

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

2 September 2011

Strike over monthly wage payment looms at Eurotunnel

According to *Bloomberg*, employees of Group Eurotunnel SA, the operator of the undersea rail tunnel linking Britain and France, may strike after pay talks broke down last week.

The company has rejected the workers' demand for an additional monthly wage payment per year of €3,000 (\$4,350) per employee.

Eurostar Group Ltd., a separate company whose high-speed passenger trains use the tunnel to link London with Paris and Brussels, said that its services wouldn't be affected by a Eurotunnel strike.

Dublin firefighters to vote on strike over €9 million in cuts

Around 1,400 fire and ambulance staff around Ireland are threatening industrial action, after demands by Dublin City Council for around €9 million in cuts to the city's fire brigade.

If the action goes ahead, it would be the first strike by public sector workers since the Croke Park agreement was signed in March 2010.

A ballot by the executive board of the Irish Fire & Emergency Services Association (IFESA) will be put to members today, September 2. Full and part-time firefighters will be asked to vote on action up to and including a nationwide general strike.

IFESA Chairman John Kidd said that the lives of firefighters were being put at risk because of reductions in services—specifically the number of units that can respond to a fire.

The recently announced additional cuts of €9 million include attempts to eliminate three days compensatory leave granted to firefighters annually as they often have to work past their scheduled shift time.

Swiss-based Portuguese diplomats on strike

Portuguese diplomats based in Switzerland are on strike against austerity measures and the increase in the value of the franc. Their salary has been lowered by 30 percent in a few months.

According to Swiss daily *La Tribune de Geneve*, the monthly salaries of the 56 Portuguese diplomats in the country have fallen from 4,500 to 3,000 francs (\$5,500 to \$3,700) after their government's recent decision to lower all public salaries by 10 percent and the rise of the franc against the euro.

"The Swiss franc, considered a safe haven currency, has been rising throughout the year as investors fled economic turmoil abroad. At its peak earlier in August it was up around 20 percent against the euro compared to

2009", reported AFP this week.

Workers at steel mesh manufacturer in Barnsley, England continue dispute

Workers employed at BRC Manufacturing in Barnsley in South Yorkshire, England took selective strike action on Tuesday and Wednesday. The staff are demanding better pay and benefits. They are members of the Community trade union.

The union said the latest action would involve around 60 of its members and would "take the form of an ongoing ban on overtime and a work to rule which has been in place since the 28th of July", and "a selective withdrawal of labour, i.e., strike, in certain targeted machine areas of the company".

Community said it had "made attempts to enter into meaningful negotiations with the local management to no avail", and had "done everything we can to avoid this situation".

The latest action is on a reduced level to that of around a month ago when employees at the plant held a four-day strike in late July/August.

BRC Manufacturing was established in 1975 and manufactures steel mesh for the construction, mining, civil engineering and industrial markets.

Council workers in Shropshire, England to be balloted for strike to oppose mass sackings

Shropshire Council workers in England are to be balloted for strike action in a dispute after being threatened with worse conditions under threat of being sacked. The ballot is being organised by the Unison public sector trade union, who represent around 40 percent of staff at the Conservative Party-led council.

Shropshire Council plans to dismiss its 6,500 staff on September 30 and re-employ them the following day on contracts that include a 5.4 percent pay cut. Other attacks on the workforce include worse hours of employment, the ending of overtime and standby payments and the removal of sick pay for the first three days of any illness.

The cuts are being imposed as part of the council's strategy to cut costs by £76 million.

The branch secretary for Unison, Alan James, said the union was holding a ballot of its members with "enormous regret" and added, "This is not what we want but feel that it is the last resort available to us".

Unison is holding yet another ballot, despite workers voting in an "indicative ballot" in July by a margin of 75 percent in favour of strike

action.

The union is not opposed to the plans by the council. Its collaboration with management at Southampton city council resulted in the latter being able to impose similar drastic attacks on its local authority workforce. This included Unison exempting some of its members from industrial action, in agreement with the council.

Jackie Kelly, corporate head of organisational development at Shropshire Council, said the council would continue to negotiate with Unison over their “alternative proposals, and are planning a similar meeting with GMB next week”.

“We will of course listen to any further points Unison may have which will help us work to an agreement”, she added.

Egyptian university professors to strike

“University professors threatened to start an open strike next month if the ruling military council failed to approve a draft law to discharge all university leaderships”, reported *Daily News Egypt*.

The academics are protesting against Prime Minister Essam Sharaf for “breaking his promise on the decision to sack the university presidents appointed under toppled president Hosni Mubarak before August and reportedly promising university presidents, in a meeting August 23, not to force them to resign”.

Daily News Egypt quoted Hany Al-Hosseiny, member of the March 9 Movement for the independence of universities, as saying, “We are not prepared to work with these corrupt leaderships and if they continue in their posts there will be no academic year”.

The strike would start September 17, the first day of the academic year.

The president of Cairo University, Hossam Kamel, and presidents of Helwan, Fayoum and Al-Wadi Al-Gadeed universities resigned last week before the end of their term.

Six other university presidents refused to resign, while the remaining eight stepped down because their legal term had ended, giving way to elections.

Adel Abdel Gawad, founder of Professors for Reform, a movement affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, said, “After the revolution we received promises that our demands will be met in the summer and so we exerted a lot of effort to calm down students and professors. ... The current situation is frustrating and we were blamed by our colleagues that we gave up, but now it won’t be a one-day strike; we will hold a lot of events until our demands are met”.

