

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

15 November 2013

Europe

Finnair airline workers set to strike

Finnair cabin crew and aviation staff are set to strike today, threatening to halt virtually all airline traffic in Finland.

The Finnish Aviation Union (IAU) and the Finnish Cabin Crew Union (SLSY) announced the strike will proceed if no progress is made in contract negotiations. Ground service staff, including baggage handlers, ticket salespeople, check-in staff and mechanics, are all involved in the dispute.

Strikes are scheduled for November 15-23 and November 27-30. Referring to the planned stoppage, the Finnish Aviation Union's spokesperson, Juhani Haapasaari, said, "It will be the biggest that's ever taken place in Finland."

According to the airline, its estimated revenue would fall about €4.5 million per strike day.

On Thursday, Finnair cancelled 24 flights to avoid congestion at Helsinki Airport in the event of a strike. A spokeswoman for Finnair told the *Wall Street Journal* that the cancelled flights could be restored if last-minute negotiations between the airline and two trade unions succeeded. "We are still negotiating and hope to avoid a strike altogether", she said.

On Tuesday, at Helsinki-Vantaa Airport, at least 400 catering employees went on strike at midday.

Workers in Valencia protest planned closure of radio station

On November 7, workers at the Radio Television Valenciana (RTVV) public broadcaster in Spain's Valencia region protested on air and outside its headquarters against plans by the local governments to close it.

Several hundred workers and supporters gathered outside RRTV headquarters in the city, Spain's third largest. Speaking to Press TV, an RRTV employee said, "We are very sad and very concerned. If the public television closes, it would be the loss of an essential public service". He continued, "We have the firm intention to continue our jobs, working as always with professionalism and responsibility, so that the government of Valencia reconsiders its decision to close this public television."

As part of spending cuts, the regional government is to close the station completely after a court rejected its original plans to lay off 1,000 of the 1,700 workers. The decision was taken by Alberto Fabra, the president of Valencia and a member of Spain's governing People's Party.

Greek public-sector strike against job losses

Greek public-sector workers struck on Thursday to protest planned massive job losses of the New Democracy/PASOK government under the "mobility scheme".

The workers, members of the ADEDY trade union federation, struck from 12 noon and held a rally in Athens at 1 p.m. They were set to return to work on Friday.

Some 12,500 civil servants are being put into a "mobility scheme" of forced transfers or dismissals, with another 4,000 workers to be fired by the end of the year.

Firefighters in England, Wales hold fourth industrial action

Firefighters in England and Wales struck on Wednesday in their ongoing dispute with the government over pensions. The strike was the fourth in recent weeks. Following the last two-hour token strike called by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), the latest action was just four hours.

Under government plans, firefighters will get their full pension at 60 years of age, up from 55 for those employed before 2006. Those forced out of work at 55 because they are no longer deemed fit could lose up to half of their pension.

The FBU is seeking to wind down strike action completely. It is currently balloting members for additional days of "non-strike action".

UK university staff announce second date for walkout

University staff across the UK are to walk out for a second day on December 3, in a dispute over pay.

The three unions involved, UNISON, Unite and the University and College Union (UCU), said their members would walk out again in three weeks' time and be joined by Scottish education union, the EIS, unless the dispute over pay was resolved.

University employees have been offered a 1 percent pay offer, which is a 13 percent pay cut in real terms due to pay reductions over recent years. This comes at a time when pay and benefits for university leaders increased, on average, by more than £5,000 in 2011-2012, with the average pay and pensions package for vice-chancellors hitting almost £250,000.

Unison said, "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,"

UK Lloyds bank staff threaten strike

Staff at the Lloyds Banking Group are threatening industrial action after proposed changes to its pension scheme. Under the plans, 35,000 members of the final salary scheme—around a third of the workforce—would no longer receive any annual pension rises.

Lloyds was bailed out after it acquired Halifax Bank of Scotland following the 2008 financial crisis. It came out of the red earlier this year with half-year profits of £2.1 billion.

Lloyds group has more than 30 million customers in the UK, through Lloyds Bank, Halifax, Bank of Scotland, TSB, Scottish Widows, and other brands.

