Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

7 June 2013

Italian public transportation workers strike

Due to the missed renewal of their collective agreement, which first expired in 2007, Italian public transportation workers staged a 24-hour strike on Monday. The strike was called by the public transport workers union FAST-Confsal.

The strike caused major disruptions in Rome, where the Metro A line was halted, as well as in Milan, with a more limited impact in other major Italian cities. It began at 8:30 in Rome and was suspended during the evening rush hour from 17:00 to 20:00. FAST-Confsal did not call a national all-out stoppage, with strikes by transport staff in some cities being postponed till later in the month.

Greek ferry and hydrofoil sailings blocked

Seamen occupied three ports (Piraeus, Rafina and Lavrio) on Wednesday morning in the Greek capital Athens. The strike was called to protest non-payment of wages, with some workers having been unpaid for up to seven months.

The National Merchant-Navy Technicians' Union said around 70 percent of crews in passenger ships have been waiting between five and six months for their salaries. According to the Panhellenic Seamens' Federation, which called the strike alongside the National Merchant-Navy Technicians' Union, some cheques issued to workers, supposedly covering back-pay, later bounced.

Several crossings by ferry and hydrofoil services were hit. The strike ended at 10 a.m. after assurances were received by workers that they would be paid. The shipping companies have allowed a collective bargaining agreement in the sector to expire, without proposing the negotiation of a new contract.

Spanish Hewlett-Packard workers begin indefinite strike

Around 2,000 Hewlett-Packard (HP) staff across the country began an indefinite strike Monday, over management plans to cut salaries by up to 10 percent and increase weekly hours to 60. Management plans also include the distribution of 230 working hours unevenly, meaning that employees might be forced to work on Sundays without pay. *El Pais* commented that firms affected could include La Caixa, RACC, Natural Gas, Banc Sabadell and the government, which has outsourced some services to HP.

The strike was called by the CC.OO, UGT and CGT trade unions, with sites affected including Madrid, Barcelona, Zaragoza and Oviedo. Around 800 of the staff are employed at Sant Cugat in Barcelona.

In León, workers from HP Outsourcing, who previously went on strike in October, joined the protest carrying placards reading: "Decent work is not a privilege."

According to sources cited by the *neurope.eu* web site, 95 percent of workers in Barcelona, Zaragoza, Oviedo y León are on strike, along with 70 percent in Madrid.

Third pay strike at Amazon Germany

Around 900 workers at global internet retailer Amazon's German operations staged a third day-long strike Monday in a dispute over pay and benefits.

According to service sector union Ver.di, around 600 workers struck at Amazon's facility in Bad Hersfeld in the central state of Hesse, with another 300 in Leipzig.

Workers at Amazon's facilities in Germany stopped work on May 14 and May 27 over the same issues. Although similar conditions prevail at all of Amazon's sites, Ver.di 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, and other benefits 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 Ver.di has done nothing about it. Ver.di wants Amazon to accept it as a bargaining partner, with the company so far spurning its offer to negotiate a special Amazon tariff agreement.

UK government workers strike in dispute over pay, pensions, closures and working conditions

Tens of thousands of staff employed at the Department for Work and Pensions , Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the Valuations Office Agency struck this week in regional strikes organised by the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) trade union.

Action involving around 135,000 workers was scheduled over four days from June 3-7, in opposition to government changes and cuts to pay, pensions, jobs and working conditions. The industrial action opposes government plans to close all 281 of HMRC's walk-in tax advice centres,

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diverting enquiries to job-centres.

Strikes were held in Yorkshire and the Humberside, north-west England and Cumbria, the south-east and the Midlands, Wales and south-west England. Workers in Scotland and eastern England will strike today.

Opposed to any national action to mobilise all public sector workers, the PCS has organised local and regional action, in isolation from other public sector unions facing the same attacks. A statement on the PCS web site said, “The union’s annual conference agreed to hold a fresh national civil service-wide strike towards the end of June if the government continues to refuse to negotiate.”

