

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

8 June 2012

Spanish coal miners' strike enters second week

Coal miners in the northern mining area of Asturias striking against cuts to government subsidies used rocks, tires and rubbish bins to blockade roads this week.

On Monday, as the strike entered its second week, Spanish police arrested five striking miners. The miners set up 16 roadblocks, seriously disrupting traffic and threw rocks at police escorting traffic around the blockades.

A police statement said two men had been detained "who were part of a group of about 50 people who were throwing objects from a highway overpass onto a highway near the town of Vega del Rey."

On May 31, 14 people, including two journalists and eight police officers, were hurt after riot police charged a group of striking miners who protested outside the industry ministry during a demonstration of nearly 10,000 miners in Madrid.

The open-ended miners' strike, which affects around 8,000 workers in the 40 or so mostly northern coal mines, began last week to press the government to reverse its decision to make sharp cuts to state coal subsidies that they say will destroy the industry. The government's budget for 2012 slashes total subsidies to the coal sector to €111 million (\$142 million) from €301 million last year.

Norwegian public sector pay strike may shut oil refineries

A strike by public sector workers may shut Norwegian oil refineries, leading to petrol shortages.

The first such strike in decades began a week ago, after pay talks broke down, shutting schools, child care centres and other public institutions, as well as affecting some shipping pilots. Around 50,000 public sector workers were on strike this week.

Although offshore oil and gas production is not directly affected by the strike, onshore ports and refineries could be affected as shipping pilots become unavailable.

Morten Eek, a spokesman for Statoil, said, "Within days we could be in a situation where we are closing down if we don't see that we are able to get products out of Mongstad."

Approximately 250,000 barrels of oil pass through Mongstad refinery per day. It is the country's largest and has an annual capacity of 10 million tonnes of crude oil. Statoil is preparing to close down production at Mongstad, as the state-owned firm has not been granted dispensation to use the pilots it needs for loading and unloading vessels smaller than 30,000 tonnes normally used for transporting petrol and other refined products.

The ExxonMobil-owned Slagen oil refinery near Oslo had received dispensation for crude deliveries, but the strike affects outgoing fuel deliveries to other Norwegian ports.

Production capacity at Slagen is around six million tonnes per year.

About 60 percent of the output is exported. A spokesperson for Statoil Fuel and Retail said the strike could mean its stations may soon start to ration fuel at the pump.

Currently, two of the main unions appear to have agreed to a deal to end industrial action with thousands of public sector workers still on strike, and having been joined on Tuesday by striking education workers and airport security staff.

One-day strike at Irish mechanised peat product company

About 1,500 workers at the peat reclamation company Bord na Móna in Edenderry, county Offaly took part in a one day strike Tuesday in a pay dispute.

Pickets were placed at Edenderry power station and at the firm's main production sites in Longford, Westmeath, Laois, Offaly, Kildare and Roscommon.

The company has not honoured an agreed 3.5 percent pay rise and has proposed a bonus scheme as an alternative.

Deliveries of peat were stopped at the ESB West Offaly and Lough Ree power station. Electricity generation was not affected due to supplies of peat kept in reserve in both power stations. The action took place at a traditionally busy production period.

Bord na Móna management has warned it intends to lay off workers to meet the pay increase demands. Part state-owned, it employs nearly 2,000 workers in waste disposal and peat briquette production.

Support staff at University of Birmingham balloted for strike

Support staff at the University of Birmingham are being balloted for strike action over pay.

The 2,150 support staff are being offered a below inflation increase of just 1.2 percent, or £250.

The dispute over pay rates began in December and may lead to the first strike at the university for 30 years. Pay for support staff has deteriorated in real terms every year since 2009.

[suhead]Swiss baggage handlers strike at UK's Stansted Airport[/subhead]

Baggage handlers and ground staff employed by Swissport, at Stansted Airport, went on a four-day strike over the Jubilee weekend over new rosters that mean pay cuts and working extra days for free.

Disruption to flights was reported to be minimal.

Long-running Greek anti-austerity strike declared illegal

An Athens court has declared the country's longest-running anti-austerity strike illegal. The strike by steelworkers at the Hellenic Halcyourgia firm had lasted almost nine months.

