

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

31 May 2013

Europe

Second pay strike at Amazon Germany

Workers at global Internet retailer Amazon's German operations staged a second day-long strike this week in a dispute over pay and benefits.

Staff at Amazon's logistics centre in Leipzig stopped work from 12:30pm Monday, after 600 workers at its facilities in Bad Hersfeld and around 300 in Leipzig went on strike May 14.

Although similar conditions prevail at all of Amazon's sites, the union Verdi limited the strike last week to the Bad Hersfeld and Leipzig depots. For workers employed there, the union is seeking a collective agreement, vacation and Christmas bonuses, as well as some awards that are standard for the industry.

None of the Amazon sites has so far participated in a collective agreement. Amazon sets wages unilaterally, basing its calculations on the tariff agreement for the logistics sector, where poverty wages of between €9.65 and €10.50 (US\$12.50-\$13.60) per hour are paid. Workers at Bad Hersfeld have not received a wage increase for seven years and Verdi has never done anything about it.

Verdi wants Amazon to accept it as a bargaining partner. The company has so far also spurned Verdi's offer to negotiate a special Amazon tariff agreement.

Amazon in Germany employs approximately 9,000 workers in Graben near Augsburg, Bad Hersfeld, Leipzig, Rheinberg, Werne, Koblenz and Pforzheim. But this figure is subject to fluctuations. For example, fewer than 10 percent of the 3,300 employees at Bad Hersfeld had a permanent job in late 2012, according to the works council. The rest were contract workers from all over Europe or other precarious workers. The ARD channel reported that 3,100 of the 3,300 employees at the depot in Koblenz were contract workers.

Staff at UK museums strike

Several UK museums will see strikes this week as part of a three-month campaign of industrial action prompted by a long-running dispute over jobs, pay and pensions.

The work stoppages will affect galleries and heritage sites throughout the country. The National and National Portrait Galleries in London have warned some of their rooms may be closed. Tate Britain and Tate Modern will open as usual, but access to some galleries may be limited. Tate Liverpool's galleries will be closed completely, according to the BBC.

More stoppages will follow today as a result of walkouts planned by the

Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union.

Workers at the British Museum, Natural History Museum, Science Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum in London are also expected to strike.

In Liverpool, the Merseyside Maritime Museum, the International Slavery Museum and three others will be closed to the public from lunchtime today to tomorrow afternoon. The Museum of Liverpool will be closed for part of Saturday, but will reopen once the 24-hour action is completed. According to organisers, strikers and supporters will form a human chain around the museum this Friday afternoon.

Employees at English Heritage sites, including Stonehenge in Wiltshire, are to take action Sunday.

Staff at Kirklees College, England to vote on possible strike

Hundreds of lecturers at Kirklees College in Huddersfield are to vote over possible industrial action at proposed pay cuts.

Union officials claim that the cuts facing the staff could vary between £2,000 a year and £12,000 a year. According to the *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*, "College chiefs have asked all staff to consider ways of helping them reduce the wages bill to deal with cuts of millions of pounds in Government funding".

An announcement of 50 job losses was made last month.

Members of the University and College Union (UCU) at Kirklees College say they are being made to bail out the college over rising costs for a much-delayed Waterfront campus. The college borrowed money from various sources to fund the new building, including a loan from Kirklees Council. Officials claim it will cost the college at least £2m a year in interest payments alone.

Thousands of West Midlands council staff may strike over derisory pay offer

Thousands of council staff across the West Midlands could strike over a one percent pay offer after a three year freeze.

The Union union is to hold a ballot before a decision is made. The offer does not include teachers, firefighters and council chief executives.

UK: Yorkshire ambulance staff set to strike over patient safety

Yorkshire ambulance service workers are set to take further industrial action next month in a dispute over patient safety.

The Unite union said that the continuing refusal of management at the Yorkshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust to discuss patient safety, which led to de-recognition of the union, had left its members with no option but to take further industrial action.

The dispute concerns the trust's plans to cut the budget by £46 million over the next five years, even though ambulance workloads are increasing month-by-month by as much as six percent.

