

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.

Southampton social workers continue strikes as unions deepen collaboration

Social workers in Southampton, England continued their ongoing strike this week. On Wednesday hundreds of staff struck for 24 hours. Some 50 fostering and adoption workers are to stay on strike for another week. At a mass meeting, more than 300 social care workers voted to strike on August 10.

The Conservative council has spearheaded the drive to impose the Conservative /Liberal-Democrat government's £83 billion austerity programme, which will lead to an estimated 28 percent cut in council spending over the next four years. Southampton Council became the first to carry out its threat to "fire and rehire" workers on lower pay rates. It set a deadline of July 11 for new contracts to be signed, with those earning over £17,500 having their pay cut by 5.4 percent. There will be a freeze on previously agreed wage increases and cuts to other terms and conditions. In addition, 250 council jobs will be lost—a prelude, a leaked council report indicates, to a quarter of all workers losing their jobs over the next three years.

The council has managed to force through these cuts with the collaboration of the public sector trade unions, who claimed to have an "anti-cuts strategy". The reality is that the unions continue to work with the council to prevent any action.

On Wednesday Jeremy Moulton, the deputy council leader, said, "The council has negotiated with the unions for a number of exemptions to the industrial action to ensure people remain safe. Along with the contingencies in place, the council will be able to operate a safeguarding service in the city."

South Yorkshire: Johnston Press journalists continue strike

Journalists at the Johnston Press newspapers group in South Yorkshire, England have been striking for three weeks. They are members of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), writing for the *Doncaster Free Press*, *South Yorkshire Times*, *Epworth Bells*, *Selby Times* and *Goole Courier*.

The strike began July 15 following a ballot in which 90 percent voted in favour. Eighteen jobs are set to be lost, according to the NUJ. Journalists have registered a vote of no confidence in the editor-in-chief of the *South*

Yorkshire Times, Graeme Huston.

The BBC reported that the union has called on the company to enter mediation talks with the arbitration body Acas, but had yet to receive a response.

BBC journalists strike for second day

On August 1 BBC journalists struck for the second time in three weeks to protest plans by management to shed 387 jobs at the World Service and BBC Monitoring. More than 100 compulsory redundancies are threatened at the World Service alone.

The BBC, a public broadcasting service, announced that it is imposing the cuts as a result of cuts to the grant funding the World Service and BBC Monitoring, part of the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government's comprehensive spending review last October.

Among the programmes taken off air due to the strike were the BBC's flagship evening news and current affairs programme, "Newsnight", and "The World at One". Radio 4's "Today" programme was able to broadcast, but was an hour shorter than usual. BBC Radio 5 Live played out pre-recorded programmes instead of its "Up All Night" show.

Of the BBC's leading journalists, Nicky Campbell, refused to support the strike.

At the Bush House headquarters of BBC World Service, staff picketed and held up a banner reading, "BBC kills World Service". Africa editor Martin Plaut said, "I'm furious to be on strike today. I'm really not happy at all. In all my time at the BBC—I joined in 1984—I've never seen the BBC in this state."

The union is not opposed to redundancies as long as they are consulted. NUJ General Secretary Michelle Stanistreet said at the beginning of the dispute, "There are so many people who want to leave the BBC that this could be resolved through negotiations."

Further talks between the unions and BBC management are scheduled for August 11.

Steelworkers strike in Barnsley, England over pay freeze

Fifty workers at the BRC Barnsley steel rod and wire factory in South Yorkshire, England began several days of strike action on July 28. The workers are members of the Community steelworkers union and are in dispute over the refusal of the firm to increase pay for a second year running. The action is to be followed by a work to rule and overtime ban.

Community's regional officer, Phil Sullivan, said, "We have done everything to avoid this dispute but management refuse to budge."

BRC Barnsley is owned by a Spanish multinational, which took control two years ago.

Finland: Steelworkers strike to protest non-payment of wages to Polish contractors

Workers at the Rautaruuki steel plant in Raase, Finland struck on Thursday. According to reports the strike was held to protest the non-payment of wages to Polish maintenance staff.

The latest stoppage started at 6 a.m. to protest the abuse of Polish labour involved in repair work. *Finland News* reported, "According to a shop steward at Rautaruuki, the company suspected of using cheap labour, Beroa, has still not given assurances that the Polish workers have been paid."

It added, "The Finnish Construction Trade Union is also considering a boycott of Beroa. Deputy Shop Steward Timo Mäkinen says the company has not given assurances that 60 percent of the Polish workers' salaries would be paid by Thursday morning."

The company has denied the reports and said that the salaries will be paid on August 10.

Slovenian crane operators strike

Crane operators at the majority state-owned port of Luka Koper in Slovenia, one of the Adriatic Sea's largest, have been striking over the past week. On August 3 the strike entered its fifth day. Workers are demanding improved working conditions and an adherence to health and safety standards. The strike began after talks between the union and management failed to reach agreement.

The 23 workers are members of the Sindikat Zerjavistov Pomorskih Dejavnosti trade union (SZPD). One report claimed that "some contract workers—who are staging wildcat action alongside SZPD members—are being paid as little as 12€ for an 11-hour shift and being expected to stay on the job for several shifts at a time."

On Wednesday, the company said that procedures had begun to dismiss the organisers of the strike and to take legal action.

Management are being assisted in breaking the strike by the KS 90 port workers trade union. The union is organising a scabbing operation, including, according to Balkans.com Business News, the collection of signatures against the strike.