The court ruled Wednesday that the decision to take industrial action had not followed proper procedure because no proper vote took place.

Workers at the privately-owned company will have to be re-balloted.

A four-day strike planned by touring bus drivers that was due to begin on Monday has also been called off, following a ruling by an Athens court that it, too, was illegal. The drivers are facing a 70 percent cut in wages.

Greece is in its fifth straight year of recession. Salaries in both the public and private sectors have been slashed as successive governments have sought to make workers pay for the crisis caused by the failure of the capitalist system. Elections on June 17 will take place amid an already expressed overwhelming popular rejection of social austerity.

UK job centre staff strike

Job centre workers in Merseyside and Halton are staging a three-day strike against plans to cut staff by up to 28 percent, brought on by making some staff work from call centres instead of meeting the public face-to-face. Members of the Public and Commercial Services union had staged two three-hour walkouts in March.

Lebanese Cooperative workers stage sit-in

"Workers at the State Employees' Cooperative protested over their lack of benefits with simultaneous sit-ins outside company offices in cities across Lebanon," reported Saturdays' edition of the *Daily Star*.

A statement issued by those participating in the sit-ins read: "We are very sorry to have an open sit-in, but we were forced to do this after several promises made by the authorities to address our demands proved false."

The protesting workers are calling for improved benefits, including those associated with retirement. The sit-ins took place in Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon, Zahle, Baalbek, Jezzine and Nabatieh.

Nigeria: Locked out call centre workers vow to fight on

On May 1, workers at the Jos MTN call centre were locked out of the premises. MTN is one of Africa's largest mobile phone services companies. It had outsourced its Jos call centre, which was being managed by the Telecom support services company, Communication Network Support Services Ltd (CNSSL). CNSSL closed the centre on the pretext of fumigating it.

The staff, organised by the National Union of Postal and Telecommunications Employees (NUPTE), had previously protested against poor working conditions and low wages and mounted a picket of the building with support from the Nigeria Labour Congress.

Following that action, CNSSL agreed to improve conditions but failed to honour its pledge. Workers again protested which led to the lock out.

CNSSL tried to selectively reinstate some workers, but this was thwarted by a mass picket last Friday. The company then said that all the staff should report back for work and they would negotiate an agreement.

However, the local NUPTE branch chairman said there would be no return to work until CNSSL signed an agreement to raise wages on a par with other call centre pay rates and to improve working conditions.

Nigerian teachers strike over assessment proposals

Members of the National Union of Teachers in the south-western state of Ekiti began an indefinite strike Monday. The strike followed Ekiti state government's proposals to bring in the Teachers Development Needs Assessment (TDNA).

The strike was called after several weeks of negotiations between the state government and the NUT failed to reach any agreement. Teachers fear TDNA will be used as a pretext to sack or demote them.

Nigeria: Imo state civil servants face redeployment

Last week, Imo state civil servant unions struck over the state government's proposals to privatise some of the ministries' activities and to redeploy civil servants into rural areas to staff Community Government Councils.

The Nigerian Labour Congress suspended the action after the first day, following calls for emergency discussions after the government said it would not pursue its proposals. The state government then went back on its word and is pushing the redeployment of civil servants to rural areas.

Civil servants have already been assigned to rural posts even though no office or residential accommodation has been provided for them. The state NLC chairman was quoted as having sent a proposal to the government and civil servant unions setting out how the redeployment process could be made to work.

Nigerian Medical Association threatens nationwide strike

The Nigerian Medical Association has threatened to call a nationwide strike if dismissal notices sent to 788 Lagos state doctors are not withdrawn. The doctors employed at Lagos state hospital had gone out on strike in April, following the state government's failure to implement the previously agreed Consolidated Medical Salary Structure (CONMESS) agreement.

The Lagos state NMA branch is due to meet with Lagos state officials in two weeks' time.

Kenyan teachers demand government release school spending funding

The Kenyan National Union of Teachers has called on the government to release the \$127 million school funding it is holding back. Currently, primary schools are facing a 20 percent shortfall in their spending allocation, while secondary schools have a 90 percent shortfall. According to the union, many head teachers have had to take out loans to finance their school's activities.

The union has threatened to strike if the money is not allocated by June 8.



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