

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

27 August 2010

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

## French rail workers threaten September strike over pensions

On August 19 the UNSA-Cheminots union said in a statement that the four unions at the state rail company Societe Nationale des Chemins de Fer Français may ballot for industrial action in protest at President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension reforms.

The unions are to meet at the end of the week to consider strike action in September.

## UK: Workers at Astra Zeneca pharmaceuticals to strike over pensions

Workers at AstraZeneca's Macclesfield plant are to take strike action over pension entitlements.

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.

The strike dates are September 8 (three two-hour strikes), September 15 (three four-hour strikes) and a 24-hour strike on September 22-23. The Macclesfield plant is the company's second largest worldwide and produces the drug Zoladex, used in the treatment of prostate and breast cancer.

## UK: Ballot for strike action at Capita Life and Pensions

The Unite union began balloting its members at Capita Life and Pensions for strike action August 25 over the company's decision to impose changes to its pension scheme that will cost staff thousands of pounds in retirement income.

The strike ballot is to be conducted across five Capita sites—Reading, Craigforth, Quadrant Court, Manchester and the Glasgow Bothwell Street office.

Employees at Capita deliver work to major finance companies across the

country including Prudential, Co-operative Financial Services and the Phoenix Group.

According to the union's website, "Unite had been in discussion with Capita to avert the prospect of strike action with Capita over the summer, but ultimately the talks failed as Capita would not move on the issue".

Capita announced record half-year profits of £179 million in July, with dividends to shareholders increased by 18 percent.

## London Underground staff strike over job cuts

Thousands of workers on the London Underground are to begin the first in a series of 24-hour strikes September 6, the day many people return to work after the summer holidays and Parliament resumes, in a dispute over 800 job cuts. The cuts will undermine public safety.

The Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union and Transport Salaried Staffs Association (TSSA) say walkouts will be staged on a monthly basis. They estimate up to 10,000 members would take part in the industrial action.

Maintenance and engineering staff will walk out for 24 hours at 5 p.m. on September 6, October 3, November 2 and November 28. Other sections of workers, including Tube drivers, signallers and station staff, will strike for 24 hours from 9 p.m. on the same dates.

An indefinite overtime ban for Tube staff belonging to both unions will also start after midnight on September 6.

## London firefighters vote on industrial action

Thousands of firefighters at London Fire Brigade—the largest in the country—are to vote on industrial action over a contract dispute, including the introduction of new start and finish times on shifts.

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) said ballot papers on industrial action short of a strike will be sent out next week, after the brigade did not meet a deadline to withdraw the changes. Ballot papers will be returned by September 17 and any action is likely to begin September 24.

## UK: Vi-Spring factory workers vote on industrial action

Workers at the bed manufacturer Vi-Spring's Plymouth factory are being balloted for strike action in protest at the dismissal of a union shop steward.

The company provides bed mattresses for many major stores including Harrods, House of Fraser, Furniture Village and Princess Yachts.

#### **Cyprus airport staff strike threat over exposure to metal detectors**

Employees across several departments at Larnaca Airport threatened on August 18 to strike due to constant exposure to security detectors, which, they say, is a health hazard.

The *Cyprus Mail* reported that staff said the last straw came when they were told a couple of months ago that their food would also have to go through the same procedure.

“Air traffic controllers, meteorological service personnel, telecommunications technicians and others claim their daily exposure to the magnetic waves emitted by the portals are dangerous”, the paper reported.

Communications Ministry Permanent Secretary Makis Constantinides said there was no risk to the workers’ health from the metal detectors. Asked why the workers were not body searched instead, Constantinides said, “It is a sensitive matter, related to other issues”.

#### **Serbian pharmaceutical workers strike over withheld wages**

A strike by 70 workers at pharmaceutical company Srbolek AD, in Belgrade, had entered its third week. Workers at the privatised pharmaceutical producer and distributor have not been paid in six months, and social contributions, taxes, statutory severance packages, and pensions have been withheld.

Strikers have been subjected to physical intimidation by hired security goons employed by managing director, Jovica Stefanovic Nini.

A four-day strike in May resulted in retaliatory action being taken by the managing director against strike leaders. He unilaterally reduced the pay of union leaders by 60 percent.

On the first day of the current strike action, the company made a proposal through a state mediator that it would pay one month’s salary if workers halted the strike. The offer was declined.

