

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

24 January 2014

Europe

UK university staff in ongoing pay dispute

Workers at universities across the country are to strike February 6 in a dispute over pay.

Two previous strikes took place over the issue on October 31 and December 7. The current industrial action involves caterers, cleaners, security guards and student support staff.

A one percent pay offer has been made. Staff have faced a real-terms pay cut of 13 percent since 2008. Currently 4,000 higher education workers are paid below the living wage at £7.65 an hour or £8.80 an hour in London. The lowest paid worker in the sector earns just £13,486 per year.

At the opposite end of the pay scale, the median salaries of vice chancellors stands at £242,000, with the highest paid employee in higher education receiving over £500,000.

The Unison union has said that universities have built up higher education operating surpluses of more than £2 billion over the past two years.

Thousands of lecturers across the country struck yesterday for two hours over pay. At least 11 universities have told staff that they will have their pay docked for the entire day.

London's Docklands Light Railway workers to walk-out

Last week, the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) confirmed a strike vote on the Docklands Light Railway after a "breakdown of industrial relations."

Staff on the SERCO Docklands Light Railway voted by a majority of more than nine to one for a strike and action short of a strike in a dispute over a range of issues, which include stalling on talks over the 2014 pay award; abuse of the disciplinary and attendance procedures; use of agency and contract staff to undermine jobs and conditions; and failures on training, development and grade progression which are limiting staff jobs prospects.

Strike at Cork institute

Employees at the Tyndall National Institute in Cork staged a picket outside their workplace Tuesday over a gap of 10-20 percent between their pay and that of their colleagues in University College Cork (UCC).

The UCC has claimed the industrial action poses a "significant financial and reputational risk to what is an important regional and national asset."

The picket, organised by SIPTU, was joined by a number of colleagues from the Irish Federation of University Teachers.

The *Irish Examiner* reported, "The Siptu members have acknowledged the gap between the pay of the two sets of workers is unlikely to be bridged before the end of the Haddington Road Agreement in 2016.

"However, they want their members to be subject to the pay increments received by UCC staff so the gap does not grow any wider."

SIPTU said that if the matter was not resolved, there would likely be a ballot of the 800 union members in UCC for supportive industrial action.

Portuguese transport workers walk out

Workers on Lisbon's subway line walked out between Wednesday night till 10.30 am Thursday, due to a strike called to protest against austerity policies passed by the conservative government of Pedro Passos Coelho which are part of the 2014 budget, involving layoffs and pay cuts due to a new law governing public companies.

Union sources said almost all workers participated in the action, part of a series launched in October. Protests by public transport workers took place on January 2 and 9.

Bulgarian tobacco growers protest

Over 1,000 tobacco growers in Bulgaria blocked the road in Garmen municipality at the weekend, protesting against low tobacco prices.

The Mayor of the local municipality of Satovcha, Arben Mimenov, told the *Bulgarian Darik* news agency, "In protest, local people are setting tobacco bales on fire. We have prepared banners with our demands written on them."

The demonstration, which blocked the road to Gotse Delchev and Drama (Greece), created a traffic build-up a kilometre long.

The workers are demanding that prices are no less than BGN 6.50 per kilogram.

Novinite.com said, "Tensions among them [tobacco workers] escalated after the first days of the new year, when the belated purchase campaign finally began, but at a much lower price than expected—about BGN 5 per kilogram.

"If the crop remains unsold by the end of the month, there is a real danger that the tobacco, which is the livelihood for thousands of Bulgarian people, will go mouldy."

Staff at Irish store stage sit-in

Employees at the Caherdavin store in Limerick began a sit-in at the premises Sunday night over an alleged non-payment of redundancy and issues surrounding payment of wages.

"Twenty of the 30 employees attended a meeting this Tuesday night in the Greenhills Hotel, where it was agreed that in a bid to get what they claim they are entitled to, they would occupy the shop," said the *Limerick Leader*.

Irish agricultural officers take action

Over 600 technical staff at the Department of Agriculture began protest action Monday because agricultural officers' duties were being taken away due to rationalisation. Management persists in transferring their duties to higher paid civil servants and unnecessarily allocating inspection work to expensive external contractors.

Previous extensive changes have led to the closure of 42 local offices, which apparently delivered €30 million in savings.

A statement by the union Impact said action would begin with measures aimed at causing administrative inconvenience to management without impacting on farmers or the food industry. "But if there is no resolution it will quickly escalate to include actions that will delay grant payments to farmers and disrupt the export of cattle and other agricultural products. ... The impact of these stronger forms of action is likely to be felt in late

February or early March."

The duties of agricultural officers include inspections of farms, meat factories, dairy processors, marts and other premises to ensure that European Union and Irish regulations are being adhered to in areas such as food safety.

Irish electricians balloting for strike

The Technical Engineering and Electrical Union is balloting its members across the electrical contracting industry for a possible strike in defence of pay rates that, it says, employers plan to reduce on a firm-by-firm basis.

A strike by around 6,500 electricians could cause serious disruption to major infrastructural projects and manufacturing within a matter of weeks.

Although the Supreme Court ruled in May that registered employment agreements were unconstitutional, these agreements have been used to set rates of pay as well as terms and conditions in a number of sectors. The current agreement in the electrical industry has been in place since 1990.

The union ballot concludes February 7.

A strike by over 10,000 electricians in 2009 saw major disruption to construction projects and parts of the manufacturing sector.

Middle East

Egyptian doctors to strike twice a week in February

The Doctors' Syndicate halted negotiations with the health ministry until the latter shows it is serious about passing the draft Staff Law.

Doctors in the public health care sector staged a partial strike on 1 January demanding reforms in the health care sector. The Doctors' Syndicate agreed last week to hold a partial strike twice a week, starting February, to push for reforms.

