

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

1 November 2013

UK higher education staff strike

Staff at higher education institutions across the UK struck today in a dispute over a five-year “pay drought.” Universities affected included those in Cambridge, Cardiff, Lancaster, Leeds, Leicester, London, Manchester, Newcastle, Southampton and Sussex.

The Unite, Unison and the University and College Union (UCU) are involved in the dispute. The unions were unable to cancel the action since the government refused talks.

Staff real pay has been eroded by around 13 percent since 2008, and they have been offered a pay rise of just one percent for 2013-14.

The cumulative operating surplus in the higher education sector is now over £1 billion, with many higher education institutions having built up cash reserves. Overall staff costs in higher education, as a proportion of income, have fallen from 58 percent in 2001-02, to 55.5 percent in 2011-12, according to union sources.

The last industrial action in universities over the issue of pay was in 2006.

UK postal workers strike called off by union

Industrial action by postal workers at Royal Mail, planned for Monday, has been called off by the Communication Workers Union (CWU), after the union and management said they were committed to “finalising an agreement” by November 13 in talks over pay and pensions.

The planned strike would have been the first national strike at Royal Mail in almost four years.

The Royal Mail was privatised in October. Postal workers were given free shares in the company in an effort to combat opposition to privatisation. An offer made by Royal Mail management in the summer also included an 8.6 percent pay rise over three years. The decisive factor, however, for the successful privatisation of Royal Mail was the CWU. Its ballot for industrial action over demands for a longer-term agreement to protect job security, pay and pensions involved 115,000 workers in Royal Mail and Parcelforce, was timed so that a strike would only take place after privatisation was an accomplished fact.

Unsurprisingly, the union has now called off this action, revealing its role as an industrial police force in the new privatised entity.

Spanish miners strike after gas leak kills six

Coal miners staged a 48-hour work stoppage Tuesday after a methane

gas leak killed six workers the day before.

It was the deadliest accident in a Spanish mine since 14 workers were killed in August 1995 in a methane explosion at a coal mine near Mieres in the northern province of Asturias.

Agence France-Presse reported that officials said that the gas suffocated the six workers in the Santa Lucia mine in northwest Spain, spreading so quickly underground that miners had no time to put on protective masks before being overcome. Another five workers injured at the mine, near the town of Pola de Gordon, were taken to hospital and are in stable condition.

At the time of the disaster, the 11 miners were reportedly working in a 200-metre (600-ft) long gallery, almost 700 metres (2,300 ft) below ground. The four-metre high, five-metre (13-ft by 16-ft) wide passage was accessible via a cage lift.

AFP noted, “Spain’s coal mining sector has been contracting for decades, with a reduction in government mining subsidies hastening the closure of unprofitable mines. Like other European countries, Spain has committed to gradually close unprofitable coal mines in the next few years”.

French agricultural workers protest plans for new “ecotax”

Up to 1,000 agricultural workers and truck drivers gathered in the Finistère department in west Brittany to protest against plans for a so-called ecotax on heavy road transport.

Police fired tear gas and rubber bullets during violent clashes with the protesters. More than 250 vehicles blocked the road. Protesters set fire to hay bales and stacked tires next to a toll gate at Pont-de-Buis.

The toll gate was the only one still functioning in the region. Two others have been sabotaged.

As riot police arrived, some of the protesters reportedly threw eggs and flares at the security forces, who responded with volleys of teargas and shots from Flash-Ball weapons—controversial handheld devices that fire rubber bullets.

One protester had to be evacuated by helicopter after his hand was injured by a teargas grenade, *AFP* reported, while another was taken to hospital after being hit in the neck by a Flash-Ball shot.

Due to come into effect in January 2014, the ecotax was first introduced by the former French government under Nicolas Sarkozy, and will see an additional levy placed on transport over 3.5 tonnes. The tax is deeply unpopular in Brittany, where agricultural industry forms an important part of the region’s economy and which has been suffering heavily from the economic crisis.

An IFOP poll for French weekly *Dimanche Ouest-France* revealed Saturday that 74 percent of Bretons are against the tax. Several demonstrations against the levy had already been held in the region before

Saturday's protest.

Striking jewelry workers protest outside Paris store

Workers at Cartier protested outside its flagship Paris store Friday to demand a pay increase. Some 70 employees gathered in central Paris near the main opera house shouting, "Workers badly paid!"

The gem polishers came from the eastern city of Reims where the Cartier workshop is located and where they launched their strike three days before. One of the striking workers said, "We will not give up. We might be losing some money, but they are losing millions." She earned only €1,300 (\$1,700) a month after being employed by the famous jeweller and luxury watch maker for 13 years.

The workers are demanding a pay rise of €200 a month, but management has only offered a raise of €75. Cartier was founded in 1847 and is now owned by Swiss luxury goods holding company Richemont, founded by South African tycoon Johann Rupert. The company's last reported turnover was €12.7 billion.

German Amazon workers strike

Workers at Amazon distribution centres in Leipzig and Bad Hersfeld went on strike again on Tuesday over pay and conditions.

The workers are seeking a collective agreement on employment conditions similar to deals for the mail order and retail sector, more generous than for the logistics sector. Amazon employs about 9,000 people in Germany, its largest market outside the United States. Sales there grew almost 21 percent in 2012 to \$8.7bn (£5.4bn), representing a third of its overseas total.

Amazon regards staff in Bad Hersfeld and Leipzig as logistics workers and says that they receive above-average pay by the standards of that industry.

The company said earlier this month it would invest in three new logistics centres in Poland, prompting speculation that it could seek to shift work across the border.

The strike in Leipzig and Bad Hersfeld is part of a series of short, uncoordinated strikes held in recent months.

