

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

9 August 2013

Renewed strike by German lock operators

There were renewed strikes by German lock operators this week protesting against government plans to restructure the inland navigation authority WSA. The WSA is a wing of the Federal Transport Ministry, which is imposing the restructuring.

Workers are seeking assurances on wages and other guarantees after the government said it planned to “reform” the agency with heavy job losses. Up to 25 jobs are set to be eliminated in a phased reduction starting in 2016.

Several canals across North-Rhine Westphalia, Lower Saxony and Bremen were blocked to cargo shipping as a result of the industrial action.

The strikes were called by the Ver.di trade union, with the dispute involving around 12,000 lock, administrative and canal shipyard operators. They follow a previous round of strikes that began July 8 after the failure of negotiations.

The strikes are set to continue until today.

Russian sugar factory workers stage demonstration and rally

On July 9, more than 200 workers from the Timashevsky sugar factory in Russia staged a demonstration and rally to press owners and authorities to keep the sugar factory open. The owner, the Izumrud company, has declared bankruptcy and put the factory up for sale.

Over half of the plant’s workforce are participating in the dispute.

The closure would mean the loss of around 400 jobs. In addition, around 100 families living in the factory’s housing facilities face the threat of eviction.

Workers passed a resolution at the rally calling on the authorities of the Krasnodar region and of the Russian Federation to intervene.

For some years, the sugar sector has been under restructuring, involving property division and redistribution.

Timashevsk is a town in southern Russia, some 80 km north of Krasnodar, the administrative centre of Krasnodar Krai, the same region where Sochi, the venue for the 2014 Winter Olympics, is located.

Hospital staff in Leeds, England, strike again

Pathology staff at the Leeds Teaching Hospitals Trust in West Yorkshire, England, have started a further 48-hour strike in a dispute over potentially unsafe changes to working patterns.

The Unite union said switching 142 of its members from normal day

working and on-call arrangements to a shift system would be unsafe for patients and staff.

Staff at the trust’s three hospitals in Leeds and Bradford held a 24-hour strike on July 16.

The changes to working patterns would affect biomedical scientists and support staff that test blood samples and monitor blood transfusions at St James’s Hospital in Leeds, Leeds General Infirmary and Bradford Royal Infirmary.

A ban continues on overtime, which has been in place following the last strike.

Civil servants protest in Athens

On August 2, civil servants in Athens, Greece, protested at the gates of the Acropolis against government plans to involuntarily move 500 workers at the culture ministry into a national Labour Mobility scheme.

The workers are part of 25,000 public sector workers who are to be moved into the scheme by the end of 2013. According to estimates, about one third of these will be eventually fired.

The employees protesting at the Acropolis did not block its entrance. The workers protested next to a mock cut of a temple with “For Sale” signs attached to it. Action by workers at other museums around the country, including the archaeological museum on the island of Santorini, resulted in their closure.

Associated Press/Enet reported the comments of Despina Koutsoumba, head of the Association of Greek Archaeologists (SEA). He said, “As things stand, we don’t have enough people to function properly. We have to cover 19,000 archaeological sites and 210 museums nationwide, as well as several hundred archaeological excavations in progress all over the country.

“We have 6,600 staff at the ministry of culture and sport, and they will dismiss 500. But they will just have to hire that number back again—of course, on part-time contracts and for less money.”

The same day, civil servants in Athens continued a second day of strikes, holding a rally in the capital.

Greece: Union calls off strike at Athens Airport

The Federation of Associations of Hellenic Civil Aviation Authority (OSYPA) has postponed a planned three-day strike among Athens International Airport workers that was due to begin August 9. OSYPA said government officials had agreed to negotiate.

The strike, which would have disrupted air traffic at the height of the

tourist season, was in protest against the involuntary transfer or firing of 300 employees of the Hellenic Civil Aviation Authority (YPA), including those working for the airport.

