Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

13 April 2012

Brussels public transport halted for four days by strike over worker's death

Public transportation in the Belgian capital, Brussels, ground to a halt for four days after staff employed by the public transport company STIB walked out to protest the death of a co-worker in an assault. Until Wednesday, no buses, trams or trains were operating in the city.

Transport workers took industrial action following the assault on Saturday, on a supervisor who died after being punched in the face.

The workers have demanded new security measures to keep staff safe.

In response, STIB announced it is to recruit 50 new security officers, on top of the 190 officers it already has. As a temporary measure, the company also said it is to move some of its staff from duties such as checking tickets to security roles.

On Wednesday, the Brussels metro was operating with reduced services on four out of six lines, but only a few tram lines were working and buses remained in their depots, according to STIB.

An AFP report said, "the partial resumption of services followed an agreement between management and the Confederation of Christian Unions, which represents about half the personnel affiliated with unions, to return to work Wednesday under certain conditions."

However, two other unions announced they would continue to strike until at least Thursday—the day of the funeral for the transport worker—with some workers reportedly intending to stay out until at least Friday.

Iberia pilots strike over start-up of low-cost subsidiary

Pilots employed by the Spanish national carrier Iberia struck Monday in a long-running dispute against the start-up of a low-cost subsidiary by the company, to be called Iberia Express.

The industrial action by the pilots grounded 150 flights in the first of 30 projected one-day strikes.

Last week, Iberia petitioned a court to ban strikes by pilots and cabin crew planned over the next few months, as well as to seek compensation for 12 days of strikes held between December and March.

The strikes were briefly called off last month while the Spanish Union of Airline Pilots (SEPLA) went into talks with Iberia, which subsequently broke down. SEPLA said it was willing to settle on a company proposal that aimed to save around US$117.57 million a year through measures such as lowering salaries for new hires.

Pilots fear that the establishment of Iberia Express will threaten the existing jobs and conditions of staff.

European airlines say they are struggling with rising fuel prices, plummeting demand from financially strained passengers, and the cost of new taxes on air travel. Airlines also face, according to Reuters, "fierce competition from low-cost carriers such as Ryanair and EasyJet."

Reuters reports that "Iberia Express is designed to complement Iberia's more profitable long-haul flights, flying to 17 national and European destinations including Dublin, Naples and Amsterdam."

Striking Bulgarian mineral workers demonstrate against non-payment of wages and company "draining"

On Wednesday, around 200 workers from the country's largest lead and zinc factory, the Lead and Zinc Complex (OTzK), demonstrated in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, against the management of the plant.

The 600-strong workforce, based in the southeastern city of Kardzhali, has not been paid wages for several months. They are now into their seventh week of industrial action.

In the past weeks, workers and trade unions had called on the government to pressure factory owner Valentin Zahariev to pay his dues, and to leave the factory.

According to the *Sofia News Agency*, the protesting workers "renewed their calls, tabling a petition to Parliament in which they request that Bulgaria nationalise the Lead and Zinc Complex."

"They also requested legislative changes making the employees of an organisation its top creditor in case of bankruptcy."

The latter was necessitated by fears that Zahariev might file for a default without ever paying the wages of employees.

The owner had announced plans to take loans amounting to some BGN 1.5 million, to cover overdue wages, which are of roughly the same amount.

Workers also claim there is information to show that Zahariev had engaged in a "chronic draining" of the OTzK, effectively mortgaging the firm up to the hilt.

Slovenia's public sector workers set for anti-austerity strike

An estimated 80,000 public sector workers could join a strike slated for April 18, as part of protests against the government's austerity measures. The government of Prime Minister Janez Jansa recently adopted an austerity budget totalling €1.1 billion in social spending cuts.

The austerity package includes up to 15 percent salary cuts for civil

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servants, suspension of this year's holiday allowances, a reduction in health care benefits, and cuts to parental leave and unemployment payments.

BBC World Service staff to strike over pension dispute

From April 15, BBC Control Room staff working in the Network Operations Centre based in Bush House and Broadcasting House, London, are to take industrial action. They are challenging the state broadcasting corporation's refusal to allow them to join a defined benefits pension scheme following the transfer of their employment to the BBC.

They were previously employed by Babcock Communications Ltd, and were transferred under new regulations into the BBC at the end of 2011.

The action will affect the transmission of programmes by the BBC World Service.

UK BMW autoworkers reject "strings attached" pay deal

Workers at the BMW's Mini car plant in Oxford, England, have overwhelmingly rejected a "strings attached" pay offer, raising the probability of industrial action. The company deal also includes other elements such as compulsory extra hours working. The majority of workers at the plant already work 11-hour shifts.

"In a consultative ballot of almost 2,000 workers, 97 per cent rejected the company's attempt to force the majority of the workforce to accept a basic pay increase of just 2.21 percent," said the Unite union.

If it goes ahead, it will be the first strike at the BMW plant since 1984.

Finland: Finnair technical staff in two-day strike over company outsourcing

Around 300 technical staff at the national carrier Finnair started a two-day strike on Wednesday afternoon after the company announced it planned to outsource engine services to Switzerland's SR Technics and cut up to 280 jobs.

Jordanian power workers begin open-ended strike for improved living conditions

Workers at the Jordanian Electric Power Company (JEPCO) began an open-ended strike to demand improved living conditions and threatened power cuts if their demands were not met, reported the *Jordan Times* on Wednesday.

