

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

14 October 2011

Thousands of Airbus workers in Germany strike over failure of wage agreement

Around 11,000 workers employed at aircraft manufacturer Airbus took industrial action October 7, after the failure to reach a new wage agreement.

“Negotiations broke down last month after a year and a half of efforts to reach a deal on a range of issues from an employment guarantee to a ceiling on the number of temporary workers that can be hired,” reported AFP.

Management is seeking to increase employee productivity.

Unions have offered productivity gains of 2 percent—worth about €1 billion (\$1.3 billion) between now and 2020—in exchange for guarantees of employment and maintaining four worksites in northern Germany. According to unions, management wants a higher rate of 8 percent.

Meanwhile a deal was reached on pay and conditions October 12, averting a planned strike by air traffic controllers that could have disrupted thousands of flights, including at continental Europe’s largest airport, Frankfurt.

Strikes, protests against austerity measures across France

According to Associated Press, strikes took place in 39 cities across France on October 11 and 193 protest marches were staged against government austerity measures.

In Paris, the protest march drew 16,000 people, according to police figures, or 25,000 according to organizers.

Reflecting increasing disengagement from the trade unions and protest organisations, the protests were reportedly less well attended than on previous occasions.

In August, the French government announced a €11 billion package of spending cuts and tax increases.

Italy: Fiat workers to strike over job contracts

Workers will strike for eight hours in Fiat factories across the country, October 21, to protest threats to their job contracts.

The strike will also affect subsidiaries of Italy’s biggest company and will be accompanied by a national demonstration in Rome.

On October 10, Fiat announced it would be leaving the employers’ federation Confindustria in order not to be bound by collective bargaining agreements.

“Fiat has signed new contracts with workers at some plants, including Pomigliano, Mirafiori and Grugliasco despite union opposition, toughening work conditions in return for investment,” reported AFP.

Company boss Sergio Marchionne, who also runs the auto giant Chrysler, wants to make job contracts more flexible for the 82,000 Fiat employees in Italy.

“Fiat, which is engaged in the creation of a major international group with 181 plants in 30 countries, cannot afford to operate in Italy in an environment of uncertainty that is so incongruous with the conditions that exist in the industrialised world,” wrote Marchionne in a recent letter.

Workers have also gone on strike at the auto giant’s Termini Imerese plant in Sicily, due to be shut by the end of the year, asking for guarantees on jobs from the company that is buying the factory.

Fiat’s decision to shut the plant as it expands internationally sparked anger among its 1,500 employees and 700 subcontractors and led to opposition from the workforce in 2009 and 2010. The site is due to be taken over by Italian auto company Dr Motor.

Russian teachers protest for wage increases

Around 200 secondary school and kindergarten teachers from all 30 districts in Irkutsk Oblast, in eastern Russia, staged a protest October 7 near government buildings to demand a wage increase.

According to RFE/Radio Liberty, the protesters held placards saying, “Parliament members should have the same salary as Teachers!” “Teachers’ salaries are a disgrace to Russia!” and “Fursenko’s salary should be the same as ours!” (Andrei Fursenko is Russia’s education minister). According to local union sources, the city authorities were reluctant to permit the protest action, but finally agreed on condition that it was “not too close to the [government] building.” The average monthly salary of a secondary school or kindergarten teacher is 12,000-15,500 rubles (\$370-480).

UK water workers vote for strike ballot

Around 250 employees of Veolia Water Central, formerly Three Valleys Water Company, have voted by 92 percent in an indicative ballot to call on the GMB union’s Central Executive Council to give authority for an official strike ballot if the offer of 2.5 percent from the company is not improved.

Veolia Water Central covers parts of Essex, Hertfordshire, Surrey, Beds, Berkshire, Middlesex and Barnet, Finchley and Stanmore in Greater London. Official inflation is currently at 5 percent.

Work-to-rule at UK universities over pension changes

Staff at 67 universities across the country began to “work to contract” on Monday “as part of a campaign of sustained industrial action in a row over changes to their pension scheme,” said the University and College Union (UCU).

Staff will refuse to undertake extra duties or work outside their contracted hours. According to the UCU site, a recent survey revealed that lecturers work an average 55-hour week and universities depend on staff goodwill. The industrial dispute is about changes to the Universities Superannuation pension scheme—the second largest private scheme in the UK. Changes were imposed October 1 that will see university staff pay more to work longer with less protection should they lose their job. “The 67 institutions affected include all the Russell Group universities and over 1 million students could be hit if the action escalates,” said the UCU.

