

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

29 June 2012

Norwegian oil workers strike in pay dispute

Over 700 Norwegian oil workers walked off the job Sunday to demand higher wages and an early retirement pension in a dispute that has so far resulted in the shutdown of production in five fields. According to *Upstream News* the strike currently affects around 11 percent of the country's 1.6 million barrel-per-day oil output and around 4 percent of its gas production. The combined sectors accounts for over one-fifth of Norway's gross domestic product and nearly half its exports.

According to the Norwegian Oil Industry Association, the strike was costing about 150 million crowns (\$25 million) per day lost revenue for oil companies.

"Norway has no immediate plans to halt a strike by the country's oil workers but may change its stance should the industrial action escalate", Labour Minister Hanne Bjurstrøm was reported as saying on Wednesday.

"We are not at all at a point where intervention is on the agenda," Bjurstrøm told Reuters. "My responsibility is to ensure this strike does not have large consequences for society. If it did, that would give us cause for intervention."

Bjurstrøm is fully relying on the trade unions to ensure that the strike does not escalate out of control.

On Tuesday the Industri Energi trade union reassured the government that there was no need for it to intervene as gas exports would be deliberately not targeted by any action. Leif Sande, the head of the union told Reuters, "If the strike escalates, we are most likely to choose installations where we can avoid affecting Norwegian gas exports".

Norway is the world's eighth-largest oil exporter and second-largest gas exporter, supplying much of western Europe's energy needs.

Bord Na Móna workers in Ireland in two-day pay strike

Over 1,500 workers at Irish peat company Bord Na Móna are taking part in two days of strikes in a dispute over pay at the company. The strike began on Wednesday. According to the BBC, the firm offered to increase staff pay by 3.5 percent, to be paid over two phases, with a lump sum of 1,000 euros to every worker. It said that "Unions representing workers want the increases to be made pensionable and no progress has been made between the sides."

Briquette production is expected to be worst affected by the action.

"Harvesting activities have been suspended in Longford, Westmeath, Laois, Offaly, Kildare and Roscommon, where 1,500 workers are back on the picket lines for the second time in less than a month," said national broadcaster RTÉ.

Pickets were also reportedly placed at briquette factories in Offaly and Tipperary and at a supply depot at Edenderry power station in Co Offaly.

"ESB power stations will not be disrupted, but the timing of the action is critical as the company's peat harvesting targets are already well in arrears after bad weather," said RTÉ.

Greek hotel and food catering employees stage 24-hour strike over new contract

A 24-hour strike was staged by hotel and food catering workers in Athens on Wednesday in advance of the expiration of their contract on July 18. Two hundred workers rallied outside the Ministry of Labor, demanding that a new collective contract be signed. The collective contract for food catering employees is valid until August.

The workers are also planning a 48-hour strike on July 10-11.

Spanish miners to march on capital in protest of crippling cuts

Spanish miners involved in a bitter, ongoing strike are to march on the capital, Madrid. Around 8,000 miners across the country have been on strike since May 31—including five miners who have locked themselves 300 metres below ground, for the past month.

On June 18, a general strike was called throughout the mining valleys, with an almost 100 percent turnout. The strike movement has been accompanied by pitched battles with the police and road and rail barricades in all the affected areas, with burning tyres and logs being used to block the railroad tracks.

"Eighty miners are setting out on the 248-mile journey from Mieres, a town near the Asturian capital, Oviedo. The 'black march' will cover 19 stages, with miners joining from León, Teruel and Palencia along the way. Around 200 are expected to arrive in the Spanish capital next month, one of many acts planned to protest at the proposed 63 percent cuts in coal subsidies already approved by the EU", reported the *Guardian* on Saturday.

Fire-fighters in Essex, England begin strike against cuts in frontline services

On Thursday fire-fighters in Essex, England began strike action. The strike was called by the Fire Brigade Union (FBU) to protest budget cuts to the fire service. The strike proceeded after the breakdown in talks Monday, between it and the management at Essex County Fire and

Rescue (ECFRS).

Fire-fighters voted by two-to-one in favour of industrial action, after being involved in almost three years of “action short of a strike.” Some 850 full-time and 400 retained fire-fighters are employed in Essex.

One hundred full-time fire-fighters have lost their jobs since 2008, according to the Essex Fire Brigades Union. This is a loss of one of every eight jobs, and further planned cuts will inevitably further increase the risks to the general public.

Essex Fire and Rescue Service announced contingency plans had been made, with 35 out of 70 fire engines available at 29 locations around the county. In an attempt to break the strike and intimidate strikers, fire engines have been fitted with security cameras and moved away from stations.

Further strikes are scheduled for July 7 and 8, August 18 and October 18.

London bus drivers to be re-balloted on strikes over Olympic Games bonus

Around 4,000 London bus drivers are to be balloted again after a high court injunction prevented staff at three operators taking industrial action over Olympic Games bonuses. The transport workers are seeking a £500 bonus for extra work during the multi-billion pound Olympic Games.

