

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

28 October 2011

BBC staff to vote on strikes

Thousands of British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) staff will be balloted on November 4 for industrial action in a dispute over jobs, pay and conditions.

The BBC has announced plans to cut 2,000 jobs and make changes to terms and conditions to make savings of 20 percent, worth £670 million a year by 2016/17.

BBC TV programmes that could be hit by the industrial action are thought to include the final stages of *Strictly Come Dancing* and the BBC's Sports Personality of the Year as well as coverage of next year's Olympics.

The ballot result is expected to be announced November 24 and industrial action could start in early December if there is a "yes" vote.

BBC News programmes were last hit by industrial action in July when staff walked out over compulsory redundancies at the World Service and BBC Monitoring.

Pay strike by cleaning staff on Virgin trains in England

Workers employed to clean Virgin Trains on the West Coast Mainline in the West Midlands staged a 24-hour strike this week in a dispute over a below-inflation pay offer.

The workers, employed by Carlisle Cleaning and Support Services, are refusing to empty train effluent tanks or refill fresh water tanks for 48 hours from the evening of November 4.

Rail sites affected by the strike include Wolverhampton, Birmingham New Street, Crewe, London Euston, Glasgow, Manchester and Preston.

The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) said a strike vote resulted in 94 percent in favour of action.

UK cabin crew at Thomas Cook may strike over jobs

Cabin crew employed at Thomas Cook Group have said they are considering industrial action if a full ballot is conducted over job losses.

The travel operator is pushing through a restructuring plan that would result in at least 500 job cuts.

Ferry workers' strike on crossings between France and UK

On October 25, employees of SeaFrance ferries took industrial action. Major disruptions resulted in cross-channel services as a result of the strike in France.

Workers protest waste collection privatisation in County Dublin

On October 20, more than 100 workers took part in a protest in Swords town centre, County Dublin, against the further privatisation by Fingal County Council of waste collection services.

According to the SIPTU (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union) web site, "The workers were led by a waste collection truck as they marched from the Pavilions Shopping Centre to Fingal County Hall where SIPTU Organiser, Paul Smyth, presented a letter to Fingal county manager David O Connor."

Aviva travel workers in Ireland strike over jobs

Staff at the travel company Aviva in Galway have voted in favour of a ballot for industrial action and have unanimously passed a motion of no confidence in the firm's management.

After weeks of speculation, the company confirmed this week that 950 workers would lose their jobs over the next two years.

Aviva has a workforce of 1,800 in Ireland and around 220 of them are employed at the call centre in Knocknacarra Business Park on the outskirts of Galway City.

Finnish steel strike ends

The *Helsinki Times* reported October 25, "A metal industry strike that began Friday last week ended late on Monday, with the Metalworkers' Union, Pro, and the Federation of Technology Industries reaching an agreement brokered by the government's labour market conciliator."

The strike, which involved 30,000 workers at 37 major Finnish companies, would have expanded next week if no agreement were reached.

According to YLE, "The private sector salaried employees' union Pro says the deal is in line with the national framework pact agreed a couple of weeks ago by the main labour market groups—a crucial shot in the arm for this hard-fought agreement, which some had begun to call into question."

Talks on the exact size and timing of wage increases have not yet begun.

Swiss rail workers strike

After a number of protests, employees at Swiss Federal Railways went on strike October 17 against “unhealthy and humiliating” working conditions and said they would not return to their jobs until the company solved the situation.

Workers are calling for measures to be put in place to protect them working in an alley below the tracks from faeces and urine dumped by older model train carriages. Some of the old carriages on Swiss trains use toilets that deposit faeces directly onto the tracks.

According to the *Local*, “Construction workers operating below tracks ... had been reporting for a month that they were receiving frequent faecal showers from cracks in the ceiling of the passageway where they were working.”

Egypt: Industrial action and state crackdown

There are ongoing strikes by workers in public transport, factories and universities, air freight and other sectors across Egypt demanding better pay, and to purge sectors of top management associated with the former regime, according to *Ahram Online*.

Around 3,000 workers protested for a second day outside the interior ministry headquarters in Cairo and “thousands more are staging pickets outside police stations around the country.”

Ahram Online reported, “Hundreds of employees at the Ministry of Petroleum have penetrated the steel barricades set up by Central Security Forces (CSF) at the entrance to People’s Assembly Street, repositioning their protest to the Cabinet’s offices on Tuesday.”

The protests called for permanent contracts as had been pledged. Some of the demonstrators had been working for over five years without fixed contracts. “The protest has seen some clashes between the Ministry of Interior’s security personnel and demonstrators,” the report concluded.

Daily News Egypt reported, “Hundreds of workers from different sectors protested Sunday in front of Cabinet voicing a range of social and financial demands. Workers from the Egypt-Iran Yarn and Textile Company have had a sit-in in front of the Cabinet since Thursday, calling for the dismissal of Samy Abou Shady, the managing director of the company, as well as Mohsen El-Gilany, its president.”

Abdel Mohsen Abdel Aziz, one of the protesting workers, said, “They robbed and squandered the company’s funds. And they give us our salaries in instalments and deduct half of our bonuses for themselves.”

Khaled El-Gilany, another worker, explained that the administration also closed down the medical department to punish them. “They closed it on Oct. 4, although it used to serve more than 600 workers,” he said.

Al Masry Al Youm on October 24 reported on the call being made by teachers for a mass protest this Saturday to demand the dismissal of Minister of Education Ahmed Gamal Eddin Moussa and a purge of “the educational system of corrupt figures”.

