they did not receive their rightful bonuses. They were prevented by security personnel, however, from marching to a nearby railroad crossing”.

The site also reported that in Sohag, “[M]ore than 250 nurses and laboratory technicians declared a strike, demanding payment of bonuses as had been promised earlier by the Health Ministry. In Cairo, 500 employees of the North Cairo Power Station also went on strike to demand better working conditions and salary increases”.

Workers employed at the Telephone Equipment Company in southern

Cairo also continued their strike action for the fifth consecutive day. The employees were protesting Manpower Minister Aisha Abdel Hadi’s refusal to pay each of them a promised LE50,000 retirement packages, in advance of the company’s liquidation.

In Fayoum, 100 villagers staged demonstrations against a three-month-long water shortage, which, they say, has caused their crops to wither and their cattle to die.

Al Masry Al Youm, reported on scores of people protesting in Cairo against a recent resolution by the Education Ministry requiring that primary school applications be personally submitted to the ministry’s Cairo headquarters. Many of the protesters live outside the capital and oppose having to travel all the way to Cairo to submit their children’s school applications.

South African auto workers strike continues

Auto workers began strike action at the end of last week in pursuit of a 15 percent pay rise, six months maternity leave and a housing allowance. Around 30,000 members of the National Union of South Africa (NUMSA) working for large car manufacturers such as General Motors, Ford and BMW participated in the action.

To date the manufacturers have not upped their 7 percent offer and have not agreed to a housing allowance. According to a *Business Day* article, unions and management met on August 13 and came to a tentative agreement. Further talks on August 17 failed. According to a *NewsTime* article, on August 18 the NUMSA may seek to widen the dispute to include its members working in workshops and car dealers who are pursuing their own claim.

A Toyota spokesman quoted in *Business Day* on the effects of the strike stated, “We are losing production at a rate of 520 vehicles per day. Roughly 50 percent of this is destined for the export market. This loss is affecting our income but more importantly our export contracts”.

Nigerian doctors’ strike has widespread impact

The nationwide strike by hospital doctors in Nigeria is having a widespread impact. The doctors began their strike on August 11. Initially resident doctors took strike action in their demand for the government to impose the nationally agreed Consolidated Medical Salary Structure (CONMESS). The resident doctors have now been joined by consultants.

The action of the doctors is impacting in all the states, with hospitals being shut down. State government representatives have been resorting to threats or appeals to the doctors to get them to return to work.

The Delta State government offered to pay 60 percent of the CONMESS agreement, but doctors rejected the offer and demanded the full 100 percent.

Quoted on the news website *Punchng*, a law lecturer at Lagos University, Dr Wahab Shittu called for support for the doctors’ action. He stated, “Every professional has the legal right to protest.... Instead of pillorying the doctors, Nigerians should focus on the Federal Government.... Look at the legislators and the bogus allowances they earn at the expense of the nation. The doctors should stand their ground and press successfully for the implementation of CONMESS”.



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