

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

20 July 2012

Strike and lockout of Polish electronics workers

Workers have been locked out during a strike at the Chinese Chung Hong Electronics factory, a supplier of Korean multinational electronics company LG, in a Special Economic Zone in Kobierzyce near Wroclaw, Poland.

On June 28, a member of the Inicjatywa Pracownicza (Workers' Initiative) trade union, was dismissed. As a result, forty workers took industrial action that lasted two weeks. In response, the company sacked 24 striking workers on July 10.

A struggle has been ongoing over the past few months for a wage increase, the restoration of the social fund, the reduction of the annual overtime limit and the restoration of free transport.

Special Economic Zones enjoy generous government tax exemptions to facilitate increased exploitation of workers.

The sacked workers staged protests in front of the Chung Hong factory and in front of LG Electronics. LG used friendly media to denounce the workers' protest, saying it "spreads chaos, creates a negative investment climate and blocks the economic development of Poland, and leads to a deterioration of diplomatic relations with the biggest investor countries in Poland; the result of it will be an increased unemployment in Poland."

Chung Hong Electronics is reportedly looking for scabs through temporary agencies.

French auto workers strike to protest factory closure and job losses

French auto workers employed at the PSA Peugeot-Citroen plant in Aulnay-sous-Bois, north of Paris, staged a protest strike on July 12. Some 250 workers protested on the picket line outside the factory. After voting unanimously to strike, the workers halted production. They chanted, "PSA criminal bosses," "PSA has money, no factory should close."

The company announced last week it is to close the plant and scale down others with the loss of 8,000 jobs. Some 1,400 jobs at the firm's Rennes factory and 3,600 jobs at other plants. These redundancies are on top of 6,000 job losses announced by PSA Peugeot-Citroen last year.

The firm said the closure and redundancies were necessary due to its growing financial losses and sales which have fallen by 20 percent in Europe in the first quarter. Sales of its vehicles have been hit due to the deepening recession in the south of Europe. It has already warned that it faces a first-half loss of €700 million (\$858.2 million).

Speaking to the TV station TF1, Chairman Philippe Varin said the firm was losing around €100 million a month, adding, "We can't keep factories working at half capacity. We have to stop the haemorrhage."

These measures cut Peugeot's workforce of 100,000 in France by nearly 10 percent.

Greek hotel workers dispute ends in pay cut

Last Friday, the Greek Panhellenic Federation of Hoteliers and the hotel employee's union (POEE-YTE) signed a new collective labour contract following five months of negotiations and several days of strikes.

The hoteliers' federation announced that the two sides have agreed on cutting the basic pay of workers by 15 percent. There will be no changes to the institutional provisions of the previous contract. The new contract will be valid until 2014.

Tourism Minister Olga Kefaloyianni was pleased with the union's sellout, saying, "The signing of a new contract is a positive development of key significance for the hotel sector for this and next season as well as for the country's tourism in general."

Portuguese doctors launch strike

Thousands of Portuguese doctors launched a strike July 11 to protest against budget cuts. The Portuguese health ministry announced the strike would lead to the cancellation of 400,000 appointments and nearly 4,500 operations.

The government has decreased overtime in hospitals, increased prices for prescription medication and shut down services.

Workers strike over pay and job cuts at UK cakes and desserts supplier for supermarkets

Workers at the Hull factory of Greencore, a supplier of cakes and desserts to UK supermarkets Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's and Waitrose, announced a protest for Thursday over pay cuts and threats of redundancy. Greencore is threatening to make 236 people redundant and replace them with agency workers on worse terms and conditions.

The workers are members of the Unite trade union who have accused the company of abolishing overtime, shift pay, and bank holiday pay for all workers. The majority of the workforce is on the national minimum wage. Hundreds of workers have signed a petition calling for a living wage.

The firm first announced the jobs threat in Hull in May after it reportedly lost a £7 million contract with Sainsbury's.

Greencore Group plc is an international manufacturer of convenience

foods. It has 22 sites in the UK and the US and employs around 11,000.

Cleaning workers strike at London John Lewis store

On July 13, cleaning workers at John Lewis' flagship Oxford Street department store in London took industrial action and formed picket lines outside in a dispute over pay and threats to their jobs.

John Lewis employs the cleaners through a managing contractor MML, which sub-contracts to a cleaning contractor ICM. According to a *Guardian* report, the ICM cleaners are on a minimum wage of £6.04 per hour and a third of their jobs are under threat. The employees are demanding the "London living wage" of £8.30 per hour, and better working conditions.

Earlier this year, John Lewis cut its cleaning budget. The remaining cleaners have to increase the rate of their work by a factor of four, for half the pay.

This is the first time in its 148 year history that a strike has taken place at the department store.

UK train drivers union ASLEF announce further strike dates after suspending previous planned action

On Thursday the UK train drivers' union ASLEF announced a strike to be held by 450 of its members on East Midlands Trains. The action is set to be held on August 6, 7 and 8 in an ongoing dispute over pension contributions. If it goes ahead, the action will coincide with the London Olympic Games.

East Midlands Trains is planning to cut both its own and staff contributions to its pension fund from July. It has claimed drivers would be £500 a year better off without affecting pension benefits.

In a comment on the union's web site ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan said, "It is disingenuous to suggest our members are getting something for nothing. The current owners of the East Midlands Trains franchise may have no responsibility over the pension fund in a few years, whereas our members face the prospect of either crippling high contribution rates or reduced benefits due to a short-term cost-cutting decision made by EMT that has left the scheme in deficit."

