

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

21 June 2013

## Europe

### French rail workers strike

Only four out of 10 French high-speed and regional trains ran June 13, due to a strike by rail workers to protest a planned reorganization of the service, according to the web site of state rail company SNCF.

While the metro service in Paris operated as normal, only one out of three trains serving the region around the capital city was running.

SNCF spokesman Frank Paul Weber said in an e-mailed message that around 70 percent of on-board ticket collectors, conductors, inspectors and train drivers were on strike.

### Portuguese teachers strike against spending cuts

Thousands of teachers across Portugal walked out from final exams at secondary schools Monday to protest planned spending cuts in education. Teachers are also fighting government plans to increase working hours for all public sector workers by one hour to an eight-hour day.

"Many pupils were unable to take the tests but in some schools they chanted and waved placards with slogans of solidarity for their striking teachers," said *Reuters*.

There are around 100,000 teachers in Portugal's state education system.

Mario Nogueira, head of Fenprof teachers union, said 90 percent of teachers took part in the strike and that some schools had cancelled Monday's exam.

The education ministry claimed the strike affected less than a third of all pupils and then rescheduled their exams for July 2.

The cuts are the latest austerity measures proposed by the government to meet the fiscal targets of a European Union/International Monetary Fund loan agreement.

Portugal is in the third year of its worst economic recession since the 1970s and unemployment stands at a record 18 percent.

### Thousands of UK postal workers begin strikes over jobs

Thousands of postal workers struck on Thursday around the UK in the sixth round of industrial action over plans to franchise 76 high street branches, resulting in the loss of up to 1,500 jobs

Workers walked out from 2 p.m. on Thursday and are set to strike for 24

hours on June 29. Around 4,000 employees in 373 Crown (main) post offices are involved.

Communication Workers Union leaders have called on the Post Office's chief executive, Paula Vennells, to join them in talks.

Of those balloted, workers voted nine-to-one in favour of industrial action at the Crown sites, which make up 3 percent of the Post Office's operations but process up to 20 percent of all transactions.

### Fourth pay strike at Amazon Germany

Hundreds of workers at global Internet retailer Amazon's German operations staged a fourth strike Monday in a dispute over pay and benefits.

Workers have staged three previous strikes since May 14.

The two-day strike affected Amazon's Bad Hersfeld and Leipzig sites. Although similar conditions prevail at all of Amazon's sites, the Ver.di union has limited industrial action 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 sites participated in any 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. 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.

### Staff at Chesterfield College, England in two-day strike

Staff at Chesterfield College in England struck Tuesday and Thursday over 70 proposed job cuts. Staff and lecturers plan further action if the college refuses to rethink plans to make compulsory redundancies. Striking workers told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters that around 200 staff have left the college through voluntary redundancies in the last two years. Workers also spoke about the casualisation of employment at the college, with unqualified students being employed to do skilled work.

Chesterfield College announced plans for job cuts after declaring a £4 million shortfall and a need to reduce its workforce by 10 percent to balance the books.

Chesterfield College principal Trevor Clay claims job losses are necessary and unavoidable due to a reduction in the number of 16-18 year-old students, government cutbacks with reduced funding, and a growing

demand for work-led training for business employees. Clay also claimed that a recent multi-million pound revamp of the college reception area was necessary to keep attracting students.

According to the *Derbyshire Times*, the trade unions “have called for negotiations around an improved voluntary redundancy scheme and to explore less damaging ways of achieving cost savings.”

### **Union calls off strike ballot over job cuts at UK O2 call centres**

A strike ballot to be held this week by the Communications Workers Union (CWU) over job cuts at O2 call centres in the UK was called off June 17 by the union. The call centres in Bury, Glasgow, Leeds and Preston Brook, near Warrington, are run by telecommunications firm Telefónica, O2’s parent company. Telefónica, a Spanish broadband and telecommunications provider operates in Europe, Latin America and Asia. Globally, it is the fifth largest mobile network provider.

A CWU statement said it had reached agreement with O2 and claimed the deal offers, “better protections on jobs, pay, pensions and terms and conditions for our members transferring to Capita than were originally on offer.”

According to the union, Telefónica was planning to cut a further 1,000 jobs as it outsources O2 call centre operations to Capita.

Up to 3,500 staff are to be transferred to Capita next month as part of a 10-year deal for customer management with O2 that is expected to be worth around £1.2 billion.

### **Middle East**

### **Egyptian pilots end protest**

On June 13 Egyptian pilots employed by the national carrier EgyptAir held a 10-hour sit-in to protest management changes and to demand bonus payments.

The action delayed 22 domestic and international flights and was the second protest involving Cairo International Airport this month.

The sit-in ended when the Civil Aviation Minister Wael el-Maadawi agreed to look into workers’ demands.

On June 5, workers at the airport struck and occupied taxiing areas near runways to demand better pay. The action resulted in seven departing and three incoming international flights being delayed.