The *Greek Reporter* explained: “The government is planning to put 40,000 workers into a so-called mobility scheme in which they will be involuntarily transferred to other positions—such as teachers becoming health care workers, except that more than 1,600 of those in the health sector will be in the programme too—and paid 75 percent of their already-reduced pay and fired if another job can’t be found for them within eight months.”

UK postal workers to hold national strike ballot

Postal workers are to hold a national strike ballot if no agreement is reached over jobs, pensions and other issues linked to the government plans to privatise the Royal Mail.

“Around 500 Communication Workers Union (CWU) representatives voted unanimously to press ahead with a strike ballot of 115,000 Royal Mail workers, no later than next month, if ‘satisfactory agreements’ are not reached,” reported the *Independent*, August 1.

It will be the first ballot for national industrial action in Royal Mail since September 2009. The ballot will also include whether to boycott post delivered by Royal Mail for rival companies such as UK Mail and TNT, which makes up a huge part of the daily postage.

A boycott would leave more than 20 million items undelivered each day, including bills and bank statements.

Thousands of postal workers in hundreds of UK Crown post offices have struck on nine separate days in the past few months over government plans to franchise out 70 branches with the possible loss of up to 1,500 jobs.

Ireland: Unions and management in talks at unresolved Dublin Bus dispute

Unions and management at Dublin Bus are engaged in talks at the Labour Court regarding a dispute over an €11.7 million cost-saving programme that led to an all-out strike at the company this week.

In the face of declining government funding, increased fuel costs, and falling passenger revenues, Dublin Bus wants to implement restructuring.

Following the intervention of the Labour Court on Tuesday, bus services recommenced in the capital Wednesday. The two unions involved in the dispute suspended the strike once they were invited to talks. Union organiser Willie Noone welcomed the Labour Court move and said the dispute would be resolved only through negotiation and discussion.

In May, the employers’ group Ibec called on the government to change the law to stop strikes causing disruption to key public services.

UK: London cycle hire workers vote for 48-hour strike

Employees of the multinational private firm Serco, who work on the London cycle hire scheme, have voted in favour of staging a 48-hour strike starting Sunday. The workers, who move the bikes around the city and maintain them, voted in favour of industrial action over pay, shift

patterns and other issues.

Strike ballot at bakery in Wigan, England

Workers at a Wigan bakery are voting on strike action after talks between unions and bosses broke down. The ballot for members of the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers (BFAWU) at Premier Foods bakery opened August 6 and will continue for a two-week period.

Issues under dispute include terms and conditions, the placement of permanent employees on zero-hour contracts and the employment of agency labour. There are also currently five members of the production team at risk of redundancy. Premier Foods maintained its right to use agency staff, stating that it is “standard procedure in the food production industry.”

A recent ballot of workers to canvass opinion on the use of agency staff resulted in a 15-to-1 ratio against the company proposals to use them.

Bulgarian miners set to strike

A trade union representative announced that Bulgarian miners are set to go on strike in the coming weeks after the death of four of their co-workers on July 16.

Monday was a day of national mourning for the four workers at the Oranovo coal mines, who were killed after a deadly collapse believed to have been caused by poor maintenance of the facility.

A report on Novinite, the Sofia News Agency, cited Vladimir Topalov, head of the miners’ unit of Bulgarian national trade union Podkrepa. “There will be protests. We will be blocking highways and roads,” he said. Topalov said consultations will be launched to decide on the timing of the rallies, which might be called after the end of Parliament’s recess, September 4.

Egyptian textile workers strike

“Workers at a public sector textile factory in Damietta have demanded the sacking of the factory’s management for delaying payments of financial allowances for over five months,” reported *Ahram Online* on July 31.

The workers began the strike July 30, issuing a statement demanding the removal of the factory’s executive board for ignoring their demands.

“Our problem with delays in our payments has been going on for years,” said the statement, stressing that the workers will continue protesting until their demands are met.