#### **Serbia: Construction workers to strike over wages**

Construction workers are to conduct a one-hour warning strike September 8 to demand the payment of wages and social insurance deductions.

According to ANSAMED, “Construction workers are also demanding that the state strongly sanction black market work and revise privatisation deals, as well as that the building of apartments within the mass housing construction project start as soon as possible”.

Nezavisnost union leader Ranko Drljevic said he expected around 80,000 to participate in the strike. It was “difficult to organise a strike”, because people were working in the field, on construction sites and on rivers.

The union estimates that around 30 percent of construction workers are involved in the black market. The state of Serbia’s construction sector was the worst in the last 50 years, Drljevic added.

#### **Tyre workers strike in Iran**

Workers at Kian Tyre went on strike August 19, demanding payment of unpaid wages. The strike closed down the factory warehouses.

Earlier management had promised to pay July wages amounting to US\$300, said *Iran Labor Report*, a pledge that was broken.

The workers were also angered by the lack of inventory of new raw materials and the repair of broken equipment.

On August 21, they met with the management representatives at Chahardangeh provisional administrative offices. The meeting ended with management threatening to call security forces to force open the warehouses.

#### **Iran: Steel workers in solidarity strike**

Around 100 steel workers at the Hormozgan Steel Complex in Southern Iran staged a demonstration August 23 in protest at 300 workers not having received wages in the last three months.

The complex, located in the city of Bandar Abbas on the Persian Gulf, employs a thousand workers and has apparently been facing problems since contracting out work.

#### **Botswana academic staff poised to take strike action**

Academic and support staff at the University of Botswana have said they will strike in support of a wage demand. The workers are represented by three unions: University of Botswana Academic and Senior Support Staff (UBASSU), University of Botswana Non-Academic Staff Union (UBNASU) and the National Amalgamated Local and Central Government and Parastatal Manual Workers Union (NALCGPMWU).

The unions have been in dispute for the last 10 months, but were unable to reach agreement. The commissioner of labour for mediation has issued a certificate of “Failure to reach a settlement”, which gives the unions an option to strike.

The unions are seeking to close the huge wage disparities amongst the university staff by raising the wages of the lower paid. An academic speaking to the *Gazette* newspaper explained, “If you don’t pay educated people, they will simply leave or find alternative ways of making money and consequently the university will suffer”.

#### **Nigerian power workers launch strike action**

Workers belonging to the National Union of Electricity Employees (NUEE) and working for the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) began indefinite strike action August 25.

The dispute is over non-payment of arrears. Following previous discussions between the unions and management and the minister of state for power, PHCN had agreed to pay the arrears over a period of 30 days beginning July 25. However, PHCN failed to keep to the agreement.

## Ugandan university staff sit-down strike over missing pensions money

Academic and non-academic staff at Makerere University Kampala took sit-down strike action Sunday, August 22. The dispute is over the government's failure to secure pensions funds paid by the workers to the National Insurance Corporation (NIC). NIC operated the workers pension scheme for the 10 years up to 2005 when the contract ended.

NIC has so far failed to pay the money to around 2,000 staff. The university staff say NIC owes them Sh17.7 billion but the company has said it will only pay Sh13 billion. Speaking to the *New Vision* newspaper, Tanga Odoi, head of the University Staff Association, said, "What we need is the release of our money. But we see no headway and we cannot open the university to the students".

## South African public sector workers strike enters second week

The strike of the more than a million public sector workers has entered its second week. The workers, including health care staff and teachers, amongst other government workers, are striking for a wage increase of 8.6 percent and a housing allowance of 1,000 rand. They rejected the government offer of a 7 percent wage increase and a 700 rand housing allowance.

The government has responded by using the police armed with rubber bullets against the strikers, drafting army personnel into hospitals and serving an injunction demanding the strikers abandon their strike and return to work. The workers have ignored the injunction and continued their strike.

COSATU, the union federation, said on Tuesday, August 24, that it will seek to expand the strike action by calling on all the nearly 2 million members it represents to take supportive strike action next week once a seven-day strike notice has been filed. COSATU head, Zwelinzima Vavi told reporters, "This will mean a total shutdown of the public sector until government comes to its senses".

The unions are keen to reach an agreement. President Jacob Zuma is currently out of the country on a state visit to China. It is likely that intensive talks will take place between the government and unions over the weekend.



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