Professors from across Egypt are set to hold an emergency meeting at Cairo University September 11 to discuss the current situation.

Construction workers protest unpaid wages in Iraq

Ukrainian and Bulgarian construction workers camped out August 25 on a construction site of half-built luxury villas in Baghdad’s elite “Green Zone”—a vast, heavily-fortified enclave housing government offices, embassies and international NGOs.

The workers are demanding their wages before being shipped back home.

Inter-Press Service (IPS) reported, “Over 200 foreign labourers began work on the prestigious Arab League Summit housing site at the beginning of the year, but construction was halted in April due to turmoil

throughout the Middle East”.

The 35 workers who stayed on are desperate to receive their unpaid wages. They are housed in a rudimentary hall where they live and sleep, have no legal working papers and little food and water.

The Salar Group, a Turkish company contracted to build the high-profile project, tore down the handmade protest signs placed on the construction site fence reading, “Please help we are in trouble”, and “SOS Ukrainian Workers”.

Workers accuse Salar’s Kurdish subcontractor, Noble House, of luring them to Baghdad with promises of salaries of \$2,500 a month. The workers were unemployed with families in an economically depressed Ukraine.

Once in Iraq, Salar representatives had 15-day visas issued, and were compelled to sign contracts for a lower wage than initially promised. They were forced to work 12 to 16 hours a day for months, but the promised payment never materialised.

A Salar manager claimed that Noble House “illegally absconded” with an advance payment of over a million dollars, and denies Salar is accountable for their subcontractor’s actions. Most of the initial workers have returned home without being paid.

In June, 41 Sri Lankan construction workers threatened mass suicide in southern Iraq after working unpaid for over two years.

Palestinian quarry workers strike at Israeli company

Forty Palestinian workers employed by Israeli company Salit Mishor Adumim have gone on strike to demand a collective bargaining agreement.

All the quarry workers hold either Jerusalem residency cards or West Bank-only IDs. They extract gravel and dirt and make asphalt at the site. The strike aims to ensure that workers are guaranteed retirement pensions, monthly pay slips, fair wages and safe working conditions.

Located in the Mishor Adumim industrial zone, within the jurisdiction of the Israeli settlement of Ma’ale Adumim, just east of Jerusalem, the quarry is situated in Area C of the occupied West Bank, which is under full Israeli civil and military control.

According to IPS, the Palestinian Statistics Bureau, “over 14 percent of Palestinians from the West Bank worked in settlements in 2010. That same year, the average wage for Palestinians working in Israeli settlements was double that of those not working in settlements”.

No Israeli company has ever signed a collective bargaining agreement with Palestinian workers.

Kenyan teachers protest

Members of the Kenya National Union of Teachers marched on

parliament on Tuesday, after government proposals to re-direct funds meant to hire 18,000 contracted teachers to the Ministry of Defence budget.

The union said it would call a nationwide strike if the plan to divert the money goes ahead. Kenya has a nationwide shortage of teachers.

Nigerian state workers threaten industrial action

Niger state workers in Nigeria have threatened to strike if the state government does not implement the agreed national minimum wage. A state government team failed to meet with Nigeria Labour Congress members on Monday to discuss how the minimum wage would be brought in.

Nigerian federal civil servants accuse Labour Congress of a sellout

Federal civil servants employed by the Nigerian central government say that the Nigeria Labour Congress has lost the confidence of workers and accused them of having sold them out over wage negotiations to increase salaries on a pro-rata basis following the introduction of the N18,000 (\$115) minimum wage that has now been signed into law.

Federal civil servants have been awarded a N900 (\$6) per month increase. One worker told the News Agency of Nigeria, "I am not happy. We thought that the minimum wage will enhance our salary but there is not much change".

Another civil servant explained how in expectation of the minimum wage prices have risen: "I feel sad. The new minimum wage signed by the organised labour did not enhance my take-home pay. The prices of food, goods and services have increased because of the announcement of the new wage".

South African nickel miners' strike

Two thousand members of the National Union of Mineworkers working for Rainbow Minerals at their Nkomati mine outside Machadodorp, South Africa struck Monday.

The workers were demanding an end to pay differentials affecting black workers performing the same role as white workers but being paid less. They are also seeking a seven percent shift increase against the company's four percent offer.

Rapid bus strike enters fourth week in Johannesburg, South Africa

Drivers working for the Bus Rapid Transport, which carries around 35,000 passengers a day, have been on strike for four weeks.

The buses normally serve Soweto and provide school transport for children, as well as taking tourists to the Soweto Township. The buses are operated by the Piotrans Company.

The dispute is over the drivers' demands for a pay increase and a proper shift system. The workers are represented by the South African Municipal

Workers Union.

South African municipal workers' strike wound up

After more than two weeks on strike, 200,000 workers represented by the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) have returned to work following talks at a special NEC of the union representing all nine provinces at the weekend.

The workers pursued a vigorous campaign to press their demand for an 18 percent wage increase. In the course of the dispute, SAMWU reduced the wage demand to 10 percent but at the talks, the employers' body, the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) refused to budge from its six percent offer. The union announced a return to work on Monday saying it will continue to negotiate with SALGA.

South African water workers set to strike

Workers at water utilities across South Africa are set to strike following failure of talks. The workers represented by SAMWU are seeking a 15 percent wage increase or R1,700 (\$240), across the board, whichever is the greater.

The employers' body, the South African Association of Water Utilities (SAAWTU), is offering a 4.6 percent increase. The union has been granted a non-resolution certificate enabling the strike to go ahead.



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