Parents protest Welsh council's nursery provision cuts

Some 100 parents protested outside Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) Council's headquarters in Clydach Vale, Wednesday against proposed cuts to the nursery provision. Some of those protesting threatened to withhold payment of their council tax for a month.

As part of its efforts to save £56 million over the next four years, the council is proposing to cut free nursery provision for all three-year-olds, recommending the children start their education later.

The council is about to launch a consultation that could see infants starting school on a part-time, rather than the current full-time basis. Around 10,000 people have signed a petition against the proposed nursery provision cuts.

Proposed changes to youth services would cut another £2.2 million, while £300,000 could be cut by ending the delivery of Meals On Wheels

at the weekend. The council also has 14 of its 26 libraries earmarked for closure.

The Welsh government's draft budget has revealed local government funding will be cut by 5.81 percent across Wales.

Demonstration to save UK council care homes

A demonstration took place this week to fight for the future of five council care homes Durham County Council is considering shutting. The council wants to reach a £222 million savings target for 2011-2017. Around 50 permanent residents live in the homes and the unions said the jobs of 170 staff were at risk.

A perfunctory three-month consultation regarding the homes in Belmont, Ferryhill, Peterlee, Chester-le-Street and Stanhope is underway. Three options are said to be considered: keeping and repairing the homes, closing them and moving residents to independent homes or seeing if other organisations might take over the homes' management.

Cypriot municipal workers protest austerity

On Tuesday, nurses, pensioners and municipality workers protested outside parliament and the finance ministry against government imposed cuts.

Some protestors held banners with slogans such as "The state should protect municipalities," "No to wage and benefit cuts" and "No to the reduction of funds to municipalities."

Municipality workers went on strike for four hours to protest against a further 12 percent cut to state funding for 2014.

The protest was organised by a group of nurses through Facebook without the knowledge of the government workers umbrella union, PASYDNY. Nurses say they will be hit hard by the 50 percent cuts on extra pay for working night shifts, weekends, and national holidays.

The deputy head of PASYDNY Savvas Vergas responded by professing, "We fully understand the circumstances our country is in and last year we managed to work on a smaller budget hoping this would please the government and that we would be able to continue on the same budget."

Turkish police use water cannon, teargas to break up protest

Some 2,000 protested Monday outside an Ankara court over the handling of the trial of a policeman accused of killing a demonstrator earlier this year. Turkish police fired water cannon and teargas to disperse the demonstrators.

Reuters cited local media which reported that several protesters were wounded and 18 detained. Ankara police declined to confirm the arrests and the crowd was later dispersed.

Police officer Ahmet Sahbaz is accused of killing Ethem Sarisuluk in a June protest against the suppression of a demonstration against the redevelopment of Gezi Park in Istanbul. Five protesters and one officer died during weeks of unrest.

Amnesty International said this month that Turkish authorities committed widespread rights abuses during the Gezi Park protests, beating and harassing protesters. Turkish officials have defended the police

response.

The hearing was adjourned to December 2.

Zimbabwean police question demonstrating fishermen

Fishermen organised in the Kapenta Workers Union (KWU) in Kariba who had held a demonstration were taken in for questioning by police over the weekend.

Among those held was KWU Deputy Secretary-General Gerald Chimurewo. They had been demonstrating outside the offices of the National Employment Council for the Agricultural Industry of Zimbabwe, under whose remit they fall, against poor wages and conditions.

KWU General Secretary Rodgers Madyara told the press, “We want better wages as our members are earning as farm workers when they are living in a town ... the lowest grade earning \$120 only... some... have outstanding back pay dating to several years... they are on fixed monthly contracts that resembles slavery attitude on workers.”

Namibian fishery staff strike threat

Around 170 Fishery Observer Agency staff based in Walvis Bay and 60 based in Luderitz are threatening unofficial strike action. The FOA workers accompany fishing boats going to sea to record data on fish stocks and take samples and are members of the Namibian Public Workers Union (NAPWU).

They are protesting not receiving this year’s scheduled annual salary increment.

Kenyan local government strike continues

The strike by 600 local government workers employed by the County government of Migori is beginning to have an impact on key operations including revenue collection. They are demanding Sh60 million (\$0.7m) in salary arrears owed when the previous municipal body was wound up. Rubbish collections have been halted. The strike began October 22.

Kenyan flower workers strike

Over 1,200 workers at three flower farms in Edloret have gone on strike as employers have failed to pay the workers a transport allowance as agreed in a collective bargaining agreement. The farms Zena Roses, Sosiani and Asai are owned by a former minister of agriculture.

A shop steward at the Zena farm told the press, “We have to be paid the arrears for the last two years before we go back to work and will stand up for our rights.”

South African brewery workers strike enters fifth week

The strike by brewery workers employed by South African Breweries (SAB), members of the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU), is now in its fifth week. They are seeking a 9 percent pay increase, the SAB offer of 7 percent but with performance-related pay conditions amounts to a 4.2 percent offer, which is below inflation.

South African platinum miners’ strike vote

Platinum miners working for Impala Platinum and represented by the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) have voted for a strike. They are demanding a doubling of the minimum basic pay for entry-level miners to R12, 000 (\$1,300). The company is offering its lowest paid miners an eight percent increase this year followed by a seven percent increase next. Although AMCU has a strike mandate, it is still to serve the 48 hour strike notice, holding out for concessions by Impala.

South African platinum miners in continued talks

Platinum miners represented by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) are in talks with Northam over a wage dispute. The NUM has been granted a certificate of non-resolution by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration.

The company is offering a wage rise of between six and 7.5 percent this year followed by 5.5 to seven percent the following year. The NUM is seeking a R2000 (\$201) increase for non-core employees and R2100 (\$211) for core employees, plus an increase in living-out allowances and a one-year-only agreement.



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