The *Slovakian Times* reported that "management estimates the loss to have reached EUR 950,000".

Sacked workers protest to demand reinstatement in Bahrain

Seventy Bahraini workers, sacked during the anti-government protests earlier this year, held a protest inside the Labour Ministry in Isa Town this week.

The workers, who were public and private sectors employees, held up banners and shouted slogans demanding their unconditional reinstatement without delay. Some of them brought their children to the demonstration. The protest lasted around an hour. Labour Minister Jameel Humaidan met with representatives of the workers.

Ministry Under-Secretary Sabah Al Dossary, who attended the meeting, said Humaidan told the workers that "the reinstatement process would be difficult for workers with criminal records." She added, "We have so far not found any company that illegally dismissed its staff, especially during the critical unrest period. Private companies were affected during this unfortunate period and laid off some staff."

The government announced last month that private sector workers sacked following the protests in February and March would be reinstated.

Public sector doctors employed by Palestinian Authority to resume protests

Doctors employed by the Palestinian Authority said this week they would begin strike action Sunday in pursuit of higher salaries and better working conditions. The union of public sector doctors in the West Bank said this week, "Responding to President [Mahmoud] Abbas' request, a strike was suspended on June 19 to start negotiations with the government".

According to the union, the minister of labour had previously agreed that a final settlement would be signed Wednesday. When trade union representatives arrived to sign the agreement, government representatives refused to approve some of the clauses relating to an increase in their salaries.

The doctors said that outpatient clinics will stop operating and that scheduled surgeries and caesareans will be referred to private hospitals at the expense of the Ministry of Health. Emergencies, cancer cases, and dialysis, thalassemia, psychiatric and haemophilia patients will be treated during the action.

According to the *Ma'an* news agency, workers in the health ministry buildings in Ramallah and Nablus will strike August 10, and a "sit-in will urge the health minister's dismissal."

Israeli National News noted that the dispute of the Palestinian doctors is "very similar, if not exactly the same, as the reasons for the strike by the Israeli doctors". Protests and strikes by doctors in Israel have been continuing for over three months.

Unions seek to stifle South African strike wave

The strike by around 250,000 striking gold miners, which began last Thursday, was brought to an end after talks with the National Union of Mineworkers brokered by the Chamber of Mines on Tuesday.

The miners' original demand was for 14 percent. Under the agreement, miners at AngloGold Ashanti and Gold Fields would get an 8 percent increase over the next two years. Miners at Harmony and Rand Uranium will get 7.5 percent over the same period.

The agreement is only marginally better than the original offer that led to strike action. Chamber of Mines Deputy Secretary General Gideon du Plessis acknowledged, "One of the major problems within the mining industry is the ongoing migration of employees from the industry to better paid positions."

A strike by around 150,000 coal miners has also ended after one week. The original demand of the National Union of Mineworkers was for a 14 percent pay increase, while Solidarity asked for 12 percent, against the employers' 7 to 8.5 percent offer. The settlement gives miners, artisans and officials an 8 percent rise, operators 9 percent and around 10.5 percent for entry-level workers. Among the companies involved were Anglo

American Thermal Coal and Kangra Coal.

Frans Barker, negotiator for the coal companies, expressed his pleasure at the outcome, which he described as a win-win situation. He explained, "The coal industry has always regarded the positive relationship that exists in the coal mining industry as a crucial element for the international competitiveness of this industry.... I would like to commend ... the leadership of the NUM, Solidarity and [the United Association of South Africa] for their role in finding compromises to end the strike."

Around 26,000 platinum miners employed by Impala Platinum are seeking pay increases of 14 percent against the employer's offer of around 8 percent. Negotiations are taking place this week with an impending strike a possibility.

Talks are taking place this week between the NUM and the state-owned power company Eskom over a pay increase.

Around 200,000 workers represented by the South African Municipal Workers Union, responsible for sanitation, refuse removal and water supply, may come out on strike this week if pay negotiations break down.

Around 6,000 cleaners represented by the Hotel, Liquor, Catering Commercial and Allied Workers Union of South Africa and the Professional Transport and Allied Workers of South Africa are on strike in pursuit of a pay increase. They are seeking a minimum wage of R4200 (\$625), with those currently earning above R4200 getting a 10 percent pay increase.

Bus drivers working for the City of Johannesburg Piotrans rapid transit system held a wildcat strike Monday over proposed changes in their shift patterns. The drivers' union, the South African Municipal Workers Union, was taken by surprise by the strike action. The union is currently in negotiations over the proposed shift pattern changes.

Nigerian Edo state government workers strike

Workers represented by the Parliamentary Staff Association at the Edo State House of Assembly began an indefinite strike Monday. Around 100 picketed the building, preventing entry of the speaker of the house.

Their grievances are the result of the failure of the Edo state government to apply the nationally agreed minimum wage brought into law earlier this year and the failure to promote staff over the last two years.

As part of the presidential re-election campaign of Goodluck Jonathan earlier this year, he promised to bring in a national minimum wage of N18,000 (\$120).

Zimbabwe airline pilots strike

Airline pilots working for Air Zimbabwe have gone on indefinite strike over non-payment of outstanding salaries. The pilots have frequently taken action over the last few months in defence of their wages and conditions.

Air Zimbabwe employs around 40 pilots who are the lowest paid in the southern Africa region.



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