The report said, “The Egyptian Teachers Union refused to attend next week’s meeting called for by the Ministry of Education, aimed at convincing teachers to cancel the demonstration and look into ways to achieve their demands.”

Teachers have been calling, since the ousting of Mubarak, for an increase in the education budget.

Dozens of protesting teachers were met with tear gas October 23 in the Upper Egyptian governorate of Beni Suef, “as security forces tried to prevent them from breaking into the provincial government headquarters,” according to *Egypt.com*.

An estimated 500 substitute teachers closed the Corniche road on the Nile, demanding equal pay with colleagues in other governorates who have signed new contracts.

“Some teachers stormed the governorate’s office and smashed its glass front after a meeting with Governor Maher Baibars, whom they said had failed to fulfill an earlier promise to ask Egypt’s education minister for new contracts for them. Central Security Forces cordoned off the building during the protest,” said *Egypt.com*.

Teachers’ strikes have taken place in a number of governorates with a demand for higher bonuses and permanent contracts. Recent strikes also coincided with the start of the new school year in mid-September.

Israeli medical interns protest, nurses walk out

On October 24, hundreds of medical interns demonstrated outside the Tel Aviv Museum in response to the Israel National Labour Court decision to forbid them from collectively resigning.

“Protesters waved signs and called for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who acts as health minister, to solve the current crisis in the wake of stalled negotiations between the interns and the government,” reported *Ha’aretz*.

“Professional doctors, medical students, and family members also came to the event, showing their support for the protesting interns. Social workers and psychologists also joined the protest against what they see as poor work conditions.

“During the demonstration, the Israel Medical Association announced that it would not hesitate to call for an elongated national strike for all medical students if forthright government measures are not taken in order to solve the crisis.”

Walkouts took place earlier this month by medical interns over a nine-year agreement reached in August between the Israel Medical Association and the government on the doctors’ terms of employment, particularly the long duration of the pact. They are seeking wage concessions as well as changes to provisions related to on-call night shifts at hospitals by young specialist physicians.

Meanwhile, around 30 nurses at Wolfson Medical Centre in Holon walked out of their units in the hospital October 24, in protest at overcrowding in their departments.

The *Jerusalem Post* said “the nurses union has declared a labour dispute at the hospital and in another nine days will be able to hold a strike in the entire hospital, Israel Radio reported.”

Protest at the Kuwaiti Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour

On October 17, the *Arab Times* reported, “Inspectors at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour continued their protest action Monday, as most of them stayed in their offices and refused to carry out their inspection duties outside.”

The protesters are demanding privileges granted to their counterparts in other government departments, especially the Kuwait Municipality.

Strike at Kuwait Airways suspended by union

“Workers at Kuwait Airways suspended strike action earlier this week after an agreement was reached between management, government and the union,” said a report of October 26 by the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF).

Workers began their strike October 24 in protest over the company executive board’s attempts to derail an agreement “set to give employees the same benefits as other public sector employees.

“A day later, however, both the minister of transport and the chief executive officer of the airline signed an agreement with the union. As a result, the strike was called off.”

The ITF statement said the agreement “meets 70 percent of the union’s demands; the remaining 30 percent is still being considered.”

Earlier this month, 3,000 customs employees stopped work for two days demanding a pay rise, but called off the strike after government promises to meet their demands.

Sit-in protest by laid-off Royal Jordanian airlines staff

A sit-in took place this week in front of Hosing Bank mall by staff laid off at Royal Jordanian airlines.

According to *Ammon News*, the workers “threatened to stage an open sit-in in front of the Interior square (Jamal Abd Al Nassir square) if their demands are not met.”

Zambian rail workers strike enters third week

A strike that began October 5 by rail workers at the Tanzania Zambia Railway Authority (TAZARA) in Zambia has entered its third week. The main demands of the workers are the resignation of the managing director, Akashambatwa Mbikusita-Lewanika, and for a regional manager, Sinonge Masiliso, to be sent on extended forced leave.

At the weekend TAZARA management threatened the strikers with disciplinary measures if they failed to return to work within 48 hours. TAZARA has denounced the strike as illegal.

South Africa bus strike

Bus drivers working for the Gautrain integrated bus and train system in Pretoria have gone on strike. This is the second strike in three months.

The strike began Tuesday in support of a colleague who had been suspended pending an investigation. Management stated it would try and obtain a court order to force the workers return to work.

South African Roben Island workers strike

Workers organised in the National Education and Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU), working for the Roben Island visitor centre, were due to strike beginning October 26. Around 150 workers who work in the Roben Island museum and on the ferries were due to take part.

Among the workers’ demands are for the closure of the visitor centre over the Christmas/New Year holiday period so they can spend time with their families and a R3500 (\$440) a month pay increase. The workers have rejected management’s offer of a one-off payment of R10,000 (\$1,260) and a 6 percent pay increase.

Kenyan power workers set date for strike

Around 12,000 workers, members of the Kenya Electrical Trade and Allied Workers Union (KETAWU) working for Kenya Power, have issued a warning to go on strike next Monday. They are seeking a 13 percent pay increase and have rejected an offer of 7 percent. They also want an end to the employing of casual workers.

Kenya Power went to court and was given an injunction to prevent the strike, saying it was illegal, but the union leaders dispute the verdict and say the strike will go ahead.

Ghanaian doctors call off strike

Doctors in Ghana had been on strike since October 7 over the government’s failure to implement a salary structure agreed in 2006. The dispute was nationwide and led to wards being closed in two of Ghana’s largest hospitals.

The doctors, represented by the Ghana Medical Association (GMA), called off the dispute Wednesday, October 26, following the beginning of a compulsory arbitration process between the GMA and the Fair Wages and Salaries Commission.



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