

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

7 October 2011

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

French refinery workers extend strike to protect jobs

Workers at LyondellBasell's Berre l'Etang refinery voted Monday to extend a six-day strike by another 24 hours, after the chemical group announced last week it planned to close the plant.

LyondellBasell said the closure, affecting around 370 jobs, was decided after the search for a buyer it announced in May proved unsuccessful.

Refinery workers staged a series of strikes last year across the sector.

UK: Thomas Cook cabin crew to hold ballot on strike over redundancy terms

Cabin crew employed by Thomas Cook are to hold a consultative ballot on industrial action over the travel corporation's redundancy plans affecting 500 jobs.

The cabin crew fly from Belfast, Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, East Midlands Gatwick, Glasgow, Manchester, Newcastle, and Stansted.

The Unite Union had requested a minimum of three weeks wages per year, plus a lump sum payment of £5,000. The average cabin crew pay is £15,000-a-year. Management had refused to enhance its current policy of two weeks per year redundancy pay.

Thomas Cook has made £320 million this year and is a major sponsor of the Olympics. It flies long and short haul flights to worldwide holiday destinations, such as the Caribbean and the United States. The company wants to reduce the size of its fleet and eradicate the rank of assistant cabin manager.

UK Teachers in strike ballot over workloads, pay, jobs, pensions

The National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) has announced a timetable for a strike ballot over the Government's public sector pension reforms.

Teachers are in dispute over workloads, pay and jobs as well as pensions.

The NASUWT said it would give employers notice of the ballot by October 20. Voting will take place November 4 to November 17.

This will allow time to call a strike on the TUC's proposed day of action

on November 30.

Thousands of teachers in Wales are to stage a 24-hours strike, after they voted by 9-1 in favour of industrial action. The union balloting the Welsh teachers, Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC), has not staged a single strike since the mid-1980s when there was a dispute over pay.

The NASUWT published a survey of more than 13,000 teachers which it said showed that excessive workloads were preventing them from focusing on teaching and learning, leaving them "paralyzed" by red tape. The union said its dispute will be over workloads, pay and jobs as well as pensions.

A recent survey found that half of teachers are seriously considering quitting the profession and 84 percent of teachers feel "professionally disempowered" and unable to do the best for the children and young people they teach.

Construction workers protest at UK power station

Hundreds of construction workers are to demonstrate at Ratcliffe power station in Nottingham October 7 after facing up to a 30 percent pay cut.

Ratcliffe power station has been targeted as one of its contractors, Spie Matthew Hall, is one of a group of companies which are imposing semi-skilled grades into the mechanical and electrical sector.

Workers in five of the seven companies have been sent letters by management with the ultimatum: sign new contracts on inferior pay, terms and conditions or face the sack on December 7.

The employers want to withdraw from five long-held agreements and replace them with a new agreement which would enable the introduction of semi-skilled grades and dictate on pay, holiday entitlement, overtime, and what constitutes away work.

The Unite web site said: "five of the seven [companies] have upped the stakes. Balfour Beatty, Crown House Technologies, Spie Matthew Hall, Shepherd Engineering Services and NG Bailey have issued Unite with legal notice of their intention to dismiss, with notice, thousands of employees before re-engaging them on new inferior contracts."

UK: Park Cake Bakeries staff plan strike ballots

Over 1,000 staff at Park Cake Bakeries, with factories in Oldham and Bolton are being balloted on industrial action over new contracts enabling the company to reduce workers' hours at a day's notice.

Park Cake Bakeries produces cakes sold under supermarkets' own brands.

Austrian rail dispute over jobs

Federal Railways (ÖBB) staff representatives refused last week to rule out industrial action, in a dispute over a possible 4,000 job losses. ÖBB boss Christian Kern intends to reduce the workforce by 4,000 to 40,000 by 2015. “I would like to act quicker but we are clashing with the labour union about contract regulations,” he said, according to the Austrian *Independent* newspaper. The state-owned ÖBB sustained a loss of around €300 million last year. ÖBB has received more than €2 billion of taxpayers’ money a year already. It has debts of €20 billion.

Ireland: Limerick nurses stage stoppage over budget cuts, overcrowding

A four-hour work stoppage by nurses at the emergency department at the Mid-Western Regional Hospital in Limerick took place October 4 in protest at over-crowding in the unit.

Nurses say budget cuts and a moratorium on recruitment have led to bed shortages and poor clinical conditions.