The union called off a previous strike, set to be held from June 23-25, at the last minute, in order to hold further talks with the private rail operating company.

Egyptian textile workers strike spreads

A strike by 20,000 workers at the state-owned Mahalla Misr Spinning and Weaving Company against corrupt management and for a greater share in profits is threatening to spread to a number of neighbouring governorates.

The textile company employs 24,000 workers and became a symbol of the explosion in industrial militancy across Egypt after two successful strikes in 2006 and in 2008. These were important stages in the development of the uprising that toppled the Mubarak regime last year.

On Tuesday, the strike entered its third day and had been joined by workers at seven other textile plants in Alexandria, Mahalla and two other

Delta cities.

A series of video interviews posted on menasolidaritynetwork.com quoted one worker, Faysal Laqusha, saying, "The revolution didn't bring anything to the workers of Misr Spinning in Mahalla. Back in 2006 we were getting profit-sharing bonuses of four-and-a-half months. Other people are getting more and we're getting less. How can they bring in someone like Fouad Abd-al-Alim [new head of the public sector Holding Company for Textiles and Garment Production]? He was the most corrupt one here. He destroyed the factory in Mahalla and is destroying the rest of the public textile factories. The workers here are making the revolution again from the start. The coming revolution will be a workers' revolution."

Hundreds of Egyptian workers protest Saudi-owned company over pay

Around 350 workers at the United Sugar Company (USCE) protested at the Saudi Arabian consulate in Suez governorate on Monday to demand a pay increase.

USCE is majority-owned by the Saudi-based Savola Group. A 20-day sit-in at USCE's factory in Ain Sokha port has brought production there to a halt. USCE workers also went on strike in February to demand a greater share of company profits.

The Savola Group has full ownership of four Egypt-based companies, as well as other interests in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia. It saw gross profits increase from \$234.6 million to \$269 million in the first quarter of 2012, according to the company's web site.

Mauritania: Protesting miner shot dead

A strike by copper miners organised by the National Workers Confederation of Mauritania began last Thursday in pursuit of a wage increase and better conditions. On Sunday police wielding truncheons and tear gas clashed with the protesting miners, leading to the death of one of the striking miners.

The miners picketed the headquarters of the Copper Mines of Mauritania in the town of Akjouti. The mine is majority owned by the Canadian based First Quantum Minerals Ltd. It produces around 40,000 tons of copper annually. The company suspended operations at the copper mine and urged the Mauritanian government mediation process to quickly resolve the dispute.

Workers strike Zambia newspaper

Nearly 300 journalists and production workers at the state-run *Times of Zambia* went on strike Monday over non-payment of wages. They have yet to receive their June salary. Two weeks ago, the Information Ministry warned the paper is almost bankrupt and told the board to come up with a rescue plan.

Namibia gold workers strike

Around 250 miners, two thirds of the workforce at the Navachab open-pit gold mine in Karibib, went on strike last Friday in pursuit of a pay increase. They began the strike after negotiations broke down the previous day. They are seeking a 12 percent wage increase and other benefits. The miners turned down the company's revised offer of an 8.5 percent increase

Ugandan teachers defy government threats

Teachers in Uganda, members of the Uganda National Teachers Union (UNATU) began a two-day strike Monday in pursuit of a wage increase and for adequate government funding of education. The government had warned in advance that striking teachers would be punished, but withdrew the threat.

Pay is low, with overall inflation rates at over 20 percent and around 40 percent for food. The government recently abolished school fees in primary schools in an attempt to provide universal primary education, but has failed to adequately finance them.

South African metal workers oppose cutbacks

Workers at Evraz Highveld Steel and Vanadium Limited in eMalahleni, organised by the National Union of Metalworkers of SA went on strike Monday.

The company had informed the union in May of possible cutbacks. A spokeswoman for the company, Cathie Lewis, told reporters that a plan to close the plant had been drawn up.

South Africa plantation workers blockade

Plantation workers from the Timbadola Entabeni plantation outside Makhado have been carrying out a blockade of roads over the last week in support of their strike demanding a 15 percent pay increase. The company had offered eight percent.

On Monday more than 800 workers picketed Entabeni headquarters. They are demanding that the pay increase should also extend to administration workers, and are seeking an end to rolling temporary contracts and for workers to be given permanent contracts.

Nigerian research institution workers strike

A nationwide strike by staff in research and allied institutions began on Monday. They are members of the Academic Staff Union of Research Institutions (ASURI) and are seeking parity of research grants with those made to university professors. They are also seeking the removal of Dr Solomon Badejo as executive director of the Forestry Research Institute of Nigeria, FRIN.

Swaziland sawmill workers strike

Workers at Rocklands Sawmill went on indefinite strike last Thursday over the failure of the company to implement a previously negotiated collective agreement. Amongst their grievances are lack of protective clothing, non-payment of overtime, and annual and sick leave.

Swaziland public sector workers dispute gathers momentum

Nurses in the Swaziland Democratic Nurses Union (SWADNU) began a two-day strike on Wednesday to push their demand for a 4.5 percent pay increase. They join teachers who have been on indefinite strike for more than two weeks and civil servants who went on strike last week.

The South African Municipal Workers Union issued a press statement on Monday condemning attacks by Swazi security forces on striking public sector workers on Wednesday and Friday of last week.

The statement says, "The security forces, comprising of police, army, prison officers and many not in uniform, physically attacked peaceful gatherings of workers. They fired tear gas canisters, stones, ran amok with baton charges and opened fire with rubber bullets, at one stage shooting at will and at short range into a group of trade unionists who were hemmed into a blocked area."



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