

# 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.

## German train drivers in fresh industrial action over pay and conditions

Thousands of train drivers at five major private rail operators carried out a 60-hour strike April 18 to improve wages and working conditions, and to demand that all rail workers be paid equally. The industrial action coincided with the start of the annual busy Easter holidays' rail traffic.

There are 26,000 train drivers in Germany, 6,000 of whom work for private companies. Drivers employed by private companies earn up to 30 percent less than their colleagues at the main rail operator, Deutsche Bahn. The GDL trade union is demanding a 5 percent wage increase and better redundancy protection guarantees.

Earlier this month, drivers from the five companies walked off the job for 48 hours over better pay. In total, drivers have been on strike for 119 hours since March.

Last week, Saxony-Anhalt carrier Veolia locked out its drivers. Other firms include Abellio, Arriva, Benex and Hessische Landesbahn. One operator, Keolis Deutschland, has had "constructive negotiations" with GDL and therefore is exempted from the strike, the union said. This showed that there was a "political will" to solve the dispute, claimed the GDL.

Deutsche Bahn's main line services, including its high-speed trains between main cities, were not affected by the recent strike. On April 15, Deutsche Bahn agreed to a 2 percent wage rise for its 20,000 drivers.

Germany's rail tracks mostly belong to Deutsche Bahn, which along with other companies operates a patchwork of trains across the country, often sharing tracks and ticketing systems. In some cases, commercial trains continued to run with non-union drivers at the controls.

In an effort to blackguard the strike, Dieter Hundt, president of the German Employers' Federation, told the newspaper *Bild*, "The GDL is a minority union that is abusing the right to strike to serve the interests of a tiny group, harming passengers and the economy."

Hundt had previously attacked the strike in the pages of the same paper and called for restrictions to be imposed on the right to strike, saying: "Non-craft unions should not be allowed to strike as long as there is a contract applicable to most union members in a company."

## UK teacher trainers threaten strike over training plan

Protests and industrial action by teacher trainers could follow the

announced plans by Education Secretary Michael Gove to move teacher training out of universities and into schools.

Universities such as Liverpool Hope, a major teacher training institution, have already reportedly responded to the government's plans by seeking job cuts. Plans for schools that specialise in training teachers have been outlined in the recent education bill as a possible replacement for university training.

Teachers already spend a large segment of their training course (typically consisting of three placements of up to five weeks each) in classrooms to gain practical experience. Some education theory and (more predominantly) current legislation are taught in universities.

A motion to be debated at the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) conference is set to formally condemn the government plans, and the issue is to feature at conferences held by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the National Association of Schoolmasters/ Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT).

Many union leaders were not opposed to the plans in principle and only pointed to the fact that they may not be financially viable in the current economic climate.

## Nottingham council workers in England ballot for action

Around 2,000 staff employed by Nottingham City Council voted by six to one in an indicative ballot last week, in favour of some form of action over pay cuts and pay freezes. These are being imposed by the council as a result of cuts in grants by the coalition government.

Two pay freezes are already in place for these council workers as well as the imposition of a car parking levy and a proposed 3 percent rise in pension contributions. Overall, staff are threatened with a 12 percent fall in earnings.

## Heathrow cargo workers in contract dispute

Staff employed at Swissport Cargo Services in Heathrow—the world's largest cargo handling company—are to begin balloting for strike action this week, in a dispute over the use of agency workers and the imposition of new employment contracts for new starters.

The Unite union gave Swissport Cargo management notice of intent to ballot for strike action on April 8. Unite's regional officer, Kevin Hall, complained that the union had offered the company "a dispute free way to resolve the issues. Amazingly, Swissport turned it down. This might be down to the new management's inexperience but it makes our members very suspicious.

“Over a dozen airlines now face the real possibility of heavy disruption to their cargo operations because Swissport management is refusing to genuinely try to resolve this dispute.”

Clients of Swissport Cargo include Qantas, South African Airlines, Korean Air, Singapore Airlines, JAL, Swiss Airlines, Martinair, Finnair, TAM Airlines, Turkish Airlines, Kenya Airways, and Saudi Arabian Airlines

The ballot result will be announced May 4, and a strike could take place seven days later.

### **Electricity workers in Greece to strike over privatisation plan**

Electricity workers could be involved in rolling strikes in May to protest plans to sell off a key stake in the state-run Public Power Corporation (PPC) as part of a major privatisation drive.

The General Federation of PPC Personnel said in a statement posted on its web site April 20 that it is considering successive 48-hour strikes “aimed at changing the wrong decision taken by the government.”

The union did not say when it would announce any decision. The Greek government plans to reduce its stake in PPC from 51 to 34 percent, under a €50 billion (US\$71.5 billion) 2011-2015 privatisation programme.

### **Polish miners’ strike against privatisation**

Up to 22,000 miners of the JSW Coal Company in Jastrzebie, Poland, carried out a one-day strike April 18 in reaction to privatisation plans.

The strikers are pressing the company authorities to respond to questions and fears voiced by union members who claim the crew will suffer a number of setbacks once the coal company is floated on the stock market. Workers are also demanding a 10 percent pay rise.

Economic commentators estimated that JSW incurred losses of up to 30 million zloty (€7.5 million) for each idle day of coal extraction.

### **Auto workers in Cairo protest**

On April 14, tens of workers at the Al-Nasr Automotive company in Cairo held a protest to demand the government make good on its promise to pay the remainder of their early retirement incentives. Workers say that officials at the Ministry of Investment and the holding company for Engineering Industries are refusing to pay them.

More than 3,100 workers at the company were forced to accept early retirement schemes between 2005 and 2010. The company stopped production altogether three years ago. Workers say that they received just two thirds of their entitlement but that the company’s land was sold for considerable profit, so there was enough cash to cover their payments.

### **Egyptian university professors rally in front of Armed Forces HQ**

Hundreds of university professors rallied in front of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) headquarters in Cairo April 16,

calling for a reshuffle of university boards of directors and deans.

According to eyewitnesses, some professors called for the dismissal of the minister of higher education, Amr Ezzat Salama, accusing him of being part of the regime of the toppled president Hosni Mubarak.

Observers say that during Mubarak’s reign, university presidents and deans were appointed according to State Security Investigative Services reports and recommendations, which were based on loyalty to the former regime, not experience.

### **Ugandan beauty product workers strike**

Workers employed by beauty product manufacturer Movit Products went on strike last Friday in protest at low pay and rapidly rising commodity prices. The workers are paid Sh3000 (US\$1.25) for a 12-hour day. They were also protesting about ill treatment by management and poor food.

According to the *Kampala Monitor* newspaper, the strikers were met with aggressive police action using tear gas and live bullets when they surrounded the Movit premises in the Zana township area of Kampala.

### **Botswana public sector workers’ strike**

Around 90,000 public sector workers began a 10-day strike on Monday. Workers involved include education, health and border post workers. The workers are represented by the Botswana Federation of Public Sector Unions.

They are seeking a 16 percent wage increase; the government is offering 5 percent. Public sector workers have had a three-year wage freeze, and inflation is currently running at nearly 9 percent.

### **Zambian construction workers strike**

Around 50 construction workers, working on the stadium in Ndola, went on strike Monday demanding a pay increase and improved safety and conditions of service. The workers are employed by the Anhui Foreign Economic Construction Company.

The multipurpose stadium, which will hold over 40,000, is due to be completed by August.



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