

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

17 May 2013

Europe

Pay strike by German metal workers looms

The metal workers union, IG Metall, has warned of industrial action if an agreement is not reached in a wage dispute by the end of the week. The union is calling for a 5.5 percent increase in wages in 2013 for over 3.5 million metal workers in industries ranging from automobiles to electronics. Almost 400,000 workers have already held shorter "warning strikes" affecting major companies including BMW, Siemens and Bosch.

Workers at distribution warehouses for Amazon Germany in one-day strike

Amazon employees at two large distribution warehouses, in Bad Hersfeld and Leipzig, launched a one-day strike Monday. They are demanding that the corporation's 9,000 workers in Germany be paid according to a wage deal in place for the retail and mail-order industries.

The strike is to forward a demand for just over €12 per hour, compared with the €9.83 Amazon is offering.

The head of Amazon Germany, Ralf Kleber, has attempted to justify low wages by arguing that Amazon employees were working in the logistics business, packing and dispatching parcels, rather than in the retail and mail-order sector.

Bad Hersfeld has a workforce of more than 3,000, and the Leipzig site employs around 2,000. Germany is Amazon's biggest market in Europe, with sales last year reaching more than €6.5bn.

A documentary film shown by broadcaster ARD in February shows that temporary workers for Amazon Germany were paid low wages and faced broken promises of getting a proper job. The film also shows foreign workers living in horrible conditions and being bullied by security personnel, some of whom wore clothing associated with neo-Nazi groups. The firm has since been fired by Amazon.

UK air force base workers balloted for industrial action

Employees of contractor ISS, which provides food services, cleaning and other services at eight Royal Air Force (RAF) stations in England and Wales, are being balloted for industrial action over pay.

ISS offered a pay rise of just 8p an hour, and only 2p an hour to those on the national minimum wage of £6.19 per hour. This was overwhelmingly

rejected.

The ballot covers GMB and Unite union members employed by ISS at the RAF stations at Cranwell, Scampton and Kirton-in-Lindsay in Lincolnshire, Valley in Anglesey, Shawbury and Cosford in Shropshire, Llanwrst in Conwy and Fairbourne in Gwynedd.

UK workers at Computer Science Corporation to strike over pay [Redacted] employed by the US-based multinational Computer Science Corporation (CSC) on a Ministry of Defence contract administering pay and pensions voted overwhelmingly to strike over a 0.5 percent pay offer and the firm's refusal to allow some staff to be properly represented by their union.

Significant problems surrounding the National Health Service (NHS) National Programme for IT led to CSC involvement being significantly stripped back and the company reportedly writing off \$1.5 billion of investment.

Despite the NHS IT scandal, CSC took over the Service Personnel and Veterans Agency (SPVA) contract from Hewlett Packard last November.

Thousands of Spanish teachers and students protest spending cuts

Thousands of teachers and students protested across Spain on May 9 against spending cuts that are destroying the public education system.

In Madrid, protesters marched to the education ministry and called upon Education Minister Jose Ignacio Wert to resign.

The protests coincided with a one-day strike by teachers, students and support staff that affected all levels of education. Organisers claimed a 70 percent turnout by teachers for the strike.

Protests were also held in several other cities, including Barcelona, Seville, Valencia and Zaragoza. The Education Ministry's budget has been cut by 14 percent between 2012 and 2013.

Norwegian power and grid company workers join strike

Norwegian power and grid company workers have joined a strike that is "creating a risk of nationwide disruptions to electricity supply, grid operator Statnett said on Tuesday, including to Norway's power and gas exports abroad," reported Reuters.

The EL&IT Forbundet union first called a strike on April 29 of 80

members over the signing of a collective agreement with IT infrastructure company Atea. On May 7, it expanded the action to 3,000 members at regional power companies that are customers of Atea.

On Tuesday, another 466 members joined the strike, “including workers at Statnett, which manages high-voltage transmission lines and power cables going abroad. The state-owned grid operator said it could no longer vouch for security of power supplies and warned of potential blackouts,” said *Reuters*.

