

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

27 July 2012

Remploy workers in the UK strike to oppose factory closures and job losses

Disabled workers employed by the Remploy organisation struck nationwide for 24 hours on Thursday for the second time in a week. The strike was called by the Unite and the GMB trade unions.

Remploy offers employment to the disabled and its workers are protesting plans by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government, announced in March, to shut down 27 factories by the end of the year. The closures will see the loss of 1,700 jobs from the current level of 2,800. A further 18 factories will see their subsidy reduced while they are assessed for privatisation. The previous Labour Party government closed 28 Remploy factories in 2008, with the loss of 2,000 jobs.

The cuts are part of the government's overall £123 billion austerity programme and will effectively mean the end of Remploy, which was established as part of the 1945 welfare state.

Among the products made at Remploy factories are uniforms for the UK's armed forces and most of the furniture for Britain's schools and libraries. A number of its factories play a critical role in supplying local manufacturing facilities. Its plants in Coventry and Birmingham are in Remploy's automotive section and supply local car manufacturers.

Unite and the GMB, two of the largest private sector trade unions in the country, have refused to mobilise any of their members alongside Remploy workers, such as at Jaguar Land Rover.

GMB National Secretary Phil Davies has instead called on GMB members to "lobby MPs, councillors and others to get them to place work with Remploy."

The only campaign Unite is waging beyond the Remploy factories is to instruct its members to email Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith.

Unite and the GMB have also set up a petition campaign asking Prime Minister David Cameron to "instruct the DWP to enter into meaningful discussion on the structure and future of Remploy and the whole of supported employment programme in Britain with a view to introducing a new vision based on public procurement work."

Italian local public transport workers strike nationwide

On July 20, local public transport workers struck nationwide in Italy on Friday in protest over changes to contract conditions. The strike was four hours long, held at different times in the day from city to city, hitting bus, tram and metro services.

The ANSA web site reported, "In Rome the metro A line closed at 08.30 and services were reduced on the metro B line. There were also disruptions to buses, trams and local overland railway services."

Italian trade unions threaten general strike

On Thursday Italy's largest trade union federation CGIL and third-biggest union UIL threatened to hold a general strike in September. The announcement was made in response to the government of Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti plans to enforce 26-billion-euro package of spending cuts and privatisations.

CGIL Secretary-General Rossana Dettori said, "We have started the procedures and on August 1 we will announce the exact date for the September strike."

Greek public sector workers protest in Athens

On Tuesday hundred of Greek civil servants protested outside the labour and finance ministries in Athens against plans by the government to impose a further €11.6 euros in cuts, including the slashing of pensions. According to reports the government plans to cut by 22.6 percent the lump sums available to civil servants on retirement. This is on top of 20 percent cut already imposed last year.

The protest was organised to coincide with the return to Athens officials from the European Union and International Monetary Fund.

A demonstration was called by the public sector federation Adedy and was held at 1pm the same day. A three-hour stoppage was also held by local government staff to demand a cut in bank loan rates for workers.

UK East Midlands Trains drivers to strike over pensions

Around 450 drivers at East Midland's Trains are to take industrial action August 6-8, in an ongoing dispute over pensions.

The three days of strikes, if it goes ahead, will occur during the London Olympic Games. But a previous strike planned for June 23-25 was suspended to allow for further negotiations to take place between the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) union and management. The talks failed to produce a formal agreement.

G4S security guards at Olympics in Manchester protest six weeks unpaid wages

Up to 50 security guards at Old Trafford, the site for Olympic Games football matches in Manchester, England walked out after they were not paid by the security firm G4S.

They staged a protest July 21 outside the stadium, saying they had not been paid since June 6.

Management at Manchester United have brought in a replacement firm until the dispute is resolved. Mohammed Umar, a supervisor with Arete Securex sub-contracted by G4S, said there had been “some problems” with paying wages.

Greater Manchester Police said they had been called in to provide security at Old Trafford after G4S failed to recruit enough guards. This police presence is in addition to a hundred officers already due to be posted around the ground for the duration of the games.

Problems concerning G4S provided the government with an opportunity to deploy 3,500 additional troops to an already heavily militarised Olympics—bringing the total to 11,000.

G4S plc is the world’s largest security company measured by revenues and is the world’s third-largest private sector employer after Wal-Mart Stores and Foxconn. G4S made £532 million profit last year on a £7.5 billion turnover, running among other things security, prison and detention services around the globe. The company has been contracted to provide security for the London Olympics. Plans are currently being reviewed to outsource police support services to G4S from at least three police forces across England.

UK Paragon print workers take two further strike days

Workers at print company Paragon, in Sunderland, took industrial action on July 24 over an attack on their terms and conditions. A further day of action is planned for July 27.

“The company is trying to impose significant reductions to industry standard shift and overtime premiums on the workers, despite a major increase in profits last year,” said the Unite union web site.

Workers at the company have had seven years of wage freezes.

ISS cleaners in UK vote overwhelmingly to strike

Cleaning workers employed by the firm ISS are to take industrial action on July 27-29 July, for better pay and conditions.

The low-paid workers voted by over 95 percent in favour according to the web site of the London Transport Regional Council of the Rail Maritime and Transport workers’ union.

The site also forecast a “high-profile demonstration on the opening day of the Olympics in the Stratford station / Olympic Park proximity.”

Office workers in Durham, England balloted for strike over pay and conditions

Over 380 office workers in Durham, UK are to be balloted for industrial action in a dispute over pay and conditions.

The workers are employed in Millburngate House, Framwellgate Riverside, for information technology support company Atos on contracts for National Savings and Investments, the Borders Agency, the Vehicle

Operator Standards Agency and the BBC.

