

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

13 July 2012

## French printers strike over layoffs

On Thursday morning, French print workers protesting layoffs staged a nationwide strike. Many newspapers had to publish online and free of charge.

The switch to digital technology has been accompanied by numerous redundancies. According to a report on the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers web site, Hersant publishing house has fired 670 workers. Presstails press distribution company has laid off around 1,000 employees.

According to *rt.com*, “The strike was condemned by the National Union of Daily Press.” It has said that the printed media is the victim of the strike, to the benefit of competitors on television and the internet.

## Workers at London Olympics sponsor balloted for action over pay

An Olympics sponsor at the centre of the government’s cuts to disability benefits faces action during the Games, according to the Public and Commercial Services Union.

Around 1,500 workers are to be balloted across Atos Healthcare and Atos IT Services, after they voted by 95 percent and 89 percent respectively to reject below-inflation pay offers. Workers from sites across the country could potentially be taking industrial action during the Olympic Games, which lists Atos as a “worldwide partner.”

The involvement of around 400 administrative and reception staff may mean health assessment centres having to close. Its IT division provides round-the-clock technical support to BBC production staff and on-air presenters across the UK, as well as fault diagnosis at vehicle test centres.

Atos has been criticised for its handling of “back to work” tests on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions, done in order to cut benefits.

Atos is sponsoring the 2012 Paralympic Games in London, prompting disabled activists to call for a boycott. Earlier this year, the former chairman of Atos, Bernard Bourigeaud, was co-opted onto the governing body.

Atos is the IT partner of the games and is building the web site.

The company has consistently refused to pay the official “living wage” to its staff—£7.20 an hour, or £8.30 an hour in London. Atos made annual profits worth more than £280 million, a 6.7 percent increase on the previous year.

## Cleaning workers on Transpennine Express trains, England in pay strike

Cleaning workers on the Carlisle contract of Transpennine Express

trains are to go on strike July 14 and also from July 16 to July 21, in a dispute over pay and conditions.

Recent meetings between the rail union and company failed to reach full agreement.

## Portuguese health workers in 48-hour strike over cuts

Doctors and nurses across Portugal staged a 48-hour strike Wednesday and Thursday, to protest cuts to health spending.

The government is slashing €800 million (\$985 million) from the health budget, as part of an unprecedented austerity programme made in return for a €78 billion (\$96 billion) bailout last year.

Doctors are working excessive hours and are protesting against the increasing use of private companies to provide public services. The government has also increased charges for some services.

Hundreds of doctors dressed in white smocks protested in the capital city of Lisbon on Wednesday, with some wearing black armbands to mourn the death of the health service.

Placards reading, “Access for all and not just the rich” were displayed outside the health ministry. The strike affected 400,000 medical appointments and 4,500 operations were cancelled.

## Emergency powers used to end pension strike by Norwegian oil workers

The Norwegian government has ended a 16-day strike by offshore oil and gas workers using emergency powers to force compulsory arbitration.

The government is a coalition between the Labour Party, the Socialist Labour Party—an alliance of ex-Stalinists and disaffected former LP members—and the Centre Party.

Oil and gas companies were set to impose a lock-out Tuesday on 6,500 offshore workers, before the action of Labour Minister Hanne Bjurstrøm, she said was in order to “protect Norway’s vital interests.”

The unions put up no opposition, with Leif Sande, the leader of the largest trade union Industri Energi, stating, “It’s very sad. The strike is over.”

Norway’s three main unions had staged a dispute over the offshore workers’ demand for the right to retire at 62 with a full pension, three years ahead of the general age for oil workers and five years ahead of Norway’s official retirement age.

Oil prices had risen on Monday, due to fear of the shutdown of the world’s fifth largest oil exporter, which has seen oil production cut by 13 percent and gas output by 4 percent due to the strikes that began June 24.

The strike had shut five Statoil-operated oil and gas fields on the Norwegian continental shelf, including the Oseberg and Heidrun fields. Oseberg is part of the North Sea Brent oil benchmark and is used as the

basis for many of the world's trades. Norwegian oil fields ramped up output on Tuesday, as soon as the government intervened to end the strike.

### **Cypriot slaughterhouse workers strike**

Slaughterhouse workers in Kofinou in the southern Larnaca District announced a protest this week to protest over-due wages and benefits.

The workers are still owed their 13th monthly salary since December. In addition, 29 have been made redundant but have still to receive their compensation payments. Others workers are awaiting overdue pensions.

