

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

10 August 2012

Europe

London Underground cleaners strike for living wage

Cleaning workers on the London Underground, employed by the private contractors Initial and ISS, began 48-hour strike action Thursday to demand a living wage and a bonus for increased work during the Olympics Games.

The cleaners, many of whom are migrant workers, are members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union.

After a long campaign in 2007, the workers won the right to a London Living Wage, set at £7.45 per hour to rise in line with inflation. But Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson has since frozen the wage at £8.30 per hour.

The workers complain that this is not enough to cover their costs of commuting to work in the capital—one of the most expensive cities in the world. During the Olympic Games, they are subject to an even greater workload, but, due to their employment by private contractors, have missed out on additional work bonuses paid to other Underground staff.

Pathology staff in Salford, England threaten industrial action

Pathology staff at Salford Royal National Health Service (NHS) Foundation Trust are threatening industrial action following a proposal by trust managers that could reduce some salaries by up to £6,000 a year.

Staff are particularly angered as the proposal follows a recent £200 million expenditure on redevelopment of the Salford hospital site. The dispute follows the merger with nearby Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh's pathology services.

The health workers have already had a three-year pay freeze, a large reduction in payments for working unsocial hours, and seen increases in their pension contributions. Some have lost up to 30 percent of earnings.

Toll booth workers on Wales/England Severn bridges vote to strike

Around 70 toll booth workers voted last month for industrial action in a dispute with the Severn River Crossing (SRC) over changes to shift patterns.

The ballot was in response to an official letter from the company stating that if the new shift patterns were not adopted, disciplinary procedures

would be invoked.

A strike would affect both Severn bridges between south Wales and west England. SRC have since withdrawn the letter and the Unite union has agreed to delay the proposed industrial action while negotiations take place.

Welsh driver's license agency staff to strike over cuts in jobs, pay

Some 2,000 workers are due to strike at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) offices in Swansea, Wales in protest at planned office closures and disputes over pay.

The Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) has said more than 1,200 jobs at the DVLA are threatened under the plans to close offices and transfer work to the agency's headquarters in Swansea.

Anti-Blacklist protest planned at Balfour Beatty Scottish HQ

Members of the Blacklist Support Group are joining electricians to stage a protest later this month outside the Scottish headquarters of Balfour Beatty Engineering Services' in Glasgow, according to the *Construction Enquirer*.

Balfour Beatty was one of the contractors recently revealed to be involved in the surveillance and blacklisting of thousands of workers, including some suspected by construction companies of having leftist political convictions.

Over 40 major firms referred to the secret database, which listed the details of thousands of workers, including their involvement in union activity, before hiring staff. Workers included on the list allege they were deprived of their livelihoods as a result of their inclusion.

Details of the blacklist surfaced in 2008 when it emerged that an organisation called Consulting Association held files on some 3,200 agency workers, including political activists, shop stewards and health and safety representatives. Some of this data was gathered using secret surveillance.

Invoices were discovered showing that 44 companies had paid to see the names on the list. Full details of the material it contained have only begun to emerge as workers now pursue individual legal actions over their victimisation.

Strike by Spanish rail workers against privatisation

A one-day strike by rail workers took place last week, over plans to privatise the railways.

The strike, which involved employees of the Spain's two state-owned railway companies Administrador de Infraestructuras Ferroviarias and Red Nacional de los Ferrocarriles Españoles, caused major disruptions to the country's train services.

The government's official rationale is to sell off the railways in a bid to reduce the country's budget deficit. Around 100,000 jobs are believed to be at risk. Further industrial action is planned for September 17.

Aer Lingus staff threaten strike to protect pensions

Staff at Aer Lingus and the Dublin Airport Authority (DAA) voted last week to take industrial action to protect their pensions.

The workers, who pay into the Irish Aviation Superannuation Scheme (IASS) pension pot, fear their savings will be forfeited if their employers do not plug the scheme's €700 million funding black hole, according to *People Management*.

Six unions, SIPTU, Impact, Mandate, TEEU, Unite and UCATT, have balloted members to take industrial action if any "negative changes" are forced through. Protests could include an overtime ban, working to rule, non-cooperation and limited work stoppages.

Aer Lingus is currently fending off a takeover by rival airline Ryanair. Bringing its defence against the bid to the European competition authorities has reportedly cost Aer Lingus many millions.

Norway oil workers in action over retirement age

Around 700 offshore personnel are currently taking industrial action over the right to retire at 62 years.

The strike involves workers at Statoil, BP, and ESS Support Services working on Skarv, the Oseberg Field Centre, Heidrun, and Oseberg's "Floatel Superior".

Jan Hodneland, Chief negotiator for the employer's organisation, the Oil Industry Association (OLF), complained, "The strike will cost roughly NOK 150 million per day (US\$25.1 million), so it will not take long before the bill tops NOK 1 billion (US\$167.7 million)."

Italian beach workers strike

Thousands of beach workers at clubs across the country's normally popular coast staged a short strike last week in an ongoing dispute over the right of access to the seafronts.

The action—organised during peak season—was in response to a government plan that would see the right to operate patches of seafront decided by auction from 2016. Although it is officially state property, access to much of the Italian coast has long been controlled by the beach clubs, which blanket the sand with umbrellas and sun loungers and charge beachgoers to use them.

Reuters said, "But the beach workers' union says the government's

proposal for auctions will favour multinational companies over smaller local businesses, putting 30,000 beach business and 600,000 workers at risk."

Africa

Namibian cleaners strike

Around 80 workers employed by Epopaleko went on strike on Monday. Among their demands is a 20 percent pay increase for labourers and 10 percent for supervisors and the payment of housing, transport and medical allowances. They are protesting that they have no permanent contracts even though some of them have worked for Epopaleko for more than two years.

The company provides cleaning services to the diamond mining company Namdeb, jointly owned by Consolidated Diamond Mines and the Namibian government.

The workers first lodged their claim in April. Negotiations between the company and the Mineworkers of Namibia began in June, but have broken down.

Zambian building workers strike

Building workers employed on the nearly completed houses for Zambia Air Force personnel in the Twin Palm area of Lusaka went on strike this week.

They are demanding the Chinese-owned construction firm pay the newly-legislated minimum wage. Last month the government brought in legislation which doubled the pay rate for domestic, shop and general workers and revised conditions.

Zambian miners' dispute

Miners at the Chinese-owned Collum coal mine in Sinazongwe went on strike at the weekend, accusing management of not implementing the government minimum wage of \$320 a month.

Anger at conditions at the mine boiled over when, following a chase, the mine manager was killed when he was hit by a coal trolley. His deputy was seriously injured. Twelve miners have now been arrested.

There is a long history of bitterness against the Chinese-owned company. Last year rioting miners were fired on by the Chinese managers. The managers were initially charged with attempted murder, but the charges were later dropped.

Following a visit by a Zambian official to the mine in 2006, the mine was closed for three days because of the state it was in. Miners complained of inadequate equipment and clothing.

A Human Rights Watch report issued last November, "You'll be Fired if You Refuse", set out conditions in the mines. It stated, "The Chinese-run companies are the worst on health and safety, working hours and the right to organise."

It quoted one miner saying; "(if) you find yourself in a dangerous position, they tell you to go ahead with the work. They just consider production, not safety. If someone dies, he can be replaced tomorrow...if you report the problem, you'll lose your job."



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