The current offer from the company is worth less than two percent to most staff. A meeting in the office car park attended by about 100 workers was informed that Atos chief executive Thierry Breton earned £1.9 million last year and his bonus of £1million would fund an improved pay award for the workforce.

Thousands of Egyptian textile workers suspend strikes

Thousands of Egyptian state textile workers suspended their strikes July 24.

The strike had impacted widely in the industry. Around 23,000 workers at Misr Spinning and Weaving, the country’s largest textile company, had been on strike for over a week, demanding improved pay and conditions.

The strikers had been joined by about 12,000 workers from other state textile firms.

“The Misr Spinning and Weaving workers said their demands had been partially met but that they would resume industrial action in September if they did not receive more concessions,” *Reuters* reported.

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.

Sit-in by gold miners in Egypt’s Red Sea region

Around 1,500 miners staged an open-ended sit-in Sunday in the Red Sea flagship Sukari gold mine of Centamin PLC, in opposition to the decision of the mine’s operating company, Centamin-Egypt, to lay off several mine workers.

The workers had previously demanded wage rise of 60 percent as a hazard fee, as stipulated in the Egyptian Mines and Quarries Law, in addition to pay 10 percent of profits as worker bonuses.

“The sit-in comes after almost a month of warnings by workers. In June, they reportedly asked the worker’s office to intervene in securing their demands. When that failed, workers announced a 15-day countdown, after which they launched the current sit-in,” said *Ahram Online*.

The decision to lay off workers came after months in which workers had called for the implementation of the Egyptian Mines and Quarries Law and equal pay for Egyptian and foreign workers.

On Tuesday, management fired 29 workers including members of the executive office of the independent workers’ union. On Wednesday, Centamin PLC said it had halted operations at its gold mine. A strike at the mine, in March, based on the same demands, resulted in the closure of the company for a week.

Civil servants hold general strike in Lebanon

On Tuesday civil servants in Lebanon staged a general strike to protest the government’s decision to exclude adjustments to their salary scale from the 2012 state budget. The stoppage was called by the Union Coordination Committee, which organises public sector employee and private and public school teachers.

During the day protests were held at a number of ministries and public

institutions, including Social Affairs, Industry and Education.

The *Daily Star* reported that, “Public school teachers have boycotted marking the official examinations of grades 9 and 12. They are demanding a salary scale that would give them and all other public sector employees the raise that the private sector received in January. Civil servants arguing for the new wage scale say that approximately 200,000 public sector employees would benefit from it.

South African steel workers strike enters second week

A strike by 4,000 workers at the Evraz Highveld Steel and Vanadium Limited in eMalahleni has entered its second week. They are organised by the National Union of Metalworkers of SA (NUMSA).

The company has laid off 100, with plans for a further 400 to be retrenched. It has cut wages in half and plans to bring in a four shift system. Currently the firm operates a three shift system, allowing staff to earn overtime.

Nigerian power workers strike

Workers at the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) at the Egbin Power Station and the Eko Electricity Distribution Company in Lagos went on strike last Friday over non-payment of benefits. They evacuated both sites on the instruction of the National Union of Electricity Employees (NUEE) when military personnel were brought into to occupy them.

Namibian gold miners’ strike enters second week

A strike by 300 gold miners at the Navachab gold mine in Karibib has entered its second week. The miners had originally demanded a 12 percent pay increase, but have now dropped their demand to 10 percent.

The deputy minister of labour and social welfare mediated at a meeting with union and company representatives on Monday with a view to reaching a settlement by the end of the week. Navachab estimate the stoppage has cost them around N\$12 million (\$1.4 million) in lost production.

Mauritania: Copper miners dispute continues

Copper miners at the Canadian-owned Copper Mines of Mauritania (MCM) continue their strike in pursuit of better conditions and a wage increase.

A miner, 36-year-old Mohamed Ould Mechdhoufi, was killed when the strikers clashed with police on 15 July while picketing MCM headquarters. The Mauritanian Forum of Human Rights Organisations has condemned the police violence and called for an investigation into Mechdhoufi’s death.

Police again attacked the miners last Sunday, using tear gas and truncheons as the strikers tried to stop strike breakers being bussed in to

the mine.

Swaziland government uses threats of sackings and army to intimidate striking public sector workers

Teachers in the Swaziland National Association of Teachers (SNAT) went on strike five weeks ago, seeking a 4.5 percent pay rise. They were joined by National Public Service and Allied Workers Union (SWADNU) members two weeks ago.

They are also protesting the autocratic rule of King Mswanti III, who has a reported fortune of \$200 million.

The government is desperate to break the workers determined strike and threatened anyone not returning to work by July 24 with dismissal. Commissioner of Police Isaac Magaguta met with senior army personnel at the weekend and drew up plans to use troops to protect strike breakers. He also banned strikers from visiting workplaces to argue for support for the strike.

Protests in Morocco against the government

On Sunday protesters in Casablanca, Morocco demonstrated in protest at the government’s policies and against growing social inequality.

According to a report in the Egyptian Daily News, the protests were called by the February 20 movement, “to ask for more democracy.”

The web site reported, that “At a protest in the working class area of Bernoussi in Casablanca, hundreds marched and chanted against government policies, social marginalisation, and corruption.”

It added, “They also took aim at the wealthy clique of Moroccans known as the Makhzen, the governing elite centred around monarch King Mohammed VI.

The report cited comments from a “citizen journalists” who said the Casablanca “march went peacefully until suddenly at the very end police started beating street vendors and passers-by. Later they started chasing and apprehending protesters.”



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