The nurses are members of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO) and SIPTU. It is the third such protest action in the last two weeks.

SIPTU Mid-West nursing organiser Jim McGrath said that staff were undertaking the planned third work stoppage “to finally make management respond to the deteriorating situation in the emergency department due to underfunding, patient overcrowding and a shortage of nursing staff, all of which has been exacerbated by the hospital reconfiguration programme”.

A 24-hour health sector strike was proposed in Northern Ireland this week.

Thousands demonstrate in Hungary over labor and tax laws, wages and conditions

Thousands of workers filled a large square outside parliament October 1, “demanding changes to labor, tax and other laws they say have led to lower salaries and uncertain working conditions,” said the *Associated Press*.

“Organizers said protesters at the rally at Kossuth Square represented about 100 unions and civic organisations. People in the crowd of at least 20,000 included railroad, iron and telecommunications workers, teachers, butchers, electricians, police, firefighters and miners,” continued the news agency.

Some signs carried by protesters dubbed Prime Minister Viktor Orban, as the “Viktator.”

The protest rally was the biggest so far in the series of so-called “D-Day” protests, which began Thursday and are set to continue this week.

Demonstrators were also protesting government attempts to force thousands of early retirees back into the workforce.

At 55.4 percent in 2010, Hungary had the lowest employment rate in the European Union. The economic growth rate for 2011 is expected to be below 2 percent.

Egyptian strikes continue

“While teachers and doctors decided to temporarily suspend their ongoing strikes, public transportation drivers continue their sit-in,” wrote *Al-Ahram* this week.

“Striking teachers and doctors have temporarily suspended their sit-ins which were blocking streets to the People’s Assembly on Saturday, pressing for a variety of demands. Bus drivers, however, refused to suspend their strikes.”

Al-Ahram analyst Amr El-Shobaki said the strikes are symptomatic of the growing distrust of the government.

“Following the 25 January Revolution, people expected their lives to change for the better. Now they feel disappointed,” he says.

Drivers of the Public Transportation Authority (PTA), who had suspended their sit-in for two weeks on Tuesday following 10 days of continuous strikes, decided to continue striking October 5.

The transportation strike began on September 17 after workers failed to reach any agreement with the PTA. Drivers at 24 garages, serving more than 2,500 buses, stopped work September 25. Ten drivers announced they would begin a hunger strike.

Bus drivers are demanding the PTA make good on government promises to increase monthly salaries, which range from LE200 to LE400, by 200 percent. They are also pressing for the dismissal of senior management appointed by the Mubarak regime and for the bus fleet to be upgraded.

The public transportation sector employs more than 40,000 workers who have been demanding a pay increase since 2007.

Last week, thousands of striking school teachers protested in front of the cabinet headquarters, demanding better pay and working conditions and the dismissal of Minister of Education Ahmed Gamal El-Din Moussa.

School teachers also began their nationwide action September 17, the beginning of the academic year. They are seeking a minimum salary of LE3,000.

Doctors are demanding that the Health Ministry’s share of the government budget increase from 3.5 to 15 percent, better security at hospitals, a complete overhaul of salary structures, and the upgrade of equipment and training.

Ahram Online reported this week that nurses in the public Manflout Hospital in Assiut in Upper Egypt struck October 5 “to protest management’s refusal to pay them 200 percent bonus on their basic salaries, which was promised by the government last spring to all government employees to push wages up to LE700 per month.”

“We work for long hours in the hospital including night shifts for a very low salary,” said nurse Israa Ali.

“We have repeatedly asked for a 200 percent bonus [to bring their wages up to the LE700 minimum promised by the government] and the authorities didn’t respond so we decided to begin this strike.”

Another nurse in the hospital, Yasmine Mohamed, said that the nurses also want a higher compensation for risk of infection, and the right to elect the head of the nursing department.

Mubarak-era university president resigns following strike

“The head of Ain Shams University, Maged El-Deeb, has officially submitted his resignation after strikes and protests at the university by professors and students,” reported *Ahram Online*, October 4.

El-Deeb’s resignation came after the university’s professors started a strike last Saturday—the first day of the autumn term—calling for his resignation in order to conduct elections to replace him, as he was

appointed under the Mubarak regime.

Professors, supported by students, are organizing a protest movement in several universities across the country to force the government to fire all university presidents and deans who were appointed under Mubarak.