Health workers have already staged partial strikes January 1 and 8.

In a meeting between members of the Doctors' General Syndicate and other sub-syndicates January 17, "doctors agreed to begin their partial strike in February, with a plan to strike three days a week in March. Rapporteur of the Media Committee of the Doctors' Syndicate Hossam Kamal said that should the partial strike remain fruitless, the doctors intend to upgrade their strike to an open-ended one after March," according to *Daily News Egypt*.

"Doctors have been trying to push for the ratification of the draft Staff Law, which would organise financial, technical and administrative matters such as training, promotions and working hours for all professionals in the public health care sector. A bulk of doctors' incomes is made up of bonuses and incentives; however, doctors demand that pay raises increase their fixed salary, which is what the draft Staff Law would achieve if passed," said *Daily News Egypt*.

Africa

Kenyan construction workers stop work over non-payment

Around 200 construction workers working on a ten-story building at the University of Nairobi's Kisumu campus went on strike at the end of last week. They are demanding their employer, Laton Construction Engineering Company, pay the Sh900,000 (\$10,500) they say they are owed.

The shortfall has accrued since December 20. One worker told reporters of inconsistency in their pay—some weeks they would receive a quarter of the wages due and sometimes half.

They were also protesting poor working conditions and the lack of proper safety equipment and clothing. One employee explained how they would only be given safety helmets when the site was inspected by university staff.

Kenyan garment workers strike

Over 6,000 employees of the New Wide Garments Company based in the free trade zone in Kajiado County went on strike Tuesday. Their complaints included the failure of the company to provide sick pay, failure to compensate injured workers and the non-payment of overtime for the long hours worked.

They were also protesting the use of vulgar language by managers addressing junior staff, the failure of management to recognise officials of the Tailors and Textiles Workers Union (TTWU) and the failure of the company to pass on union dues deducted by the company in spite of a court ruling ordering the company so to do.

Zambian lecturers stage go-slow

Lecturers at Mulungushi University in Kabwe began a go-slow at the end of last week. They took the action after university authorities refused their claim for a 21 percent pay increase; management have offered 10 percent. Amongst the unions representing the lecturers is the Copperbelt University Academics Union (CBAU). The lecturers have been in negotiations over their pay since October last year. They were incensed that management had awarded themselves a 21 percent pay rise.

Namibian gold miners stoppage

Around 160 staff employed by Lewcor Plant Hire at AngloGold Ashanti's Navachab gold mine at Karibib went on strike last week. Their action slowed down production at the mine. They are members of the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN).

The employees had been negotiating with the company since August last year. The company had agreed to their demands for an N\$2.60 (\$0.25) an hour pay increase together with a housing allowance of N\$300 (\$28). However, Lewcor would not accede to their demand for a "13th" pay cheque as an end of year bonus. The company had refused to pay such a bonus in the five years it has been operating on the Navachab site. The union had applied to the Labour Court before taking the action, which had been granted official status.

Ghana oil workers protest

More than 50 workers employed by Schlumberger, the Texas based oil production servicing company in Ghana's Western Region, held a demonstration Monday in front of the company's premises. They were protesting at not having had a pay increase for the last two years. They accuse the company of refusing them a pay increase after the workforce attempted to form a branch of the General Transport and Petroleum and Chemical Workers Union (GTPCWU) in 2012. They were also protesting poor working conditions.

Fuseini Iddrisu, GTPCWU general secretary, told reporters the union had written to the company to facilitate the setting up of a branch of the union, but Schlumberger had refused to cooperate. The union was petitioning the National Labour Commission in an attempt to get bargaining rights.

Nigerian health workers strike

A nationwide three-day warning strike by health workers under the umbrella of the Joint Health Sector Unions (JOHESU) began Wednesday. They threaten all-out indefinite action if their demands are not met. Among those taking action are medical laboratory staff, pharmacists, nurses, radiographers and physiotherapists. Medical staff are not involved.

The health workers have a list of grievances, including the government's failure to honour previous agreements and to apply a unified salary structure in spite of court orders demanding it does so.

South African platinum miners set to strike

The Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) announced strike action by 70,000 of its members employed by Anglo

American Platinum (Amplats), Impala Platinum and Lonmin Platinum would begin Thursday.

They are demanding a more than doubling of current wage levels to a “living wage” level of R12,500 (\$1,150). The strike announcement follows the issuing of a certificate of non-resolution to AMCU by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration after talks between the union and the three companies became deadlocked.

AMCU replaced the Nation Union of Mineworkers (NUM) as the body representing most platinum miners, after many miners rejected the NUM as being too business-friendly. A recent Reuters’ report spoke of fissures appearing within AMCU. Some miners doubt the union has a strategy to be able to win a “living wage” demand. The same report spoke of a possible rival union being set up in opposition to AMCU and of raised eyebrows when AMCU President Joseph Mathunjwa showed up at a recent rally in a brand new expensive car accompanied by three white bodyguards.

South Africa: AMCU announces strike at gold mines

AMCU has announced it will serve notice of strike action at Sibanye Gold’s mine in Driefontein, Harmony’s mines at Kusasalethu and Masimong and AngloGold Ashanti’s operations, in pursuit of a wage increase. In response, the gold producers announce they intend to seek a court order to prevent the planned action, arguing they reached an agreement with the majority of the workforce in September last year when AMCU represented only a small minority of the workforce.

South Africa: NUM ends Northam Platinum strike

The National Union of Mineworkers ended the 11-week strike at Northam Platinum at the end of last week. They had recently amended its demands and were seeking a 16 percent pay increase and 69 percent living out allowance. In the end the NUM settled for a 9.5 percent pay increase a 9 percent living out allowance and a one-off R3000 (\$276) payment.



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