Five hundred staff will stage a 12-hour stoppage June 7. This follows a one-day strike on April 2. If management maintains its position, there is to be a 24-hour stoppage on June 22, from midnight to midnight.

A continuous overtime ban is also in place.

UK coastguards in short walkouts over bank holiday weekend

Coastguards at closure-threatened stations around the UK held short walkouts during the bank holiday weekend over cuts to pay, pensions, jobs and working conditions.

Delegates at the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union's annual conference this week voted for a national strike next month if the government continues to refuse to negotiate on these issues. Government cuts include the Maritime and Coastguard Agency's plans to shut half of the UK's 18 coastguard stations and cut more than 140 jobs, putting lives at risk.

The PCS web site said, "Despite pledging that no station would close before a new national operations centre was up and running on the south coast, the government has already shut three stations—Clyde and Forth in Scotland, and Yarmouth in the east of England."

Staff at City of Glasgow College threaten industrial action

Staff at the City of Glasgow College are threatening action in a long-running dispute over pay. Around 300 support staff have rejected a pay offer of a flat rate rise of just £250 for those earning less than £21,000, and nothing for those on more.

Last week, Education Secretary Michael Russell praised the college for its successful merger and Principal Paul Little wrote to staff thanking them for their "superb team effort."

Workers at UK's largest brewery vote to strike

Employees at the Molson Coors brewery in Burton-on-Trent, England, have voted overwhelmingly to strike after facing the prospect of being sacked and reinstated on inferior pay and conditions.

The workforce of 455 voted by a margin of 97 percent in favour of industrial action over management's proposals at Britain's biggest brewery, which include cutting the wages of 184 brewery technicians by up to £9,000 a year. The Burton plant produces Carling, Grolsch, Coors Lite and Cobra lagers, as well as beers including Worthington, White Shield and Stones.

Spanish TV workers strike

Media workers at Prisa TV are on strike over pay and conditions. *Raidtvnews.com* reported, "37 channels in Spain are to be affected by a one-week strike by Prisa TV workers. The strike could also affect sport broadcasts, the rights of which are exclusively owned by Prisa. Roland Garros and the last day of the national football league will probably not be broadcast".

Prisa TV's parent company recently announced that is going to take over the television subsidiary, and staff fear that the new agreement will set the ground for future layoffs. The company intends to reduce wages due to the drop in profits during the first quarter of 2013, which was especially large for Canal+.

The union has argued that Canal+ made a €50 million profit in 2012.

The board of directors has access to up to €28 million in bonuses in 2013, according to the Comisiones Obreras (CC.OO) union. The strike will be effective until Saturday and will affect channels including Canal+1, Canal+Liga, Canal+ Deporte, Sportmanía and Caza y Pesca.

Strike by ground crew at Norwegian airport ends

A strike by ground crew at several airports in Northern Norway ended over the weekend, when airport employers and the ground crews' union LFF (Luftfartens funksjonærforbund) came to an agreement on a new pay deal.

Some of the workers had been on strike since March 12 and the strike later spread to halt airline traffic at Brønnøysund, Svolvær, Vardø, Vadsø, Mehamn and Honningsvåg.

The crew provide ground services for Norway's regional domestic airline Widerøe, which was forced to suspend its airline service for the duration of the conflict.

Middle East

Foreign workers to leave UAE after pay strike

"Hundreds of foreign workers at the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) biggest construction company are to return home, law enforcement officials say, after a pay dispute triggered a strike and threw a fresh spotlight on labour conditions in the Gulf," according to the *Financial Times*.

Most of the striking workers were from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Strikes are illegal in Dubai and across the Gulf.

Last week, Dubai police chief, Dhahi Khalfan al-Tamim, said 200 workers would be repatriated in the wake of the strike, which was aimed at forcing Arabtec to pay the workers' monthly Dh350 food allowance in cash rather than meals.

The visas of over 460 Arabtec workers—who are paid between Dh650 and Dh1,200 (\$176 and \$327) a month—are to be cancelled after they opted to leave the UAE, according to a Dubai police official cited in the Abu Dhabi state-owned newspaper, *The National*.