Among the companies affected is Bergen-based BKK, the power supplier to Norway’s leading gas processing plant Kollsnes, which exports gas to the UK and continental Europe. Energy Norway says the industrial action will hit some 1.4 million people. Middle East

Egyptian electricity workers strike

Workers from electricity companies throughout Egypt went on strike Sunday.

The *Daily News Egypt* reported a complaint by the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights (ECSR) that workers have been treated unequally and pointed to increasing corruption in the Ministry of Electricity and Energy.

According to ECSR, strikers are demanding equal treatment for workers from the holding company and subsidy companies including health care for them and their families and school grants for their children.

The council demanded the formation of a delegation to negotiate with the Ministry of Electricity and Energy. “The workers refused to form the delegation because they have previously met with the ministry and only received empty promises from officials, according to Wael Aql, president of the Workers Union,” said *Daily News Egypt*

Construction workers stage protest at mosque in Tehran

Four hundred construction workers staged a protest at a mosque in the Tehran Pars section of Tehran earlier this month. The protest was over the government’s failure to resolve their insurance needs and the lack of a proper framework to regulate pay. Africa

Zambian mine workers strike again

Just four days after 600 contract workers downed tools, miners at the Chinese-owned Luanshya Copper Mines facility in Milyashi again took strike action. The workers are demanding a 60 percent pay rise. Management have offered 12 percent.

One miner told the press, “What we do here is not a simple job, these trucks and heavy machinery we move here is even affecting our reproductive health. We have families and what we get here from these Chinese are peanuts. We want these people to give us a just wage and the 60 per cent increment is what is reasonable.”

Strike at Nigeria’s *ThisDay* newspaper

Workers have blockaded *ThisDay*’s printing plant and the main editorial office in Lagos with pickup trucks, seeking to force publisher Nduka Obaigbena to pay them as much as four month’s outstanding wages. The strikers carried placards saying, “We reject slavery.”

Obaigbena held senior posts with *Time* and *Newsweek*, before founding Leaders & Company Ltd, which owns *ThisDay*, in 1995. *ThisDay* employee Tony Enabulele told the press, “He’s stepped on our toes. Believe me, we’re not going to back down... He knows the top people, so he gets away with it.”

While the newspaper workers have more than once gone without wages, Obaigbena has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars paying speaking fees to those such as former President Bill Clinton and ex-Prime Minister Tony Blair to appear at his events. Some workers at *ThisDay* in Lagos have said they will camp out in front of their office until they are paid.

Malawi hotel workers go on strike

Staff at the 100-bed Crossroads Hotel in Malawi’s capital Lilongwe walked off the job on Friday last week, demanding better pay and working conditions.

The strikers are demanding a 40 percent increase due to the high cost of living resulting from the devaluation of the kwacha, which has forced up the price of basic commodities. “We have tried so many times discussing with management to increase our salaries since June but nothing has come out,” one of the workers said.

The average wage in the hotel sector is \$800 a year, just over two dollars a day.

Zambian tax authority staff launch nationwide strike

Staff at the Zambia Revenue Authority are taking indefinite strike action to support their demand for a 20 percent salary raise. They have rejected an offer of 12 percent, calling it “a mockery.”

Rises in the prices of commodities and services have eroded the value of workers’ wages, with hikes in the cost of fuel, bus fares and the basic staple, mealie meal.

Ugandan factory workers strike

More than 300 workers at the Darling Company engaged in running battles with the police as they protested against unpaid salaries and poor working conditions.

Angry strikers threw stones at police outside the factory gates, as they tried to disperse them using teargas and live bullets.

Workers at the factory, which makes wigs and hair extensions, face low wages, late payment and a rising cost of living. One worker complained, “A casual labourer is paid a daily wage of 4,800 Ugandan Shillings [\$1.8] and yet they have asked us to receive the money from Crane Bank after two weeks”.

Bank of Namibia fails to block strikes

Bank workers are preparing to take strike action in support of their demand for a 12 percent pay increase in face of a rapid rise in the cost of housing. Management have only been willing to offer an 8 percent rise.

Management have sought to block the strike by having Bank of Namibia facilities employing up to 60 percent of the workforce classified as “essential services,” which would mean workers breaking the law if they go on strike. So far the ministry of labour has refused to grant the request.



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