“[Prime Minister Essam] Sharaf had promised professors last spring that democratic elections on campuses will take place at the beginning of the current school year, but was forced to withdraw his commitment due to lack of support for that move by Egypt's ruling military council,” concluded *Ahram Online*.

Kuwait Ministry of Interior staff and IT workers demand pay increase

The *Arab Times* reported this week that “civilians working in the Ministry of Interior Sunday held a demonstration in front of the ministry's Finance and Administrative Affairs building at Ardiya.”

The staff demanded “that the ministry treats them on par with their colleagues in the police, as stipulated in the decision of Civil Service Commission (CSC).”

The workers also demand the payment of allowances and other bonuses at the ports and technical inspection units who fall within the ‘hard jobs category.’

They will continue to hold weekly strikes Sunday mornings until their demands are met.

A group of information technology employees staged a protest action in front of the Civil Service Commission (CSC) building Sunday to demand a wage increase. The demonstration coincided with the meeting between CSC Deputy Mohammed Al-Roumi and representatives of the Kuwaiti Society for Information Technology.

South Africa trade union federations call off planned national strike

On Monday, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the National Council of Trade Unions called off a national strike scheduled for Wednesday against the use of labour “brokers” in South Africa.

COSATU described brokering as “a form of human trafficking which has condemned thousands of workers to insecure jobs with poverty pay, no benefits and no job security.”

The federation called off the action after bowing down to a ruling by the Nedlac Sector Convenors. Nedlac is the National Economic Development and Labour Council. The federations stated that “the Nedlac Sector Convenors took a majority decision that the Notice submitted by COSATU under Section 77 1 (d) of the Labour Relations Act does not comply with the law.” It added, “Although our lawyers are confident that they could thwart any attempt to interdict the strike action, there is a risk that a court could use the Nedlac Convenors' majority decision to rule in favour of the employers.

“The two federations have therefore agreed to postpone the strike action and to seek an urgent meeting at Nedlac to resolve the matter as speedily as possible.”

South African mineworkers protest mining fatalities

On Wednesday, the South African National Union of Mineworkers held a one day strike, calling for safer working conditions in mines. The union said it expected around 400,000 workers to take part in the one day stoppage to remember “those who died in the line of duty.” Already this year 97 miners have been killed. Another 12 workers were killed in the construction industry and 17 workers in the energy sector.

As part of the day of action, several thousand mineworkers and their supporters gathered in the capital Johannesburg. Among those protesting were miners from Lonmin, Evander gold mines, Anglo American, and Ergo mining. Wearing red shirts stating, “We demand to Live.” the miners held up placards with slogans including, “Safety first, Profits later” and “Prevent fatalities now.”

Speaking to the protesters NUM representative Lesiba Seshoka said, “To date, over 100 workers died in the mining industry alone. Thousands are injured every year. Over 50 workers are electrocuted every six months whilst many others die in the construction sector due to many factors including poor scaffoldings.”

Later a “Memorandum of Grievances on health and safety in the industry” was handed over to officials of the Chamber of Mines, Eskom, and the departments of labour and mineral resources.

South African health laboratory workers begin nationwide strike

On September 27, some 1,500 South African health laboratory workers began a nationwide strike in a dispute over pay. The lab analysts and support staff are employed by the National Health Laboratory Services and are members of the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union.

The union is calling for a 9 percent pay increase and a R2,300 medical aid benefits. The National Health Laboratory Services has offered just 6.5 percent and a R2,100 medical aid allowance. Since it began pay talks with management in April, the NEHAWU has already retreated significantly from its original demand of a 15 percent pay increase for its members.

The National Health Laboratory Services provides laboratory and related public health services to more than 80 percent of South Africans through a national network.

Upsurge of industrial action in Zambia

On October 3, workers at Zambezi Portland Limited in Ndola downed tools and demanded a K3.5 million (US\$ 704) increment across the board. *Times of Zambia* reported that the strikers also demanded that “the company's management should not insult or allow alleged hired thugs to batter them whenever they were deemed to have done wrong.”

According to the paper, workers outside the plant were shouting that they would not return to work until management met their demands. “Those spoken to said the lowest paid worker at the company got K420, 000 (US\$84) as basic pay and that there was no medical cover for their families, while the company was not fulfilling the mandatory requirement of taking them for pneumoconiosis examination.”