Ashraf, a scaffolding installer at Arabtec, told Al Jazeera Wednesday, after receiving a phone call from a coworker, "Between 20-25 people just got the [deportation] letter now... When we got the news of the [first] deportations [on Monday] everyone came down shouting. When the police came, we just went back to our rooms. People were trying to be

part of the group without coming to the front,” he said.

Arabtec, part-owned by the Abu Dhabi government, declined to answer questions from the *Financial Times*. The company said last week that all employees had returned to work after an “amicable solution” was found, although a “minority group” would be “held responsible for their actions.”

A Human Rights Watch report published last year said that some Qatari construction workers were virtual forced labourers in bondage to their employers. Arabtec was among the companies that built the Burj Khalifa, currently the tallest building in the world.

Dubai is an autonomous city and part of the UAE, a federation run by an unelected emir where the press is censored and public demonstrations are illegal.

Bahraini construction workers’ strike ends

Around 1,800 workers at GP Zachariades, a Cypriot construction firm in Bahrain, have ended a five-day strike over non-payment of wages for the last two months.

GP Zachariades’s projects in Bahrain include the Ritz-Carlton and Movenpick Hotels, as well as the headquarters of the Ministry of Interior.

According to the *Gulf Daily News*, “Bahrain’s Ministry of Labour said that an agreement was reached between the striking workers and officials during a meeting at staff accommodation in Sitra on Tuesday.”

Company director Ahmed Al Haiki said that an agreement had been struck for GP Zachariades to pay employees’ one-and-a-half months salary of what they were owed, with the balance being paid in the coming days.

GP Zachariades is the third major employer in the Gulf to suffer unrest among its workers, noted the *Gulf Daily News*, citing Arabtec and 1,000 staff at Kuwait’s Oil Sector Services.

Egypt Iffco strike enters second week

A strike at Iffco Egypt, an oil and fat refining and processing company in Suez, has gone on for more than two weeks faced with management’s decision to close down the factory until further notice, reported *Daily News Egypt*.

The workers are demanding their delayed profits and special allowances, reported state-owned news agency *MENA*. Workers are also demanding the return to work of their colleagues, who were fired by management. Since the strike began on 12 May, the administration has suspended nine union members.

Africa

Nigerian teachers set to strike

Members of the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) in 18 states are set to begin indefinite strike action June 1.

The governments of the 18 states which include Cross River, Ogun, Oyo and Niger have not yet implemented the 27.5 percent Teachers Enhanced Allowance agreed in 2008.

The NUT national executive took the decision in April to undertake the

strike as a bargaining ploy. However, a meeting between NUT officials and state governors on May 23 under the auspices of the Senate Committee on Education broke down.

Some of the 18 state governments have yet to implement the Federal Government’s N 18,000 (US\$114) monthly minimum wage, which was passed into law two years ago.

Zimbabwe car dealership workers strike

Workers at the Harare-based luxury car dealership Zimoco have gone on strike. They have several grievances including no review of their salaries since January 2012 and lack of safety work clothing. They are also opposed to the company’s new human resources manager, saying that he refuses to address their concerns. They accuse him of ordering them on how to vote in upcoming elections to gain a salary increment.

Kenya construction workers walk off the job

Around 20 construction workers building the new Malaba International Bridge have walked off the job. They include carpenters, steel fixers and masons. They say they are owed back wages by the contractor employing them and will not return to work until paid. Some of the construction workers are from Uganda.

The bridge forms part of the 70 kilometre trunk road linking Webuye in Kenya to Malaba in Uganda. The trunk road is near completion. The new bridge, which is being built beside the existing one, will enable heavy trucks to cross more easily.

South African garment workers take two-day strike

Around 10,000 members of the Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers’ Union (SACTWU) began a two day strike on Tuesday. They accuse various textile companies, within the United Clothing and Textile Association (UCTA), of paying below the legally prescribed minimum wage and of seeking to undermine the union’s bargaining rights.

Around 4,000 of the strikers are based in the city of Newcastle in the KwaZulu Natal region.



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