

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

6 September 2013

Europe

Greek workers protest transfer to mobility scheme and unpaid wages

Municipal employees, school guards, nursing staff and doctors from public hospitals protested in Athens Wednesday.

The school guards were protesting their inclusion in the governments' mobility programme and are demanding the payment of unpaid wages. Early in the morning, about 100 school guards entered the Ministry of the Interior building in central Athens and occupied it for several hours. Around 50 school guards protested outside the Ministry of Administrative Reform.

The jobs of 2,150 guards were eliminated in July. Under the scheme, they have eight months from September 23 to be placed into another public job or be fired. This is part of the initial wave of 4,400 civil servants whose existing jobs were terminated as they were forced into the scheme. The scheme is a critical element of the New Democracy/PASOK government's austerity agreement with the European Union and International Monetary Fund to slash 150,000 public sector jobs by 2015.

Doctors held a rally outside the health ministry offices in Athens to protest their forced transfers into other jobs as well as cuts in their pay.

Hellenic Vehicle Industry workers take industrial action

On Wednesday workers employed by the state-owned Hellenic Vehicle Industry (ELVO) struck to protest the Greek government's plans to put the company up for sale as part of its privatisation programme.

Hellenic Vehicle Industry is the Greek Army's largest supplier of armoured and civilian vehicles.

Workers held a rally in central Thessaloniki, starting at the northern city's main courthouse and ending at the Macedonia-Thrace Ministry.

The head of the ELVO workers' trade union, Theodoros Aliongas, said that the date of the protest rally was changed because union representatives wanted to meet with government minister Theodoros Karaoglou ahead of the latter's meeting with Prime Minister Antonis Samaras in Athens on Wednesday.

ELVO is one of three state-owned firms that the troika is demanding be closed. The other two are Larco, which produces military and civilian special-purpose machinery firms and EAS (Hellenic Defence Systems). In an email to the Finance Ministry on Monday, the troika stated, "In our view, the option of closure/liquidation must be considered for all three companies."

Bosnian miners hold 48-hour underground protest

Around 140 miners employed at the Djurdjevik coal mine near Tuzla in Bosnia mounted a 48-hour underground sit-in at the mine.

The workers resurfaced Wednesday following discussions between their representatives and management. EPBiH, the power company that owns the mine, agreed to a pay rise and to hire more production staff to bring the underground sit-in to an end.

The brown coal mine employs around 1,000 workers and produces 600,000 tonnes of coal a year which goes to the Tuzla coal-fired power station.

Russian Aeroflot airline workers protest

Around 20 Aeroflot airline workers staged a protest outside the Moscow based Aeroflot office Tuesday to protest against working conditions.

The workers are demanding a premium to be paid for night flights and highlighting the lack of qualified personnel. The airline workers are members of the cockpit union SCPA. SCPA say the airline owes workers \$30 million in back pay. The union has gone to court to retrieve the money.

UK teachers' unions call more regional strikes

The National Union of Teachers and NASUWT teaching unions, the largest in the UK, representing nine out of ten teachers, announced further rolling strikes on Thursday.

Teachers are angered by a series of attacks made by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government since 2010, including a pay freeze, an increase in pension contributions and retirement age increase. Performance-related pay is also taking effect from this month with national pay levels being ended.

The union is to continue its policy of divisive regional strikes in October with teachers involved in the east of England, the Midlands, Yorkshire and Humberside on October 1 and teachers in London, North East, South East and South West on October 17. In June, teachers in the northwest of England were called out.

No regional action is to be held in Wales as was originally scheduled. The unions stated, "the Welsh Government has been prepared to engage in constructive talks to seek to avoid the escalation of the rolling programme of strike action in Wales". The unions gave no further details of the talks.

The union has not scheduled a national strike, stating that the possibility of one would not be discussed until after the October 17 regional action. This would be a non-starter, since at the beginning of the new academic year preparing for yet another action after the regional strikes is something teachers would likely be unwilling or unable to do.

Christine Blower, General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers said the unions had sought to avoid strike action. “With pay pensions and working conditions being systematically attacked and an education secretary who refuses to listen or negotiate, teachers now however have no other choice.”

The BBC reported that NASUWT general secretary Chris Keates said the teachers’ unions would meet the government “any time, any place” to discuss a settlement to the dispute.

UK biscuit factory workers may ballot

Hundreds of workers at the United Biscuits factory in Aintree, Merseyside could be facing a strike ballot over changes in working arrangements that include having to ask permission to go to the toilet. The factory employs around 800 workers and makes biscuit brands including Penguins, Jacob’s Crackers, and McVitie’s.

The *Liverpool Echo* reported, “It is understood the toilet break rules were introduced by the acting general manager and affect staff who drive fork lift trucks.”

Evidence obtained by the *Echo* suggests they have been given rotas with an allocated time to use the bathroom. The breaks are said to be staggered throughout the day.

The GMB union said its executive will decide this week whether to ballot its members at the factory.

Staff at chemicals plant in Norwich, England reject pay deal

Workers at Briar Chemicals in Norwich, England have rejected the latest company pay offer in a formal ballot.

The firm employs 124 workers who voted to reject the final offer of an unconsolidated one-off payment and a one-off bonus payment. The company reportedly dropped its demand for a new “Agreement of Intent” and a new Substantive Agreement by April 2014.