No action is being planned involving joint struggles with non-public sector unions, with the union stating, “Dates will be set at a later date and co-ordinated alongside other unions” only “where possible.”

Workers blockade last Sony plant in France

Workers blockaded the sole remaining Sony plant in France this week, demanding better bonuses from the electronics giant before the factory is sold off.

According to unions, activity at the plant, in the north-eastern Alsace region, was brought to a stand-still as around 300 of the factory’s 516 employees blocked the entrance to the plant.

The action is protesting Sony’s offer of a separation bonus of €2,000 ($2,600), calling for a payment of €1,500 per year worked, with those over age 45 or with 20 years of service to be paid at higher rates. The plant in the Alsace city of Ribeauville is due to be taken over by the French company Cordon Electronics next year, with up to some 190 jobs set to be cut.

Sony has returned to profitability after four years in the red, after a programme of thousands of job cuts and asset sales, including its Manhattan headquarters for more than $1 billion.

Madrid’s health workers strike for the fifth time within a month

On Wednesday health workers at hospitals in Madrid, Spain struck for the fifth time in the past month, against the decision of the regional government to privatize six hospitals plus other services in health centres.

Around 64 percent of workers supported the strike according to medical trade unions. Further protests are expected to be decided during the next few weeks.

UK O2 call centre workers ballot for strike

Thousands of workers in O2 call centres around the UK are to be balloted on possible industrial action in a dispute over jobs.

Workers in call centres in Bury, Glasgow, Leeds and Preston Brook, near Warrington, are to vote over the next few weeks on whether to launch a campaign of industrial action. O2 announced plans last week to outsource around 3,500 jobs to Capita.

Staff at UK housing association vote overwhelmingly for action

Staff at One Housing Group (OHG) voted overwhelmingly for industrial action this month, following management’s decision to impose wage cuts to 200 frontline supported housing staff from February 2014.

According to *union-news.co.uk*, “The ballot result comes at a time when OHG’s surplus has soared, with a 200 per cent rise in the supported housing wing alone, as it continues to win massive—and lucrative—contracts from local authorities.”

OHG’s chief executive, Mick Sweeney, recently accepted a £31,000 hike in pay and bonuses, while asking 200 support workers to accept cuts of up to £8,000 a year, averaging £2,000 for the majority.

Strike looms over Indesit job cuts in Italy

Italian workers at the home-appliance maker Indesit said they will strike in protest at the company’s proposals for major job cuts, announced Tuesday. Indesit announced plans to cut 1,425 positions, including 25 managers, 150 white collar staff and 1,250 factory workers across three Italian manufacturing plants.

“The company said workers must be let go due to production and financial woes triggered by falling sales… Indesit plans to keep only high-end appliance manufacturing in Italy, and to concentrate low-cost appliance manufacturing in Poland and Turkey,” *Ansa.it* reported. According to the company, the outsourcing was part of a 70-million euro restructuring plan in the works. Investors applauded the plan, boosting Indesit shares by 1.9 percent in value in Tuesday trading to 6.39 euros.

Strike at Egypt’s main airports

The Associated Press cited a senior aviation official Wednesday as saying that “striking workers at the Cairo International Airport’s largest terminal are blocking airplanes on the tarmac and disrupting flights.”

The strike delayed the departure of seven flights and diverted passengers from three incoming international flights to the other terminal. Abdel-Aziz Fadel said “security forces have refused to intervene to remove the striking workers, arguing that such a move would worsen the situation and recommended resolving the strike through negotiations.”

Customs employees at several Egyptian airports and seaports also struck Tuesday to demand better pay and working conditions. One, preferring anonymity, told *Ahram Online*, “We are also exposed to radiation for long hours without any protection or precautionary measures.”

According to customs employees contacted by *Ahram Online*, six of their colleagues had died suddenly within the past six months—many under the age of 35.

The workers blamed poor and often stressful working conditions, under-staffing and long night shifts for their colleagues’ deaths.