Menasolidaritynetwork.com reported in August: “A new rash of strikes across the Egyptian textile industry shows the challenges faced by the military-backed government installed in the wake of Mohamed Morsi’s overthrow. The new government has been in power less than a month, but workers’ protests are already on the rise.”

Workers at Nasr Spinning and Weaving Company in Mahalla walked out on strike July 31 in protest at delays in paying their wages, as well as three months of their annual profit-sharing bonus.

Meanwhile, workers at Stia Spinning and Weaving Company went on strike for at least 12 days, and workers at Misr Spinning and Bayda Dyers

in Kafr al-Dawwar protested for 4 days.

Libyan oil workers' strike

Workers at shipping terminals and oil fields in Libya have gone on strike over nonpayment of back pay.

Tripoli, the Libyan capital, is experiencing power outages for periods of several hours, up to twice a day. The state electricity company blamed the outages on decreased gas flows resulting from a series of ongoing strikes by oil and gas workers.

It is also reported that the strikes have led to a 70 percent fall in oil exports, which is starting to affect the Libyan economy.

State electricity company GECOL has taken aim at the striking energy workers. "The ongoing labour actions at shipping terminals and oil fields are not affecting only consumers," reported *Magharebia*. "The economy depends mainly on oil exports, and any slowdown in output takes a toll on state revenues."

Deputy Oil Minister Omar Alchukmak said, "Libya is incurring losses estimated at 50 million Libyan dinars per day due to the sit-ins."

Production has ceased at Sidra, Ras Lanuf, Brega, and Herega, while only 30 percent of normal output is being produced at Az-Zawiya.

"We were expecting to get a job after a revolution that toppled a regime that took advantage of the wealth for its own benefit," unemployed Ajdabiya resident Youssef al-Maghribi said.

Iranian sugar cane factory workers' strike

On August 2, the Free Union of Iranian Workers reported that "about 500 Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane Factory workers went on strike on July 29."

The report listed the workers' five main demands, including that four managers, with dual jobs in the factory, step down. One of them is reportedly Borzou Ahmadi, ex-head of Shoushtar Intelligence Office, who was active in expelling employees during protests that occurred in 2007 and 2008. Another demand is that the sale of the factory to the Revolutionary Guards Corps be stopped.

Ghanaian university teachers strike

University teachers belonging to the University Teachers Association of Ghana began an indefinite strike Thursday of last week after an emergency meeting of the Fair Wages and Salaries Commission failed to resolve the dispute.

They are protesting the nonpayment of a market premium as part of their salary. A press report August 5 stated the workers have now been paid their premium arrears but were continuing the strike until outstanding book and research allowances were also paid.

The Ghanaian president, John Mahama, called on them to return to work.

Nigerian air workers strike

Around 50 workers at the Nigeria Aviation Handling Company walked out on strike Monday. They are members of the National Union of Air Transport Employees and the Air Transport Senior Staff Association of Nigeria.

They were protesting the sacking of 30 of their colleagues and calling for a salary review and a fairer promotion procedure.

A company spokesman stated that the 30 workers were not sacked but had only been employed on a temporary basis. The company added that, depending on the result of a written assessment, some of the 30 sacked workers may be reemployed by the company.

Nigerian local government workers walk out

Local government workers in the state of Nasarawa walked out on strike Tuesday. They are members of the Nigeria Union of Local Government Employees.

Their demands include the lack of promotion and nonpayment of entitlements, outstanding since 2010. They are also protesting the non-payment of leave and transport grants, and the underpayment of salaries to some staff.

The union took the action following the failure of three meetings with the state government since May to resolve the issue.

South African textile workers ballot for strike

The Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (SACTWU) will ballot its 40,000 members over the next three weeks. The balloting began Thursday August 1 in the Western Cape area.

The employers are seeking to cut the previously agreed minimum wage paid to textile workers by 20 percent. The employers are also seeking to renege on a deal signed last year that had narrowed the gap paid to those in metropolitan areas as compared to those living in non-metropolitan areas.



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