

# 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.

## Engineers servicing Apache helicopters to strike

Engineers at Wattisham airbase in Suffolk, who service Apache helicopters involved in the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, are set to take industrial action in a pay differential dispute.

Over 100 workers at the base employed by Morson Wynnwith voted overwhelmingly in favour of a strike, as they receive about £3,000 less a year than their counterparts at the firm's Middle Wallop site in Hampshire.

According to the Unite union web site, industrial action could take place within the next four weeks.

## Train drivers strike over pay in northern England

Around 300 train drivers at TransPennine Express took industrial action August 24 after negotiations failed to resolve a pay dispute.

Train drivers carried out limited pickets at stations under the aegis of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) union. The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union took the decision the previous day to avert industrial action, which meant that up to 350 rail conductors and station staff were not out on strike alongside drivers.

The RMT said it was considering a "significantly improved" 5 percent pay offer from management. This latest offer consists of a 3.5 percent pay rise backdated to April, and a further 1.5 percent from September. It also includes increases in April 2012 and April 2013, equal to the Retail Prices Index in February of each year.

The previous offer tabled by the train operator for conductors and station staff was a 2.2 percent pay offer, a substantial pay cut given the rate of inflation.

Nine out of 10 ASLEF members voted to back stoppages scheduled for August 24 and August 26.

TransPennine Express operated a reduced train timetable through much of northern England. The franchise is a partnership of rail operator First and transport group Keolis, and runs routes linking Liverpool and Manchester with Leeds, York and Sheffield, as well as

connecting lines to the Lake District and Scotland.

## State ends strike at Albanian mine

According to Reuters, the Austrian mining company DCM DECOMetal said it had retaken control of the Bulqiza mine in northern Albania August 22, "after it met miners' demands for a pay rise and police ended a miners' hunger strike."

According to the report, however, "The company might have some difficulty in persuading miners to come back to work." Reuters added, "The hunger strike by a series of miners 1,400 metres below ground went on for 26 days before police forced them out at the weekend. They had downed tools since July 4, asking also for a clear commitment about the mine's future."

Around 700 miners were involved in the strike. On August 15, 10 Bulqiza miners who had been on hunger strike for 23 days were replaced by 10 others. The following day, work stoppages began at the Puka and Rrezhen mines.

The miners' average net salary is €360 a month, and they receive €120 compensation for food. Along with a demand for a 20 percent increase in pay, workers also called for pay for the workdays lost during the strike and improved working conditions such as adequate canteens and showers.

Manager of Albanian Chrome (ACR), the local arm of DCM DECOMetal, promised the miners a 20 percent gross wage rise and assured them it would grant other benefits. But miners remain suspicious of the management contract and have demanded that it be signed by a union leader.

DCM DECOMetal, Albania's largest employer, has been able to keep its ferrochrome smelter in Elbasan working by buying chrome from third parties, respecting contracts in Europe, the United States and China. It produces 3,000 tonnes of ferrochrome a month.

## Protests outside luxury hotels in Athens over early retirement

During a 24-hour strike by hotel staff opposing plans to cut their entitlement to early retirement, dozens of protesters picketed the entrance to three luxury hotels on Athens' main Syntagma Square August 23.

The protesters said they were not preventing customers or employees from entering the buildings, but were handing out

information leaflets and shouting slogans through loudspeakers.

### **Tel Aviv taxi drivers protest**

Around 200 taxi drivers gathered August 24 on Rothschild Boulevard, the hub of Tel Aviv's tent city, to protest high gas prices and work conditions.

The protests caused "mass traffic jams in the city centre and the main artery has been closed off to private vehicle traffic," according to *Haaretz*.

Taxi drivers are protesting high fuel taxes, which were not reduced despite the reduction in gasoline prices. The drivers are also calling for better protection after 12 had been attacked in the past month.

*Haaretz* quoted Yehuda Bar-Or, chairman of the taxi drivers' union, as saying, "There was a time when gas was 15 percent of our expenses, now it is 40 percent.... I know that it is going to be an inconvenience for the people of Tel Aviv, and we don't mean to harm them. We live on the road and therefore we are protesting on the road. We hope that passengers understand that this protest is for them, so that we don't have to raise prices and hurt them."

### **Namibian diamond miners strike**

Miners working at the Bogenfeir diamond mine went on strike last week. Around 50 miners, members of the Mineworkers of Namibia, were due to be redeployed to other mines following the exhaustion of the Bogenfeir site. The miners were due to be resettled by the company, but during this period would lose their entitlement to housing allowances normally paid to them.

The company responded by threatening a lockout and demanding the miners sign a transfer agreement within five days or face retrenchment. The miners are demanding the removal of the general manager.

### **Sudan hospital workers strike**

Around 30 hospital workers in Yirol in the Lakes States of South Sudan went on strike last Friday after the hospital reduced their salaries to half pay. Subsequently, the state's health minister said more money would be sent to the hospital to make up the shortfall. Workers expressed no confidence in the minister.

### **Ugandan lecturers strike**

Lecturers at Makerere University began a strike Tuesday over irregularities in their allowances. A university ruling in 2005 decided all university staff should receive a regular allowance on top of their

salary. However, in practice, the bulk of the allowance goes to top management. The university Academic Staff Association are calling for all staff to be given the allowance, including manual workers.

### **Nigerian hospital staff strike**

Nurses and technicians working at the National Orthopaedic hospital in Lagos went on strike Tuesday. They are demanding payment of salary arrears and promotion pay accrued since 2009. They join medical staff who have been on strike since August 15 over salary arrears accrued since November of last year.

### **South African NUM to declare strike**

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) is set to declare a dispute with the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration this week. The NUM members work for Roshcon, part of Eskom, the state power utility company. The NUM is seeking a 9 percent pay increase and 60 percent medical cost contribution from the employer.

### **South African municipal workers strike**

A strike by 150,000 municipal workers has entered its second week. The workers represented by the SA Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) are seeking an 18 percent pay rise. The body representing the municipalities, the SA Local Government Association (SALGA), is offering around 6 percent.

The strike was joined this week by around 70,000 members of the Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union (IMATU). They are putting forward the same demands.

SALGA and the unions met in Pietermaritzburg on Tuesday for a first round of talks, followed by a second round on Wednesday. The unions held a march Wednesday of thousands of strikers in the eThekweni municipality, which includes the city of Durban.



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