

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

18 October 2013

UK postal workers vote for industrial action

Postal workers are to take one-day strike action following a four-to-one vote in favour. The members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) will walk out on November 4.

The CWU declared that the action would be over threats to conditions in the wake of Royal Mail's privatisation. But the union delayed action and only announced the result of the ballot after the Royal Mail was privatised and its shares floated on the stock exchange.

The CWU has done nothing to oppose the privatisation. The government has expressed that a crucial element in encouraging private corporations is to inflict a decisive assault on the jobs, pay and pensions of postal workers.

CWU Deputy General Secretary Dave Ward made clear that the union had accepted privatisation stating, "What we want is a ground-breaking, long-term, legally binding agreement that not only protects postal workers' job security, pay and pensions, but will also determine the strategy, principles and values of how the Royal Mail Group will operate as a private entity."

Italian bank workers to strike

Bank employees are to hold a national strike October 31, in a dispute with the country's banking association over employment contracts.

Its first such action in 13 years, the strike is in response to the decision of the Italian Banking Association (ABI) to annul the sector employment contract almost a year before the expiry date.

Last month, the head of ABI, Giovanni Sabatini, said the "competencies and professionalism" of many employees "are not coherent with the current way of banking." He also said that the recent rise in Italy's retirement age had created excess staffing levels.

According to the Bank of Italy, most Italian banks have cut their lending to private households and firms, opting instead to buy government bonds, holdings of which have nearly doubled over the past two years to €400 billion (\$540 billion).

Greek private sector and civil servant unions call 24-hour strike

The private sector General Confederation of Greek Labour (GSEE), and civil servants ADEDY union have announced a 24-hour strike for November 6 to protest austerity measures imposed by the coalition government in return for bailout funding from the country's international creditors.

The national seamen's union (PNO) is expected to join the 24-hour walkout.

French air controllers strike over "single sky" plan

A strike by air traffic controllers protesting a European Union (EU) plan to centralize the continent's airspace took place October 10.

The workers have held several previous stoppages over the same issue.

The latest strike had been called by two smaller unions in protest at the EU initiative.

The work stoppage forced several airlines to cancel scores of short-haul flights.

Carriers had been asked to cancel 10 percent of the day's flights within France and to Spain, Portugal and North Africa.

Low-cost carrier Ryanair was reported to have cancelled some 90 flights. Lufthansa was also partly affected by the strike, although this was limited as the biggest union, USAC-CGT did not join the action.

Brussels claims the EU's "single sky" plan will reduce congestion and inefficiencies costing an estimated €5 billion (\$6.6 billion) annually. But employees fear the planned reform will lead to worsening working conditions and job cuts.

Finnish air traffic controllers threaten partial strike

Air traffic controllers are threatening a partial strike from October 30, against plans to move work from Tampere to Helsinki-Vantaa airport.

Controllers have been observing an overtime ban since the middle of August.

The action would have a minimal effect on flights, according to the civil aviation authority Finavia.

Plans to concentrate air traffic control in the capital region were announced last month. They would see some operations moved to Helsinki-Vantaa airport, with Tampere's air traffic control centre kept open until 2018 at which point it could be shut down if no alternative had been found.

England: Check-in staff and baggage handlers at Swissport vote overwhelmingly to strike

Workers at the ground handling company Swissport—based at Gatwick, Heathrow, Manchester and Stansted airports—have overwhelmingly voted in favour of striking in a dispute over pay.

The dispute, which includes check-in staff and baggage handlers, is centred on the company's decision to freeze workers' pay for the past eighteen months, and a below-inflation increase of just 2.5 percent.

Swissport's clients include British Airways, Ryanair, Thomas Cook, Thomson and Virgin Emirates.

Union calls off strike at Scottish oil refinery

A planned strike at the Grangemouth oil refinery has been called off by the Unite union, even though talks failed to resolve a bitter dispute over a union convener.

According to a report in the *Guardian*, “Unite attacked the ‘scandalous behaviour’ of the Scottish site’s owner, Ineos, but said it wanted to protect the national asset.”

Workers were due to walk out for 48 hours from Sunday over the treatment of Unite Convener Stephen Deans. He was involved in a dispute over the selection of a Labour candidate in Falkirk where he is chairman of the constituency party. He was suspended by Ineos and later reinstated, but is facing an internal investigation by the company over issues linked to the Falkirk affair.