Customs employees at Upper Egypt’s Assiut Airport and Alexandria’s Borg Al-Arab Airport, along with those at the Safaga and Nuweiba Red Sea maritime ports, joined the strike Tuesday morning, while workers at Luxor and Aswan airports joined at 4 p.m.

Top finance ministry officials told media that they had responded to some of the strikers’ demands by raising the night shift allowance from LE350 (roughly $50) to LE500 (roughly $72).

Striking workers claim that their salaries can be raised without putting additional burdens on the state budget by reallocating bonuses given to top officials. The customs employees are also demanding the dismissal of senior officials they accuse of corruption.

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Employees at First International Bank of Israel to escalate action

Employees at First International Bank of Israel are to escalate their industrial action, after negotiations between management and the workers committee ended inconclusively, Wednesday morning.

"In late April, the Histadrut (General Federation of Labor in Israel) declared a labour dispute at First International Bank over the heavy workload, management's refusal to extend the labour contract for five years, and management's actions to block unionization, including censorship and not distributing the union's circulars," said *Globes Online*.

Workers stage a sit-in at major Bahraini company

Workers staged a sit-in at Bahrain's Arab Shipbuilding and Repair Yard Company (Asry), Sunday, demanding pay rises and bonuses. The workers gathered during their lunch break.

South African miners' struggles continue

Two hundred miners at the Glencore Xstrata chromium mine at the Helena mine in Bushveld, South Africa walked out last week. They were then joined by others, resulting in over 1,500 Glencore chromium miners out on strike.

Swiss-based Glencore Xstrata responded by dismissing around 1,000 of the miners over the weekend. The company informed them they would have Tuesday of this week to appeal their dismissals.

Around 3,000 miners at the Impala Platinum Holdings mine in Rustenburg began a wildcat strike on Monday. They were protesting the dismissal of an Impala employed miner.

A National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) leader was shot dead and another wounded in an incident at the NUM office at the Lonmin plc Marikana mine in north-western South Africa.

The rival Association of Mineworkers and Construction Workers (AMCU) had been in a struggle at the mine for the right to represent mineworkers as the official union. Currently the NUM is the union officially recognised by Lonmin, but only now represents around 20 percent of the workforce as opposed to the 70 percent represented by AMCU. Under a Johannesburg labour court ruling the NUM has until July 16 to regain its majority representation.

Hunger strike by Algerian catering workers

More than 1,000 catering workers employed by three companies supplying catering services to Hassi R'Mel gas workers in Algeria have begun a hunger strike. They had previously taken strike action and other protests to demand trade union recognition, a pay increase and improved conditions.

The catering companies together with the state petroleum company Sonatrach, which owns the gas field, refused their demands. They began a strike on May 29; in response the companies brought in scab labour, which sparked the workers' hunger strike.

Strike by Zambian municipal workers

On Sunday unionised and non-unionised municipal workers at Kitwe City Council went on strike. Kitwe is Zambia's second largest city. They were protesting the non-payment of their April and May salaries. According to the town clerk, the delay in payment was country-wide, affecting all councils, and the government had now released the money for the April salaries which workers should receive shortly.

On the same day around 15 former council workers picketed the civic centre. They were formerly employed as cleaners but had not had their contracts renewed by Kitwe council.

Nigerian primary school teachers walk out

Nigerian primary school teachers in the southern state of Kogi and the northeastern state of Borno walked out on strike Monday. The members of the Nigerian Union of Teachers are protesting the failure of both state governments to impose the federally-agreed minimum N18000 (US$113) wage.

South African telecom workers may strike

Telecom workers employed by Telkom, Africa's largest integrated communications company, may soon be on strike. The Solidarity union and the Communication Workers Union (CWU) have been in discussion with Telkom over a pay claim.

Telkom had offered a 1.5 percent increase, but then upped it to 6 percent last week. This offer was rejected by Solidarity, who are seeking an 8.8 percent increase, and the CWU, which is pushing for 11.5 percent. Talks involving the Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration were due to begin this Wednesday in attempts to resolve the issue.

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