Possible strike at UK’s National Gallery

Warders are considering industrial action next month, in protest over security cuts that they warn will make works of art more vulnerable to damage or theft, reported the Observer newspaper.

“The action would take the form of walkouts for an hour or two at a time, necessitating the evacuation of the building. News of the protest comes after a man vandalised two Poussin masterpieces last July with paint,” said the paper.

The National Gallery in London is facing the prospect of strike disruption during November’s major Leonardo da Vinci exhibition, when the gallery is expecting record numbers of visitors to see the “largest ever number of Leonardo’s rare surviving paintings”. The exhibition is due to open on 9 November.

The gallery has instructed its warders, now called gallery assistants, to each watch over two rooms rather than one. Warders maintain that the new instructions allowed the Poussin vandal time to attack two paintings because the warder was in the adjoining room.

Around 200 members of staff, including curators, have signed a protest petition to the gallery’s director, Nicholas Penny. An indicative ballot is being run towards possible industrial action.

Workers at Boots chemists, Northern Ireland, protest pay cuts

Staff at the pharmaceutical giant Boots held another protest October 8 at the company’s flagship store on Donegall Place, Belfast, in protest against cuts to their pay, including a reduction in premium pay and withdrawal of paid tea breaks. The SIPTU union said that the total loss of pay to some workers is as much as 7 percent. Over 2,000 signatures were collected for a petition against the cuts. Last year, Boots’ profits rose above £1 billion for the first time.

Finnish engineering and metal workers strike over low pay offer

Engineering and metals workers at the crane-maker Konecranes may strike as early as next week, after wage talks between unions and employers collapsed when the workforce rejected a wage increase proposal of only 1.9 percent.

The Finnish Metalworkers Union and labour union Pro have said 30,000 employees will go on strike from October 21 at 44 metals and engineering firms unless a deal is struck, reported Reuters.

“Other firms that would be hit include paper machine and mining equipment maker Metso, lift and escalator maker Kone, Wartsila, Talvivaara, steelmaker Rautaruukki, Boliden’s Finnish subsidiaries. The industry estimates a two-week strike would cut firms’ net sales by a total €715 million (\$976 million),” said Reuters.

An immediate overtime ban has been issued across the whole Finnish metal industry, which covers around 200,000 workers.

Last year, a third of Finland’s exports were metals and engineering products such as ships, paper machines, and metals. The euro zone debt crisis has diminished demand, prompting some analysts to predict that the Finnish economy could officially slide into recession next year.

Egypt: Air navigation engineers strike over pay, corruption

Engineers from the Air Navigation Services Company at Cairo International Airport went on strike over the weekend, “demanding better financial management, the removal of corrupt management figures, and an overhaul of administrative operations,” reported Al Masry Al Youm.

The workers marched from the airport to the Civil Aviation Ministry Sunday, where they announced an open-ended sit-in until their demands were met.

The engineers are demanding that Captain Mohie Ragheb, acting president of the Air Navigation Services Company and head of air traffic control, be removed from his post.

“They also complained in the memorandum of having been attacked by thugs as they announced their intention of holding an ongoing sit-in,” reported Al Masry Al Youm.

South African dock workers take strike action

On October 8, an unofficial strike by workers at Durban’s Pier 1 brought container handling to a halt. According to the Mercury, the shutdown had been preceded by a week of “go slow” action. The paper reported, “Transnet had made changes to a staff incentive scheme without consulting the unions”.

Malcolm Sodalay, regional chairman of the South African Association of Freight Forwarders, claimed that the strike was illegal. He said that the action would have a major impact on the freight industry and that the terminal would remain closed until at least October 10 while talks continued with union officials.

A spokesman for the Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC), one of the largest in the world, said that one of their ships was lying idle in the dock and it was possible that other ships might be affected. Some companies have diverted their vessels elsewhere because of the strike.

The Mercury reported a joint statement from Transnet and the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union, which blamed the problem on “a temporary suspension of activities due to operational issues within the terminal”. The statement assured ship owners that “None of Transnet’s other operations in the Durban Port were affected. Transnet

has activated its contingency plans to minimise further disruptions.”

Namibian Hospital cleaners demand the right to training

Between 20 and 30 cleaning staff at Windhoek Central Hospital struck on October 7 in support of their demand to be allowed to attend “mandatory” training courses. They told the Namibian that they were determined not to return to work until they obtained management’s agreement. They claimed that senior staff are “constantly on courses and workshops”.

Shop steward Fransina Djuulume, of the Namibia Public Workers Union, told the Namibian about other grievances, including the late payment of overtime. She said that “in some instances they have to wait up to one month for payment”.