### **Sumed Petroleum employees in Egypt hold a sit-in**

On June 15, workers at the Sumed Arab Petroleum Pipeline Factory in Ain Al-Sokhna, located in Suez Governorate, began a sit-in outside the gates to deny access to the company.

The workers called for an end to nepotism and demanded the removal of the company chairman Abdo Saad, Operations Sector Chairman Ali Ghazaly and Administrative Sector Chairman Ibrahim Al-Khalfy.

According to the *Daily News Egypt*, “They stated that the administration appointed the Minister of Petroleum’s daughter in an important post in the company.” The article also cited an anonymous “non-striking employee” who claimed the administration attempted to deduct a sum of money from the protesting employees’ bonuses.

The action is the latest by the workers, some of whom struck in February to demand proper contracts and the same benefits that contracted workers received. These demands have yet to be met, despite company promises.

### **Mint workers set to strike in Turkey**

Mint workers in Turkey plan to strike in protest at being treated as “burglars”.

A report in *Hurriyet English* said, “The Basın-?? Union of the printing and press industry announced June 17 the strike decision at the General Directorate of the Mint and Stamp Printing House and its branches.” According to law, a strike can go ahead, pending further negotiations, 45-days after it is decided on. Were a strike to proceed, it would be the first by mint workers in 25 years.

The workers trade union’s leader, Yakup Akkaya, also the deputy chairperson of the main opposition Republican People’s Party, said, “Between their entrance through the door until they exit the building—even while they go to toilet—the workers are treated as burglars. The wages might be low, we can fight for that. However, we don’t permit the staining of people’s honor.”

### **Africa**

### **Algerian catering workers continue strike**

The strike by over 1,000 catering workers at the Algerian state petrochemical company Sonatrach is now in its third week. They came out on strike May 29 against low pay, poor working conditions and degrading treatment by management.

They are employed by three private catering companies providing services to the petrochemical company. They began their protests in March and came out on strike in April, returning on May 1 following the catering companies agreeing to their demands. However, the agreement was not implemented.

When they began their current strike, the catering companies recruited strikebreakers. However the strikers began a hunger strike and the workers recruited to break the strike stopped work in solidarity.

They have now stopped their hunger strike but are continuing their occupation outside the Sonatrach headquarters.

### **Strike by Ugandan taxi drivers**

Taxi drivers in the Eastern Ugandan city of Mbale went on strike Monday following the imposition of new traffic penalties. The drivers consider the penalties too high. Public transport was unable to cope with extra demand and traffic became gridlocked.

The taxi drivers held demonstrations along the Mbale-Soroti road, and police responded with tear gas and rifles.

### **Mozambique doctors end strike**

Mozambican doctors, members of the Mozambican Medical Association and the Commission of United Health Professionals, ended a 27-day strike this week, without winning any of their demands. They were demanding a doubling of their basic wage and improvements in various allowances.

They had rejected the government pay offer made in early May of a 15 percent pay rise for doctors and 9 percent for nurses.

The strike had an impact in Maputo city and province with around 300 doctors involved, but according to press reports had little effect in other areas. If the strike is now ruled as being illegal by the government, the doctors who took part could face disciplinary measures.

#### **Kenyan secondary school teachers strike**

Secondary school teachers, members of the Kenya Union of Post Primary Education Teachers, are on strike. They are demanding their allowances be brought into line with other groups such as the Teachers Service Commission, who receive an enhanced allowance. According to the union, the government had agreed to harmonise the allowances following a strike last year.

The Kenya National Union of Teachers has announced they may also come out on strike if their demands are not met.

#### **Kenyan hospital staff strike**

Medical staff at the Kenyatta National Hospital came out on strike this week. They were protesting management's refusal to implement the 46 percent pay increase agreed in 2011 in a collective bargaining agreement. They are also seeking a 23 percent house allowance. They are members of the Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals, and Allied Workers.

#### **Nigerian teachers strike continues**

Teachers in Ekiti state, members of the Nigerian Union of Teachers have been on strike for two weeks. They are seeking a 27.5 percent professional allowance.

A recent meeting between the union and state government representatives, presided over by the state governor, failed to settle the dispute. The state government offered a 15 percent professional allowance payment but it was refused by the union.

#### **South African auto retailer workers' pay dispute**

The National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa declared a wage dispute Wednesday on behalf of its 100,000 members involved in auto retailing, including petrol pump attendants. They are seeking an entry level wage of R6,000 (US\$600) a month. The wage claim will now be subject to mediation. If that fails, a strike could be called.

#### **South African National Union of Mineworkers members march**

Around 250 National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) marched through Sunninghill, Johannesburg on Tuesday. They were protesting salary discrepancies and seeking NUM recognition. The workers presented a memorandum to representatives of the Minopex mineral processing company.



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