The company employs more than 2,600 workers, and around half of these are participating in the strike.

Ahmad Meri, president of the workers' "independent" trade union, said that that staff at JEPCO's control centre and emergency offices had been excluded from the strike to make sure that power is not disrupted.

Among the specific demands of the JEPCO workers are improved financial benefits including a four-month bonus salary each year, end of service allowances, better health insurance and transportation services for all staff.

The *Jordan Times* reported, "A worker said that JEPCO is one of the strongest companies in the Kingdom and its employees should receive benefits like those of other firms. 'Other companies' workers are given much better benefits while our conditions have not been improved. The company hires mainly technicians who work eight hours a day besides administrative staff who work seven hours a day.'"

Egyptian public sector workers clash with army during sit-in

"Dozens of workers filled the inner halls of Egypt's State Council building on Tuesday, marking the second day of their open-ended sit-in after clashes broke out between military police forces and a number of workers on Monday," reported *Ahram Online* last week.

A court hearing was held last week over the appeal presented to the State Council by the government of the former prime minister, Essam Sharaf, and a number of "investors", to reverse the renationalisation of four factories, according to the news source.

The factories were renationalised in September in a popularly backed change by workers made unemployed as a result of the companies' original privatisation under the regime of deposed dictator Hosni Mubarak.

"The workers from Shibin El-Kom, Nile Cotton Ginning, Omar Effendi and Tanta Flax and Oil staged a sit-in with some of their families after several workers were beaten by the military police and denied entry to the courtroom," said the *Ahram Online* report.

The protesting workers also called for opposition to the unjust and arbitrary manner in which the military government is dealing with their case.

Egyptian train drivers strike over pay demands

Train drivers staged a sit-in protest in Bab Al-Hadid station (Cairo's central train station) on Monday, demanding an additional allowance for working on Saturdays, bonus increases and risk allowances.

The action brought "rail traffic across the country to a halt for more than seven hours," according to *Ahram Online*.

"On Monday evening, protesters temporarily called off their sit-in after being attacked by local street vendors. Protest leaders, however, have vowed to resume their strike action until all of their grievances are addressed," it said.

The train drivers have reportedly rejected an offer by Egyptian Railway Authority (ERA) officials for an LE100 additional allowance, opting instead to hold out for all their demands.

"Sit-in organisers stress that they only called for the labour action after all other attempts to realise their demands had met with failure," said *Ahram Online*.

Swaziland teachers and public sector workers' strike goes ahead

Workers represented by the teachers, nurses and public sector workers

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struck on Wednesday in defiance of a court order obtained by the government declaring the strike illegal.

They are seeking a 4.5 percent cost-of-living adjustment. The strike was due to take place Wednesday and Thursday. The plan was for the two-day strike to coincide with a mass protest calling for democratic reforms due to take place on Thursday.

In a separate dispute, nurses belonging to the Swaziland Democratic Nurses Union, working at the Moneni TB hospital, vowed to continue their strike action, which began last week. They are demanding the government act to bring the hospital in line with World Health Organisation standards.

The TB hospital opened in 2009 even before it had been completed, and the nurses say the incomplete structure represents a safety hazard to both staff and patients.

Striking Kenyan airport workers sacked

Around 1,300 workers working for the Kenya Airports Authority at various airports struck April 6 in pursuit of a 25 percent pay increase. The government laid down an ultimatum that unless strikers returned to work on Monday they would face dismissal.

Many of the workers did return to work, but around 350 refused to bow to the government diktat and have now been told they will be dismissed. The majority of those threatened with dismissal work at the Jomo Kenyatta international airport at Nairobi and make up around 50 percent of the workforce.

Nigerian power workers strike

Workers at the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) in the southeastern state of Enugu went on strike at the end of last week. They are demanding PHCN implement a 50 percent pay increment agreed to by the federal government.

Nationally, the National Union of Electricity Employees and the Senior Staff Association of Electricity and Allied Companies threatened a three-day warning strike beginning April 12 over the non-implementation of the 50 percent pay increment.

They were also protesting the use of casual workers and outsourcing by PHCN. The federal government invited the unions to an emergency meeting in the capital Abuja last Friday to discuss the dispute.

Nigerian Lagos doctors strike

Doctors represented by the Medical Guild, working in Lagos state-owned hospitals went on strike Wednesday. They are protesting the failure of the state government to fully implement the Consolidated Medical Salary Structure (CONMESS), agreed on with the Medical Guild by the Lagos State government in April of last year.

Nigerian oil workers threaten strike

The Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) has issued a three-day strike warning beginning Monday, April 16. The federal government has called a meeting on Thursday with PENGASSAN representatives in an attempt to head off the strike. The National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) representatives will also attend the meeting.

PENGASSAN are protesting the high rate of job losses in the oil and gas production industry, unfair labour practices and anti-union activities within the industry.

Nigerian police protect Oyo Nigeria Labour Congress offices

On Monday, armed police surrounded the Oyo State Secretariat Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) offices. Police informed press representatives that they had orders to prevent workers entering the offices.

The police had apparently responded to threats by workers to protest against the NLC officials. Workers have voiced their opposition to the NLC officials, whom they accused of compromise in their struggle against the state government over the implementation of the federally agreed minimum wage.

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