At a meeting with workers' representatives, management denied that this was the case. However, they said that the company had offered an immediate award of K500, 000 (US\$100) across the board as a temporary

measure until the government issued a revised minimum wage. The strikers were asked to disperse and get back to work today after assurances that management would put the agreement in writing.

Also on October 3, casual workers at two plants in Kabwe, Zinc Aluminum Copper and Ore Company (ZALCO) and Full Value Goodness (FVG) milling company, downed tools demanding improved conditions of service, among others issues.

Times of Zambia reported that at ZALCO “more than 200 irate workers blocked the entrance to the plant with huge stones and threatened to damage any motor vehicle entering the premises, while chanting and vowing to continue until their demands were met.”

Lubasi Chimuka, a representative of the workers at ZALCO, called for an increase in salaries, saying that the current K15,000 (US\$3) per day was not sufficient to sustain their families. He said, “Most of us are working from as early as 07: 00 hours up to as late as 20:00 hours but our salaries show nothing for these efforts... Most of us have been temporary employees for over two years and we want to be recognised as permanent employees.”

In Lusaka, more than 400 casual workers staged a protest at ZESCO head office. According to *Times of Zambia*, the workers locked the entrances to the head office demanding increased salaries and job security. Speaking on behalf of the protesters, Joseph Phiri said the casual workers, who had in some cases worked for ZESCO for over 10 years, wanted permanent jobs. He said that wages were too low for workers to afford a decent life.

October 3 saw an angry protest of workers at Mochipapa Livestock Development Trust (LDT), Choma. They had gone on strike to demand payment of 15 months’ salary arrears. They have vowed not to return to work until their outstanding salaries have been paid.

The strikers told *Times of Zambia* that their families had been reduced to destitution as a result of failure by the institution to pay them their salaries for 15 months. They claimed that the government had been releasing money to LDT but that management was diverting the money to other uses.

Also on October 3, hundreds of striking workers at Mpulungu Harbour, on the shores of Lake Tanganyika, camped out at the town’s main bus station. Instead of commencing work at 6.00am, they staged a protest to demand improved conditions of service.

Namibian miners strike over bonus payments

Namibian miners employed by Rio Tinto at the company’s Rössing uranium mine near Arandis, Namibia took all-out strike on September 19. They are members of the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN) and are seeking an additional N\$30,000 (US\$3727) on top of the current bonus payment of N\$11,000 (US\$1,365) to bring them in line with bonuses paid to management. According to *In These Times News Service*, between 800 and 1,000 of the total of 1600 workers employed were involved in the action.

The miners demanded payments of the extra bonus as a condition for

ending the strike. Rio Tinto referred the matter to the Namibian Labour Court, claiming that the strike was unlawful.

One of the strikers told the newspaper *Informanté*, “Many of us have worked at the mine since the seventies. We want to work, but we are on strike as a result of the unfair treatment we received with the production bonus pay-outs.”

On September 29, the Labour Court ruled that the main issue in the dispute was not permissible grounds for industrial action under Namibian law. Presiding Judge Swanepoel ruled that the workers’ demand to be paid a N\$30 000 production bonus could not permissibly form part of any lawful industrial action.

Soon afterwards Ismail Kasuto, branch chairman of the Rössing branch of the Mineworkers’ Union of Namibia, lodged an appeal against the court’s ruling.

He told the press, “The strike will still go on as our appeal has suspended the court verdict up until the company institutes an urgent court application to get an interdict to enforce the current verdict.” A second Labour Court order was then passed to enforce the original order.

The strike was called off on September 29. The MUN is organising a ballot to decide whether to launch another strike at the mine. The outcome of the vote will be announced next week.

According to *Informanté*, Rio Tinto made \$14 billion in profits last year. The company is anticipating a 40 percent increase in global demand for copper by 2020.

Indefinite strike at Nigeria’s public universities

Non-academic staff at Nigeria’s public universities launched a warning strike October 3, in support of their demand for better working conditions.

Unions involved in the strike are the Senior Staff Association of Nigeria Universities (SSANU), the National Association of Academic Technologists (NAAT) and the Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities (NASUU).

In a press statement on the day before the strike began, Mr. Samson Ugwoka, spokesman for the striking workers, said that the action would go ahead despite the fact that October 3 is being observed as a public holiday to mark the nation’s 51st independence anniversary.

He said that one of the issues is the authorities’ failure to implement an agreement reached on January 1, 2010 regarding retirement age. He said, “Also, issues such as earned allowances (field trip/teaching practice/industrial supervision allowances, hazard allowances, deanship of student affairs etc) have not been addressed almost two years after agreements were consummated.”

