

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

10 January 2014

French workers release Goodyear executives and occupy site

Workers at a Goodyear tyre factory in northern France slated for closure released two executives they were holding hostage Tuesday afternoon.

The men had been detained by up to 200 employees who blocked their escape with a tractor tyre as they arrived at a meeting with union leaders Monday. As they walked free from the plant in northern France after being “imprisoned” for 30 hours, staff shouted, “We’re not the hooligans.”

The site was occupied on the departure of the two executives.

Goodyear announced it was closing the plant, throwing 1,173 employees out of work, citing turbulent relations between management and unions.

Head of US-based Titan International, Maurice Taylor, Jr., who had offered to buy the site but with “zero employees”, on Tuesday described the workers as “pirates.”

Taylor ran for the US Republican presidential nomination in 1996, and was invited by French industrial minister, Arnaud Montebourg, to take over the plant last February. He told RTL radio, “...in the US that’s kidnapping and they’d go to prison... The police should go in and arrest these pirates but they won’t ... that’s how it is in France.”

UK lawyers in unprecedented strike

UK trial lawyers staged their first ever strike Monday to protest government cuts of up to 30 percent to legal fees they said endanger the criminal justice system.

Trials across England and Wales were severely disrupted as hundreds of barristers demonstrated outside courthouses.

“Nigel Lithman, chairman of the Criminal Bar Association that organised the half-day protest, said it was the first time barristers had withdrawn their labour in the history of a profession dating back to the 15th century,” said *Reuters*.

It is also the first time the two wings of the legal profession have taken coordinated, national action.

“The very future of our criminal justice system is in jeopardy by the imposition of savage cuts to funding”, Lithman told around 100 protesting lawyers outside London’s Southwark Crown Court.

The proposed reforms, which are due to come into force for trials starting from April onwards, would reduce the legal aid budget by around half a billion pounds.

Outside the Old Bailey, senior barrister Mukul Chawla told a large crowd of protesters that ever-decreasing fees for legal aid work would mean “the guilty will go unpunished and the innocent will be wrongly convicted.”

Lawyers argue that if the Ministry of Justice enforces the latest

reduction it will lead to lower quality legal representation and more miscarriages of justice.

Successive reductions in legal aid fees have already resulted in cuts of 40 percent for criminal cases since 1997.

The protest was coordinated with the Justice Alliance, which is supported by trade unions, charities, and organisations such as Amnesty UK, Liberty, Unite, the Howard League for Penal Reform and the Children’s Society.

Matt Foot, a solicitor and founder of Justice Alliance, said the cuts “will have a devastating effect on the rights of ordinary people in this country and undermine the ability to challenge unlawful government actions ...No one has stood up and supported these proposals.”

The modern system of Legal Aid in the UK was created by the Legal Advice and Assistance Act 1949. This was part of the establishment of the post-war welfare state and was the first coherent attempt to provide a comprehensive system of state-funded legal aid. Prior to this, legal advice for poorer litigants was either non-existent or relied heavily on the good will of lawyers.

The cutting of legal aid funding and the denial of access to justice are integral to the unprecedented assault on civil liberties and the denial of democratic rights, amid escalating attacks on the living conditions of millions of people in the UK.

Staff on new UK gas plant project vote to strike

The workforce employed on a new gas plant project in Shetland have voted overwhelmingly in favour of industrial action in a long-running dispute with the construction company Balfour Beatty over accommodation and travel time.

The dispute concerns a claim for an additional £50 per day from the company to compensate for the failure to provide suitable accommodation and an additional claim for payment for lengthy travelling time undertaken each day.

Workers employed by different contractors on site are also involved in the dispute and will also be balloted for industrial action.

Balfour Beatty are subcontractors for the project, which is run by Petrofac. TOTAL is the client.

UK regional rail staff vote for industrial action

Staff on Greater Anglia’s West Anglia route in England have voted by nine to one for a strike and action short of a strike in a dispute over the ripping up of agreed procedures, as the company try to bulldoze through

the removal of station cleaner posts and enforce “flexible working” on remaining staff.

German Amazon workers plan to strike, distance themselves from union

Employees working for Amazon in Germany have said they are planning more industrial action over a protracted pay dispute.

According to *Deutsche Welle*, the workers “declared they’re not seeing eye to eye with their service sector union.” *Deutsche Welle* continued, “German services-sector union Verdi confirmed Monday it was planning more strike actions at as many locations of Amazon logistics centers in the country as possible after pre-Christmas industrial action in Leipzig and Bad Hersfeld didn’t yield the desired results.”

Workers want Amazon to pay them in line with wages in the retail sector, while the online retail giant says that it intends to pay wages according to the logistics industry.

According to a report in Monday’s edition of the German regional daily *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung*, more than one thousand workers from Amazon’s centers at Bad Hersfeld and Leipzig voiced their discontent with Verdi’s current policy, distancing themselves from “the demands, arguments and statements made by the union and the picture it created about the workforce in the public.”

Protest by laid-off Bulgarian shipyard workers

More than 60 Bulgarian workers, who were made redundant by the Burgas shipyard, staged a protest and a 15-minute road block January 5 over unpaid wages and compensation.

“During the road block of the Ivan Vazov Street, near the city’s railway station, only public busses were allowed to pass,” according to novinite.com.

According to reports on the Bulgarian National Radio, the protesting workers demanded that the new management of the company pay the unpaid wages and compensation. The Burgas shipyard owes around BGN 4,000-5,000 to a total of 150 redundant workers.