### **Israel Military Industries to be hit by strike**

IMI (Israel Military Industries) employees are to strike on Sunday, after the Ministry of Finance delayed paying salaries.

Globes reported this as a way to "apply pressure in the talks on the company's privatization."

The Histadrut (general trade union federation in Israel) announced the planned strike Tuesday, after previously declaring a dispute at the company.

Starting from Wednesday, IMI staff have stopped showing up for the second and third shifts, and ceased working overtime. The workers are also threatening to suspend two scheduled tests for foreign buyers.

### **Egyptian ceramics workers protest non payment of wages**

Hundreds of Cleopatra Ceramics workers demonstrated outside Egypt's Supreme Court in Cairo, Thursday. They denounced employer Mohamed Abul-Enein, a former member of ousted president Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP).

One worker, Ahmed Roshdi, told *Ahram Online*, "Abul-Enein stands in opposition to around 25,000 workers at Cleopatra factories nationwide. He insists on renegeing on his promises to distribute profit shares to the workers."

As well as non payment of wages, Abul-Enein faces charges of "unjustly sacking factory workers."

In March, around 4,000 workers at the Cleopatra Ceramics factory in Ain Sokhna staged a strike to demand wage increases, bonus payments and a share of company profits. In May, work stoppages disrupted factory operations for 12 days after company management stopped providing free transportation for workers. Public transport costs represent an ever larger portion of workers' wages.

Cleopatra Ceramics has a presence in more than 100 countries. Its Ain Sokhna factory is one of the largest ceramics plants in the Middle East.

Abul-Enein was summoned for questioning in a number of corruption cases following last year's uprising, but no charges were ever brought. On Thursday, the prosecutor-general Abdel-Meguid Mahmoud issued a travel ban on Abul-Enein, Egypt's state news agency *MENA* reported.

### **Iranian cement factory workers strike**

"Seven hundred workers at the Sepahan Cement factory in Isfahan have entered their third day of strike to protest their unfavourable legal and working conditions", reported *Radio Zamaneh*, Monday.

The Iranian Labour News Agency (ILNA) reported that the workers' efforts to push their demands through the Ministry of Labour had failed.

The plant produces 13,000 tons of cement each month.

"The head of the Isfahan Islamic Work Associations, Ahmadreza Moini, told ILNA that more than 700 of the plant's workers are contracted through brokers, and these brokers are not paying the workers their proper wages", said *Radio Zamaneh*.

Iranian media also reported this week that more than 100 telephone information centre workers in Shiraz have entered their fifth day of strike in protest at new contracts with lower pay and benefits.

Africa

### **Zimbabwe municipal workers strike**

More than 40 municipal workers in the southern Zimbabwe town of Gwanda went on strike last Friday, following the non-payment of wages for March, April and May. They picketed the Gwanda municipal building to press home their demands. They are members of the Zimbabwe Urban Council Workers Union.

The Gwanda union branch secretary told the press, "We are hungry and tired of working for no pay. They should give us our salaries today."

The acting mayor responded, saying March and April's outstanding pay had been paid in the last two days and they were trying to pay the May arrears but did not have the finances to do so.

### **South African forestry workers' strike continues**

The 1,500 workers employed by Komatiland Forests continue their strike for a 15 percent pay increase. Komatiland runs 18 forests in the Mpumalanga, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal provinces of South Africa.

Mpumalanga province economic development spokesman, Selvy Mohlala has urged the Food and Allied Workers Union and Komatiland management to return to negotiations.

### **Niger uranium miners' strike**

Around 1,200 uranium miners at the Akouta mine in the northwest of Niger began a three day strike on Monday in pursuit of a wage increase. The mine is owned by Cominak, a subsidiary of the French public energy company Avera. The workers represented by the SYNTRAMIN union are seeking a three percent pay increase.

The Akouta deep mine produces around 1,600 tonnes of uranium a year. Niger is a major producer of uranium. Avera is currently constructing the Imouraren mine, which is expected to double Niger's production of uranium when it comes on line in 2014.

## **Nigerian teachers strike over minimum wage**

After a two week ultimatum, teachers in the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) in the north-western state of Kebbi began an indefinite strike last Friday. They are demanding a 30 percent salary increase for professional teachers, a 12.5 percent increase for non-professional teachers and for the implementation of the federally agreed N18, 000 (\$112) minimum wage to any teacher currently not in receipt.

The NUT accused the Kebbi state government of delaying tactics in not setting up a dispute settlement committee.



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