Last week, university teachers also embarked on a week-long warning strike to press for better working conditions.

On October 4, the University of Ibadan, Oyo State, was brought to a

standstill when the three main unions there, the Senior Staff Association of Universities, Non-Academic Staff Union, and National Association of Academic Technologists, embarked on a one-week warning strike over the non-implementation of the 2009 agreement by the Federal Government.

Nigerian Airtel workers take indefinite strike action

Strike action by customer service agents employed by Airtel Telecommunications have shut down the two major call centres of the company in Lagos and Abuja. The strikers are protesting against the plan by their employers to sack 50 percent of the work-force and reduce the wages of the remaining employees by 60 percent. The workers are extremely angry at these draconian attacks and the National Union of Postal and Telecommunication Employees (NUPTE) has called an indefinite strike to oppose them.

There are currently about 4,000 customer services officers working for the company on a contract basis. In the past, they were recruited by three agencies--Banzeleel, HR Index and CCSNL. However, six months ago Airtel engaged the services of two new technical partners from India, Spanco and Tech Mahindra, to provide core centre services and shops.

Two weeks ago the management of Spanco and Tech Mahindra invited the national leadership of NUPTE to a meeting where it presented a proposal to lay off half the workforce.

The proposed reduction of salaries by 60 percent would result in a monthly salary of N30,000 (US\$ 182). Under the current agreement a customer service agent in Airtel is being paid a monthly salary of N85,000 (US\$ 516) in Lagos and N75,000 (US\$ 455) in Abuja. Other proposals include a reduction in the entitlements of customer service agents, an increase in working hours from 40 to 48 hours per week and a relocation of the call centres.

According to *THISDAY*, negotiations ended in a stalemate September 28, and the unions called for indefinite industrial action.

NUPTE representative Ayodeji Olowoniya, told the paper that contrary to the claim by management that the company was making losses, it has recorded improved returns in recent years. He noted that Airtel Nigeria generates 46 percent of total revenue of Airtel businesses worldwide.

In June this year, Airtel workers took ten-day industrial action in protest against alleged abuses and refusal by the new management to pay their bonuses.

Zimbabwe rail workers, strike is suspended

Voice of America has reported that the all-out strike of workers employed by the National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ) which began on September 27, has been suspended. The strikers were demanding the payment of their wages for August and allowances dating back to 2009.

The action, which involved members of four unions, the Zimbabwe

Amalgamated Railway Workers' Union, Railway Association of Yard Operating Staff, Zimbabwe Railways Artisans Union and Railway Association of Enginemen, initially brought the whole railway system to a halt.

Last week, the management held a crisis meeting in Bulawayo, where the general manager, Retired Air Commodore Mike Karakadzai, appealed to the thousands of striking workers, including enginemen, signal operators, artisans and office clerks to return to work. He said that the first two days of the strike had resulted in the parastatal losing millions of dollars.

Management claims that because of falling revenue they cannot afford to pay workers their full entitlement and are having to stagger payment. Karakadzai said, "We are paying them in two batches of 30 percent and give them the remaining 40 percent later.... We rely on derived demand and because of the liquidity crunch on the market, there is no money as the volume of traffic is low."

The workers reject this excuse and have given management two weeks to address their grievances.

Zimbabwean lecturers union calls off strike

The strike of lecturers at public teachers colleges and polytechnics has been called off with strikers claiming that they have been intimidated by Ministry of Education and college principals.

Secretary General of the College Lecturers Association of Zimbabwe Nickson Madovi, told *Voice of America* that some of his members want to continue the strike though they have been served suspension letters.

The lowest paid lecturers in colleges and polytechnics earn US\$220 per month, less than a quarter of their counterparts at universities. The instructors are demanding at least 70 percent of what the university lecturers are being paid.

Strike by Cross River State College staff in Akamkpa, Nigeria called off

The two weeks strike by staff at the Cross River State College in Akamkpa, Nigeria has been called off, according to a Thursday report on *Allafrica.com*. Members of three trade unions, the Colleges of Education Academic Staff Union, Senior Staff Union of Colleges of Education and the Non-Academic Staff Union, suspended the strike action after an agreement was reached with the Traditional Rulers Council.

According to *Allafrica*, the agreement results in staff being awarded a pay increase backdated to April 1, 2011.



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