Lengthy talks were held at the conciliation service Acas, but they ended without agreement.

Unite accused Ineos of running the Grangemouth refinery and petrochemical sites, near Falkirk, into a “damaging cold shutdown” which would affect fuel production and supply across Scotland.

Pat Rafferty, Unite’s Scottish secretary, said, “The safety and integrity of the site and the local population are now paramount and we have an obligation to ensure that Ineos does not permanently decimate the plant’s assets and the workforce with this cold shutdown.

“As a result, Unite will now call off all industrial action with immediate effect in order to protect this national asset from the scandalous behaviour of its owner. The plant should now start the return to full production and there is no excuse for this not to happen.”

Zambian shop workers sacked

On Monday, around 3,000 workers employed by South African-based Shoprite went on strike demanding the government-legislated minimum wage and against poor working conditions. The company runs 21 Shoprite stores together with nine Hungry Lion fast food outlets. The workers are represented by the National Union of Commercial and Industrial Workers.

Shoprite responded by sacking the striking workers, telling them they would be entitled to reapply for their jobs. Union leaders and Shoprite management were due to meet with the Zambian labour minister to discuss the dispute.

Ghanaian local government workers walk out

Local government workers represented by the Civil and Local Government Staff Association of Ghana (CLOGSAG) went on strike this week over the government’s Fair Wages and Salaries Commission’s failure to recompense those who have lost money as a result of the introduction of the Single Spine Salary Structure (SSSS).

Other local government workers represented by the Local Government Workers’ Union (LGWU) are not taking part in the strike. The LGWU leadership is in talks with government over problems with the introduction of the SSSS.

Nigerian academic staff strike passes 100-day mark

The indefinite strike by university staff members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has passed its 100-day mark. Their action has closed all public universities across Nigeria. They are demanding the federal government implements agreements made between the union and the government in 2009 and 2012.

According to an ASSU representative, the agreement would have provided the universities with N500 billion (\$3 billion) to update and maintain university infrastructure but only N100 billion (\$625 million) has been provided.

Three other unions, the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT), the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) and the National Union of Electricity Employees (NUEE) have threatened a one-day solidarity strike in support of the academic staff and are calling on the federal government to honour the agreement with the ASUU. However, they have not set a date for action.

The NUT has also threatened action in its own right if the federal government goes ahead with plans to cede responsibility for primary school teachers to state governments.

South African soap opera actors strike

Actors in the popular South African soap opera “Generations” have gone on strike. They failed to show up on the set on Monday when filming was due to restart. Their action has been supported by the Creative Workers Union of South Africa (CWUSA). They have accused the executive producer of acting in an arrogant manner.

Among their demands are an end to exploitative working conditions, longer-term contracts to afford them more financial stability and access to social benefits including retirement packages.

South African car retail workers settle dispute

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) representing workers in the car retail sector, including car component manufacturing, signed an agreement with the Retail Motor Industry employers Tuesday ending the four-week strike. NUMSA had called off the strike the previous week.

The three-year settlement will give workers in the car components sector a ten percent increase this year followed by eight percent in 2014 and 2015. Others such as forecourt attendants will get nine percent this year followed by eight percent in 2014 and in 2015. NUMSA had been seeking an across-the-board double-digit pay increase along with other demands such as the abolition of the use of labour brokers.

South African brewery workers’ strike continues

Workers represented by the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) employed by South African Breweries (SAB) have vowed to intensify their strike if SAB does not make a better offer. The union and SAB management were due to meet for talks Wednesday. The workers are seeking a nine percent pay increase while SAB has offered seven percent. The seven percent offer only amounts to a 4.2 percent increase with the remainder dependent on a non-guaranteed performance related factor.

On Monday, FAWU members vowed to intensify the action by calling sympathy strikes at SAB-related plants producing soft drinks and at their hops farms.

South African civil servants picket offices

The Department of Home Affairs offices in Western Cape were picketed by the office workers Tuesday. They are members of the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union and were demanding better working conditions.

The department accused the workers of taking part in unprotected strike action and threatened legal action should picketing continue.



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