The laid-off workers have each initiated a lawsuit over the unpaid wages and compensation.

Bulgarian tobacco workers protest at Turkish border

On Monday, tobacco workers across Turkey protested low prices set by companies for tobacco products by closing the highway towards the Kapikule Border Gate with Turkey and burning down tobacco bales in protest. This year’s tobacco prices are lower than last year.

The head of the National Tobacco Growers Association (NAT), Tsvetan Filev, said that trader companies are purposely delaying buying tobacco in order to manipulate the market value.

According to NAT, around 200,000 people’s livelihood depends on tobacco production in Bulgaria.

Israeli railway workers launch strike

On Tuesday, Israel Railways employees launched a strike to protest what they call “the systematic violation of agreements by management.”

An agreement to regulate Israel Railways’ maintenance system was signed a year ago between management and employees and the Histadrut (General Federation of Unions in Israel). The agreement states that some maintenance work will be outsourced and that there will be full separation between Israel Railways employees and the contractor’s employees.

UNRWA employees strike in Gaza

Palestinian employees at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) went on strike in Gaza on Sunday to protest the agency’s dismissal of workers and its refusal to increase wages.

The Popular Committee for Refugees in Hebron organized a demonstration on Ein Sarah Street, where hundreds of participants marched holding signs in support of the UNRWA workers’ demands.

Demonstrations were held on Monday for the second day in a row in Bethlehem in protest against policies of the UN’s Palestine refugee agency.

The strike in Gaza and protests in the West Bank come after a number of Palestinians went on hunger strike against UNRWA in recent days.

South African platinum miners strike continues

The strike by platinum miners employed at the Northam-owned mine in Zondereinde, south of Thabazimi, is now in its tenth week. They are members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).

The miners are seeking a pay increase and a rise in their living-out allowance. Currently the union is seeking a 16 percent pay increase and a 69 percent living-out allowance. The NUM has amended its demands downwards during the strike. Northam is currently offering a pay increase of 9 percent.

Talks between the company and the NUM are continuing.

Mozambique road construction workers strike

More than two hundred machine operatives, masons, mechanic and drivers working on the Maputo Ring Road in Mozambique went on strike last Saturday against the China Road and Bridge Corporation.

They are demanding the payment of a New Year bonus known as “the 13th month”. They are also protesting dismissals of workers without due cause, the lack of proper equipment which lead to accidents. Other demands include proper medical care and for overtime to be paid.

Zimbabwean municipal workers on strike

Staff working for Harare City Council in Zimbabwe are on strike to protest the non-payment of salaries and bonuses. On Monday waste management operatives dumped refuse at the city's main bus depot. Harare Mayor Bernard Manyenyeni announced that the municipality may start paying the wages at the end of the week.

Cosmas Bungu, chairman of the Harare Municipal Workers Union, told the press, "Our members are now desperate. With the beginning of a new year they have to pay for rentals, school fees and groceries for the upkeep of their families."

The union has instructed lawyers to begin a legal action for the release of the arrears of pay.

Kenyan nut processing workers strike

Staff at the nut processing factory in Murang'a, Kenya went on strike just before New Year, protesting poor wages and non-payment of leave allowances.

The company employs 4,000 workers, of which around half are taking part in the action. For the second day in a row on Tuesday, hundreds of the striking operatives marched in Murang'a chanting slogans against the factory managers.

Kenyan workers await pay arrears

Several thousand staff working for Tuskys supermarkets in Kenya went on hunger strike and a withdrawal of labour last month, demanding a pay increase and other benefits.

They are members of the Kenya Food and Commercial Workers union. A return to work agreement was signed December 19. The management promised 50 percent of arrears of an agreed rise would be paid at the end of December, and a further 50 percent at the end of January.

They have received their December pay packets, but because of the way the money was accounted it was not clear whether they had received the agreed 50 percent.

Kenyan flower workers strike

Employees at the Karuturi flower farm in Naivasha, Kenya struck last Thursday after not receiving their salaries for the last two months. One worker who called on the government to intervene explained, "We have not received our November salaries, there is no water in the camps, the sewer is flowing all over and our children are sleeping hungry."

Ferdinand Juma from the Kenya Plantation and Agricultural Workers Union in Naivasha told the press the staff had gone on strike after farm management failed to keep agreements.

Nigerian University staff strike demands removal of vice chancellor

Staff at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the Non Academic Staff

Union (NASU) and the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), are on strike.

They are demanding the removal of the current vice chancellor, Professor Bartho Okolo, and the reinstatement of the school's pro-chancellor, Emeka Enejere. UNN staff accuse Okolo of financial recklessness and of not following procedures when awarding contracts.

Nigerian health unions strike notice

Trade unions covering Nigerian health workers, apart from doctors, have given notice of a five day strike beginning January 15. They are demanding improved working conditions and a pay increase.

Nigerian state government workers on strike

Employees of the Nigerian Nasarawa State government began an indefinite strike Monday. Among their demands are the payment of arrears, the implementation of an enhanced welfare package, and a promotion procedure. The strike began after a 14-day ultimatum issued previously had expired with no response from the state governor.

The governor attacked them for taking the action and said promotion was a privilege and not a duty.

Nigerian university hospital nursing staff strike

Around 300 nurses, including staff nurses and matrons, at the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital in Nigeria began a three day warning strike Tuesday. Their action is in response to unpaid salaries, a wage increase demand, and the fact that more longstanding nurses are being overlooked for promotion.



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