The paper reported that there has been a budgetary provision of N\$825,000 (US\$104,586) to cater for training courses and workshops for the hospital operational staff. The cleaners want to know what the hospital’s management intends to do with the money which was set aside.

Zambian rail workers take strike action

Zambian workers on the Tanzania-Zambia Railway began all-out strike action on October 7 in support of their demands, including the resignation of the managing director, Akashambatwa Mbikusita-Lewanika, the sending on forced leave of Mpika-based regional manager Sinonge Masiliso, and payment of workers’ leave dues arrears.

Africa M’kandawire, general secretary of the Workers Union of TAZARA, told the Times of Zambia that another issue in the dispute was “management’s insistence that the retirement age should be 60 instead of 55 years.” He said that union officials had met with management but the meeting had not yielded anything.

The action has affected more than 40 stations from Nakonde to Kapiri Mposhi and the strikers have vowed not to return to work until their demands are met.

Municipal workers in Zimbabwe capital Harare strike for improved salaries

Municipal workers in the Zimbabwean capital Harare went on strike on October 7 demanding improved salaries and better working conditions. The Zimbabwe Guardian reported that “workers are demanding an end to ‘secretive’ payrolls and incentives to senior managers [which] they claim were bleeding the council at the expense of their welfare and service delivery”.

The city’s health department, refuse collection and cleaning services have been most affected, but the strike has disrupted most council services. Strikers were planning a demonstration outside Town House on October 10.

A crisis meeting, convened by Local Government, Rural and Urban Development Minister Ignatius Chombo, was held on the first day of the strike. The meeting was attended by representatives from the Harare Municipal Workers’ Union (HMWU) and Zimbabwe Urban Councils Workers’ Union (ZUCWU) as well as members of Harare city council

and the government. After the meeting representatives of the two unions ordered their members to return to work, saying they had agreed to give dialogue a chance.

Secretary for Local Government, Rural and Urban Development Killian Mupingo confirmed the instructions. “All parties have committed themselves to ensuring that a balance is maintained for the benefit of the residents and ratepayers and the community of Harare,” he said.

Zambian copper miners win a 100 percent pay increase

The strike of miners at the Chinese-owned Chambishi Copper Mine was called off on October 10 after the management conceded a 100 percent pay increase.

The increase had been the main demand of the strike in order to put the Chambishi miners on a par with miners at Vedanta Resources PLC’s (VED.LN) Konkola Copper Mines and Glencore International AG’s (GLEN.LN) Mopani Copper Mines. The dispute had halted all production at the mine for six days.

Chambishi is operated by Chinese-owned NCFA Mining, a unit of China Nonferrous Metals Corp. Union officials have accused Chinese-owned mines of paying the lowest wages in the country. The mine yields 65,000 metric tons of copper a year.

MarketWatch reported that miners at another Chinese-owned copper plant—Sino Metals in the Copperbelt—went on strike October 7. The dispute was part of a wave of wage struggles that are spreading through the Chinese-owned mines in Zambia.

Niger Delta: Three-day warning strike called, called off by oil unions

Nigeria’s oil unions began a three-day strike on October 10 to demand that the government does more to address the growing insecurity in the Niger region, especially the ransom kidnappings of workers.

According to Platts news agency, the unions ordered a halt to the delivery of petroleum products in the Warri area from midnight October 9 and petrol stations were expected to run out of fuel by the following day.

President of the white-collar Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (Pengassan), Babatunde Ogun, told Platts that his own union “and the blue-collar Nupeng would embark on an indefinite strike if the government fails to address the growing level of kidnappings and violence in the area”.

Ogun told the news agency that there has been an increasing level of kidnappings of his members around the oil city of Warri and Delta, Edo and Ondo states in recent weeks. He said, “We need a commitment from government to stop the growing violence. The lives of our workers have been endangered and we cannot continue like this.”

On the night of October 11, the two unions involved in the strike issued a statement declaring that the action was suspended. This was after a meeting with the Delta State governor, who promised to ensure the safety of oil workers in the region.

Kenyan workers strike for 60 percent wage rise

A strike by members of the Kenya Union of Commercial, Food and

Allied Workers (KUCFAW) began on October 8. It paralysed the operations of the National Social Security Fund (NSSF).

According to the Standard newspaper, the workers want an increase in basic salary of over 60 percent “to cushion them against the ever-rising inflation”. Other issues include redundancy and retirement agreements.

KUCFAW Secretary General Boniface Kavuvi said management has been dragging its feet on a number of issues, including salary increases that would have acted as a basis for calculating dues for staff willing to retire.



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