

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

24 August 2012

Remploy factories close in the UK as trade unions call token strikes

Disabled workers employed by Remploy in the UK are to strike for four days from August 25. Members of the Unite and GMB unions are to strike at four sites in Chesterfield and Springburn, Glasgow.

Remploy offers employment to the disabled and its workers are protesting plans by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government 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 more than 2,000 jobs.

The strike has been called by the unions under conditions in which 25 of the factories already closed last week. Following two stoppages last month, the union called off a third planned stoppage, facilitating the governments' closure programme.

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.

Most of these workers have been unable to find employment since. A survey earlier this year found that among the 2,500 Remploy workers who took redundancy in 2008, 85 percent of them were no longer in full-time employment.

Hotel employees in Portugal strike over labour legislation

On August 15 staff employed at hotels, resorts and restaurants in the Algarve, Portugal began a period of strikes. Workers are protesting changes made by the government to the national Labour Code, implemented on August 1 by the government of President Anibal Cavaco Silva.

As a result, hotel industry workers must now work overtime and provide labour on public holidays without receiving higher pay levels.

Tiago Jacinto, coordinator for the Workers Union of Hospitality Industry in the Algarve, said, "The measures now implemented by the Government will have a very negative impact, particularly with regard to overtime, which reduces rates and compensatory time off by half."

Elidérico Viegas, president of the Algarve Hotels and Resorts Association, told the *Algarve Resident* that the government's legislation would be "overall very positive, but could have been more ambitious."

He commented that the trade unions had been fully complicit in the implementation of the Labour Code legislation, stating, "These new measures were agreed by all the social partners and the government, except one Union—CGTP—having been the subject of a large consensus."

Lufthansa cabin crew workers continue pay dispute

Lufthansa cabin crew staff in Germany may strike to reject a new pay offer from the company. On Wednesday the airline proposed another deal that the cabin crew union, UFO, is now considering.

The 18,000 cabin crew have been in dispute with Lufthansa for 13 months over pay and conditions. Last week the UFO union, which represents more than 10,000 flight attendants and pursers, rejected Lufthansa's previous pay offer.

Lufthansa is carrying out a restructuring programme to cut 3,500 jobs (3 percent of its global workforce of 117,000). In another move to save costs the airline has shifted contracts of pilots and flight attendants at Austrian Airlines to a lower-cost subsidiary. Lufthansa has also ensured, with the collaboration of the UFO, that members of the union have not had a pay increase for three years. Further cost cutting measures are to be outlined in the autumn.

Last week the head of UFO, Nicoley Baublies, would not commit to naming a date for industrial action, merely stating that one of a few hours duration could be held. He admitted that the union had already offered "painful" concessions to the airline, including fewer days off. UFO has not called any strikes under conditions in which its members have already voted for strike action earlier this month.

One hundred council workers in Sheffield, England strike over pay

Around 100 electricians, mechanics and other trades workers staged a one day strike against Sheffield City Council, South Yorkshire, England on August 17. The workers are members of the Unite, GMB, and UCATT trade unions and are seeking pay parity with other staff who earn up to £4,000 more.

Workers picketed the Olive Grove depot in the city before marching to Sheffield Town Hall to protest.

Rail maintenance workers in Barton under Needwood, England set to strike

Rail maintenance workers at Bombardier's Central Rivers maintenance depot, in Barton under Needwood, England are scheduled to hold a series of strikes from August 26 in a pay dispute. Employees at the Central Rivers plant carry out refuelling, cleaning and maintenance for train companies Cross Country and Virgin.

The workers have been offered a below-inflation pay rise of 2.5 percent

by the Canadian-owned firm. They are members of the Unite trade union. Following a breakdown in talks, 139 of 165 workers voted 81 percent in favour of strike action and 94 percent favoured action short of striking.

A continuous overtime ban starts from August 25 followed by “six periods of non-continuous strike action between Sunday and September 9”, according to the local *Burton Mail* newspaper.

One worker speaking anonymously to the newspaper said, “The bosses keep banging on about how we’ve got awards for this and that, but when it comes down to it, I feel they’re kicking us in the teeth.

“We’ve been talking to the train drivers and if they refuse to cross the picket line they’ll have to leave the trains at Birmingham New Street. The trains won’t be able to go into service and there will be delays across the whole network.”

Norway’s oil service workers in pay dispute

Oil service workers in Norway may strike in a dispute over pay. Wage negotiations began on August 22, affecting Thursday’s negotiations which affect several thousand managers, administrative staff and service staff. The majority of the employees are calling for similar conditions to offshore workers.

The pay talks follow the ending on July 9 of the Norwegian government of a 16-day strike by offshore production workers. The stoppage had a massive impact on Norway’s economy, reducing oil output by 13 percent and natural gas production by 4 percent. The service workers were not part of that dispute. Einar Johannessen, one of the negotiators for the Industri Energi union, said this week that it would seek to reach a settlement without resort to industrial action and that even if one was authored it would not take place until the second half of September.

Hundreds of metal workers protest in Iran

On August 13, about 600 workers employed by Metal Work Industries protested to demand eight months of unpaid wages and 11 months of unemployment insurance payments by the management.

According to a report from the *iranlabor* web site, “the workers staged their protests following the promises of payments in a meeting with the management at Tehran Governor’s offices by August 12 and their failure to do so.”

The following day, workers protested outside the Ministry of Industries main building. A workers’ representative stated, “the Ministry of Industries has made the management promise to pay the workers dues but the management [is] now giving the excuse that the main investor has not provided the necessary funds [and] is declining to meet any of its promises.”

Iranlabor reported that according to the Free Union of Iranian Workers, “following three hours of workers loud protests, deputy Industries Minister, Salehnia, and head of the Tehran Chamber of Industries provided certain promises booed down by the protesting workers. The workers representatives were eventually accepted to the ministry building for talks.”

The ministry promised to pay the outstanding amounts for March and April by August 15.

Namibian diamond mining company tries to provoke strike

After five months of negotiations between the diamond mining company NAMDEB and Mineworkers’ Union of Namibia (MUN), the company has requested a certificate of unresolved dispute from the government Labour Commission. The MUN had put in a demand for a 15 percent pay increase in March.

A MUN representative accused the company of seeking to provoke a strike saying it would suit the company following a slump in demand for diamonds and a fall in their price. A Labour commissioner commented: “It is actually strange that the company has to ask for an unresolved dispute certificate.”

Namibian government intervenes in attempt to end broadcasters’ strike

Workers at the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) went on strike last week seeking an initial 13 percent pay increase. The strike resulted in a big disruption to radio and television programmes. They are represented by the Namibia Public Workers’ Union (NAPWU); they are now demanding a four percent pay increase for lower grade workers and one percent for higher grades.

NBC were hoping the government would provide extra finance to fund a pay increase but it has refused and instructed the company to re-prioritise its budget and bring the dispute to an end.

Uranium miners in Niger strike

Uranium miners at the Somair uranium mine in northern Niger held a one day strike Monday over living and working conditions. They returned to work Tuesday but their union declared the strike would resume if their demands were not addressed. The mine produces 2,650 tonnes of uranium a year for the French energy company Areva. Areva has a two thirds share in the mine, with the Niger government holding the other.

South African Wits University staff threatens further strike

Academic and support staff at Wits University held a one day strike on August 2 seeking a pay increase, more money to fund research and improve parking and child care facilities. They have called for a second one day strike on August 28. Talks between the university unions and management broke down before the August 2 strike and have not yet resumed.



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