Three operators secured an injunction over alleged ballot irregularities last week, although thousands of drivers at 17 other operators went ahead with strikes last Friday.

The Unite union confirmed the re-ballot as “groups of supporters staged protests outside depots used by the three operators involved in the high court ruling,” according to the *Guardian* newspaper.

Transport for London (TfL)—the corporate operator of the capital’s subway and bus networks—said the impromptu protests had disrupted 33 services. TfL is expected to make tens of millions of pounds in extra bus revenues during the Olympics.

The *Guardian* reported: “It is also understood that bus operators have sounded out TfL about a contribution towards an Olympic bonus, but TfL has made clear that the ODA [Olympic Delivery Authority] fund will be the limit of any taxpayer-backed contribution.”

Further strike dates are expected to be announced in a dispute that could include up to 29,000 workers.

London underground train drivers union calls off 24-hour strike over driver disciplinary

The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) trade union called off a planned strike by its members on London Underground’s Piccadilly Line on June 26. The strike was set for June 28 with the dispute centering on a claim by ASLEF that London Underground had abused the disciplinary process in relation to a case of a driver employed at Arnos Grove.

The union issued a statement on its web site giving no details except a comment that, “A conclusion satisfactory to the member and the company was concluded today.”

Workers at Bulgaria’s uncertain Lead-Zinc Complex protest non-

payment of wages

Bulgaria’s Lead and Zinc Complex is being targeted by employees for civil disobedience over unpaid wages.

The Lead and Zinc Complex stopped functioning at the end of last year and its owner, Valentin Zahariev, owes four months’ wages to the 519 workers, according to the Bulgarian National Television (BNT).

Staff had called on Prime Minister Boyko Borisov to come up with a plan for solving the company’s problems by June 20, threatening to stage roadblocks at main road arteries in Kardzhali if their demands were unmet.

The Polish consortium Silesia is said to be the only investor still interested in renting the plant, the two other candidates reported as having withdrawn.

Israeli state x-ray technicians strike over wages and conditions

Israeli state x-ray technicians began to take sanctions this week in an ongoing dispute over wages and conditions. The technicians have been involved in a work dispute for two years over their wages and terms.

“Government hospital x-ray technicians started to apply sanctions on Tuesday as a result of a ‘dead end in negotiations’ between the Histadrut labor federation and the workers’ union on the one hand and the Treasury on the other,” said the *Jerusalem Post*.

The workers union said the employees would only treat emergency cases.

Government workers union head Ariel Ya’acobi said that for more than six months, the Finance Ministry has “refused to sign a collective agreement because it insists on its wording of a single and insignificant sentence that only harms the workers. The Treasury thus decided to hurt the public by pushing the technicians into a situation of sanctions and strikes.”

The industrial action is to continue until further notice, reported the *Jerusalem Post*.

Tunisian furniture company workers hold two-day strike and blockade road

On June 21 workers blockaded a road between the coastal city of Sousse and the industrial area of Akouda in the latest in a series of conflicts between Tunisian furniture company Meublalex and its employees. The blockade was ended when security forces moved in to disperse it.

Meublalex had threatened to close its subsidiaries citing “security concerns” arising from a strike between June 18 and 20. HR Director Bougera claimed that “political and violent slogans” observed during the strike were an incitement to “arson and vandalism” against the company in pursuit of the workers demands.

The UGATT trade union denied the allegations saying this was a pretext to prevent it protecting workers rights.

On Tuesday the company issued a press release saying it would reopen its subsidiaries around the country, closed as a result of the strike. Regarding the status of its employees, the statement gave no commitment, reading, “the workers will be invited individually to rejoin their

positions.”

Meublatex employs around 7,000 workers and is one of Tunisia’s largest domestic furniture firms.

Health workers strike in Adaba, Nigeria

A two week strike by hospital workers in Adaba, Delta state, Nigeria has “paralyzed all activities in the hospital” since midnight June 7th when a ministerial directive over implementing the ‘Consolidated Health Salary Structure (CONHESS10) brought matters to a head.

The workers want the cancellation of the directive and to revert to their previous status. Anthony Asiodu, NAN Joint Action Committee chairman, said the workers were on strike in legitimate pursuit of their rights over issues of promotions and non-payment of some entitlements.

Asaba is the only federal medical centre currently on strike and was resolved to continue until management reversed its decision, he said.

Kenyan sugar plantation workers set to walk out

Around 4,000 sugar plantation workers are set to strike at four Kenyan sugar companies on July 4. The Nzoia, Chemelil, Muhoroni and Sony sugar firms are scheduled to be affected by the scheduled action.

The strike has been called by Kenya Union of Sugar Plantation Workers, who said that firms had failed to approve the report on job evaluation and a salary survey. Francis Wangara, the secretary general of the union said, “A job evaluation and salary survey undertaken last year recommended re-categorisation of jobs for our members”.

Speaking to the *Standard* web site, Wangara said management had reneged on an agreement to review the salaries and implement changes by last month. He stated, “The recategorisation was supposed to start in May. The management of the sugar factories are now dismissing the report, yet they had representatives in the survey”.



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