Bulgarian medics' protest postponed by union

The Bulgarian Doctors' Union decided last week to postpone plans to hold nationwide strikes and protest rallies, originally prompted by the decision of the National Health Insurance Fund (NZOK) to pay only 80 percent for activities at medical institutions until the end of the year

In a so-called warning protest on November 1, doctors, nurses and medical staff issued an ultimatum to the NZOK to resolve the issue with payments to hospitals by November 8.

Croatia's Zagreb Airport staff may walk out

Staff at Zagreb Airport could take industrial action over the concession agreement signed between the government and the airport's future operator, Zagreb Airport International Company, a consortium led by Aéroports de Paris.

The trade union representing workers has outlined seven conditions to employers that include the immediate halt of the airport's takeover, an investigation into the concession agreement, pay guarantees for employees in advance of one year and appropriate government measures against the airport's management, which the union says has "damaged the airport's financial credibility and reputation."

No date for industrial action has been set.

Middle East

Workers strike at five Israel Chemicals plants

On November 11, workers at five Israel Chemicals Ltd plants in the Negev launched strikes to protest the streamlining plan that management is seeking to implement.

Workers walk out at state-owned Jordanian newspaper

On November 12, workers at Jordan's largest daily newspaper, the state-owned *Al-Rai*, and its sister newspaper struck for 24 hours in opposition to state interference. The strike resulted in the suspension of that day's editions.

Workers are also protesting the delay in implementing a 2011 labour agreement on salaries, reported the AFP news agency.

Africa

Ghanaian TUC calls off proposed general strike

The secretary general of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Kofi Asamoah, has called off the general strike due to start Monday, November 18. The strike had been called in opposition to last month's utility price hikes. The cost of electricity went up by 79 percent and water by 52 percent. Asamoah made the unilateral decision to call off the strike after the government announced it would absorb 25 percent of the electricity increase.

Amongst the unions opposing the TUC decision were the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union and the Ghana Medical Association, but they will not embark on any independent strike action.

Ghana ship workers take action

Workers for Volta Lake Transport have gone on strike. Volta Lake Transport runs passenger and cargo boats on the enormous man-made Volta Lake. They are demanding unpaid wages for the last month. They are also demanding the Ghanaian government replace the management team that has accused them of running down the company.

Libyan teachers walk out

Teachers in Libya held a three-day strike last week demanding a pay increase. Reports stated 95 percent of schools were closed including in the capital, Tripoli. Teachers in the western city of Zawiya temporarily blockaded an oil refinery to push their case. Teachers are amongst the lowest-paid state employees.

Nigerian primary teachers continue action

Around 27,000 primary school teachers in the state of Benue have been on strike since August after the state government reneged on promises to implement the federally agreed minimum wage.

On June 14, the state government signed an agreement with the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) to implement the minimum wage rate from August 1 but then did not honour the agreement.

Benue state has implemented the minimum wage rate for secondary school teachers, civil servants and local government workers.

Nigeria: Mass sackings follow the privatisation of power company

On November 1, the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) was handed over to a private company. Around 60 percent of the PHCN staff including union officials were then sent termination letters.

Those who have since been re-engaged have been taken on as casual workers on the basis of a six-month contract.

The National Union of Electricity Employees (NUEE) has called on the government to reverse the sackings and casualisation or face industrial action.

South African farm workers strike

Farm workers on four farms owned by the Le Roux Group in the Boland area of Western Cape went on strike last week. They are represented by the Black Association of the Wine and Spirit Industry (BAWSI) and the Bawsi Agricultural Workers Union of South Africa (BAWUSA).

They are opposing deductions made to their pay. After strikes in the Western Cape area last year, the minimum wage was raised from R69 (US\$6.70) a day to R105 (US\$10.20) a day. However, the workers claim employers have increased deductions from their pay for transport, rent and electricity in order to claw back the pay increases.

This week, Le Roux went to court and the dispute was declared illegal, meaning the strikers could now face dismissal.

South African platinum miners hold underground sit-in

Around 2,000 miners at the Anglo American Platinum Dishaba mine in Limpopo held an underground sit-in at the weekend following the suspension of an Association of Mineworkers and Construction Workers Union (AMCU) shop steward for an alleged breach of safety regulations.

AMCU secretary general Jeff Mphahlele disassociated the union from the action stating, "We can't sanction an illegal strike."

The miners returned to the surface Sunday and went back to work.



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