Irish doctors set for action

Junior doctors represented by the Irish Medical Organisation (IMO) have voted to strike beginning September 25 after a ballot of around 1,000 junior doctors produced a 97 percent vote in favour of industrial action over working hours.

The doctors’ grievance is over the fact they are working around 100 hours a week—more than twice the legal maximum. Talks between the IMO and Health Service representatives broke down at the end of last week prompting the ballot and planned strike action.

UK postal workers to vote on strike

Postal workers in the UK are to ballot for strike action to protest government privatisation plans and threats to pay, jobs and pensions.

The workers employed by Royal Mail and Parcelforce are members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU). The union said it would ballot 125,000 workers starting September 20 with a result due on October 3.

It will be the first national postal ballot since a pay and conditions dispute in 2009. A number of local disputes have broken out around the UK among postal workers, with 96 percent of the CWU’s members recently voting against privatisation.

A statement by CWU Deputy General Secretary Dave Ward exposed the unions’ claim that it is organising a genuine struggle against privatisation. Ward made clear the union is preparing for the “realities” of the sell-off of Royal Mail stating, “We are dealing with a company that is preparing for privatisation with relish. While the union continues to fight privatisation we are also dealing with the potential realities for workers if there is a change of ownership.

“We are looking to reach a groundbreaking agreement on terms and conditions that sets unprecedented legally binding protection for workers in the event of a sale, and regardless of who owns the company.” [emphasis added]

The government said it will not alter its decision to sell shares in Royal Mail in this financial year. Royal Mail responded to the CWU’s announcement condemning industrial action or the possibility of disruption as damaging to its business, especially in the run-up to Christmas, which is the busiest time for the company.

Royal Mail managers in the Unite union have also voted strongly against the planned sell-off.

UK firefighters vote in favour of strikes

Firefighters voted by almost four-to-one last week in favour of striking in a dispute over pensions. If it goes ahead it will be the first national walkout by firefighters in a decade.

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) said planned changes to pensions were “unaffordable and unworkable”, would impose an increase in members’ contributions and would put firefighters at greater risk of dismissal without access to a proper pension. Workers retiring at the age of 55 could lose thousands of pounds per year.

In response to the strike vote FBU general secretary Matt Wrack said the union wanted to hold further talks with the government in order to avert a strike. “This result is a clear indication of the anger felt by firefighters. It’s still not too late for common sense to prevail if the government are willing to return to the negotiating table. None of us want a strike, but we cannot compromise on public and firefighter safety”, he said.

Middle East

Tunisian journalists announce strike

The General Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT) announced a general strike on September 3 “protesting against a partisan leadership imposed upon the journalists”, according to the *Tunis Times*.

The strike is said to include all public radio stations.

The journalists and technicians are also demanding the resignation of the current director, Mohamed Meddeb, who was assigned by Hamadi Jebali’s cabinet on April of 2012. Meddeb is alleged to have been

exercising pressure on journalists in an attempt to force them to change the editorial line of radio stations in favour of the current government.

Africa

Reinstated Tazara railway workers remain on strike

The management of the Tanzania-Zambia (Tazara) railway have rescinded their sacking of around 1,000 Tazara workers. They began their strike two weeks ago. They are refusing to return to work until the four months' salary arrears (May to August) they are owed is paid.

Erasto Kihwele secretary of the Tazara Railway Workers' Union (TRAWU) told reporters management had promised to pay at least one month's pay by August 29, however this did not materialise. He added they would not return to work until all the arrears are paid.

Kenyan local government workers prevented from holding strike

Around 11,000 Nairobi county government workers were due to go on strike on Monday but have been ordered not to do so after intervention by the Industrial Court. The planned strike was to compel the government to implement a collective bargaining agreement signed into effect a year ago giving them a 50 percent increase in benefits received by them.

However, workers defied the court order and lobbied the Nairobi city hall on Tuesday. Police then used teargas to disperse them.

The agreement was signed between the workers' union representatives and the national government. A lawyer representing the Nairobi county government area said because Nairobi county government was not a signatory to the agreement, they would not abide by it.

The Labour court is due to hear the case on September 9.

South African casual postal workers strike

Casual workers employed at some South Africa Post Office (SAPO) mail processing centres in the Gauteng area went on strike Monday. They took action as part of their campaign to be given permanent positions. SAPO management was in talks with representatives of the casual workers in an attempt to resolve the dispute.

South African auto workers vow to intensify dispute

Auto workers say they will intensify their strike now in its third week. Around 30,000 auto workers employed by Toyota, Volkswagen and Ford, amongst others, are on strike. They are demanding a double-digit pay agreement for the next three years together with medical aid facilities and shift flexibility.

Around 500 striking auto workers marched on the offices of the National Association of Automobile Manufacturers in Pretoria last week to push their demands.

South African construction workers' walk-out enters second week

The 90,000 construction workers organised by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) are continuing their strike. They are demanding a minimum wage of R5500 (US\$535). The action is affecting major construction companies such as WBHO, Group Five, Murray and Roberts and Stocks amongst others.

Striking construction workers employed at the Nkomati mine in Machadodorp are due to be joined by nickel miners working at the site when they take secondary supportive action on Friday 6 September.



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