

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

4 April 2014

Europe

Norwegian dockers' dispute now in sixth month

Dockers are holding a solidarity rally in Oslo on Saturday. They have been on strike for nearly six months over job demarcation. The dockers argue they alone should have the right to load and unload cargo. Norwegian dock employers are determined to allow seafarers to carry out the loading and unloading process in order to slash labour costs.

UK lawyers and probation staff hold joint strike

Around 14,000 lawyers and probation officers throughout the UK held a two-day joint strike beginning Monday.

Criminal defence lawyers staged their third strike to protest against government's proposals to cut legal aid fees. For probation officers organised in the National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO) it is their second round of strikes against the government's plans to privatise 70 percent of the probation service. They held joint a demonstration in London and protested outside the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). Minister of Justice Chris Grayling's remit covers the probation service and legal services.

The MoJ plans to cut £215 million (US\$357 million) from the annual budget for legal aid, which will mean a denial of justice to the poor and vulnerable.

Liverpool UK rail maintenance staff walk out

Rail maintenance staff working for the contractor Lorne Stewart, providing services to Merseyrail in the North West of England, were due to strike Thursday and Friday of this week. They are members of the RMT union. It will be the third set of strikes by the low-paid workers who provide cleaning and maintenance services throughout the Merseyrail network of stations. The workers are seeking a pay rise; the company is offering a below-inflation wage increase in spite of the company's latest profit figure of £15 million (US\$25 million).

Job cuts threatened at UK's Kew Gardens

The Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) says 125 jobs are at risk at the world-famous Kew Gardens as a result of funding cuts proposed by the Department for Food and Rural Affairs.

The PCS says the cuts would threaten the world-renowned scientific research carried out at Kew.

UK: London hospital staff set for action

Around 150 staff employed by Compass at Ealing hospital in London are to begin a seven-day strike this Friday. They are members of the GMB union and provide domestic, portering and catering services at the hospital. They are currently paid the national minimum wage of £6.31 (US\$10.50) and are seeking to be paid the so-called London living wage of £8.80 (US\$15.00) an hour. They are also seeking an extra two days of annual leave and sick pay. They have already held 11 days of strike action in pursuit of their demands.

Workers at Bulgarian power plant announce strike

Around 300 employees at the thermal power station in the Bulgarian city of Varna were set to strike at the end of last week over uncertainty about the plant's future. It needs a large financial input to bring the power station up to modern standards. The company says it has the finances to invest but is seeking state guarantees before going ahead.

German airline grounded by pilot dispute

A three-day strike began Wednesday by pilots working for the German airline Lufthansa. It will lead to the cancellation of nearly 4,000 flights. The pilots are seeking the reinstatement of a scheme whereby on forced retirement at the age of 60, they would receive 60 percent of their pay until age 65, when they would be eligible for a state pension. Since 2011, the retirement age for pilots was raised to 65, and Lufthansa argues the scheme is no longer necessary.

The pilots are members of the Vereinigun Cockpit (VC) union and

are also seeking a pay increase.

Iceland teachers' strike enters third week

The strike by teachers in Iceland is now in its third week and is affecting 20,000 high school students. Negotiations between the government and teachers' union have so far reached a stalemate. The teachers are seeking increased compensation in response to working hours and curriculum changes brought in by the government.

Spanish voice-over actors protest

Around 250 actors who provide Spanish voice-over dubbing for foreign TV programmes broadcast on Spanish TV are on strike. They are seeking a new collective agreement. Their action threatens to delay showings of the popular "Game of Thrones" programmes due to be shown in April.

Middle East

Israeli foreign ministry dispute ends

The nearly two-week strike by Israeli Foreign Ministry staff has been settled. The strike had closed Israeli foreign embassies and disrupted visits by foreign dignitaries to Israel.

The settlement agreed upon is based on four tenets: The foreign ministry will employ a new management model covering staff working abroad; employees will receive an improved pension scheme; service conditions will be improved with additional financial assistance for staff working abroad; and finally, the promotion process will be accelerated.

Public sector strike in Lebanon

Teachers and civil servants in Lebanon held a one-day strike on Wednesday to protest delays in government legislation that will give them a pay increase. Hundreds of protesters gathered near parliament to push their demands. Some held banners reading, "The salary scale is our right".

Africa

Midwives strike at Zimbabwe hospital

Midwives at Harare Central Hospital went out on strike March 27 to oppose large allowances paid to Health Ministry directors out of a

fund earmarked for preventing maternal mortality. The hospital provides for low-income workers.

A part of the Health Transition Fund (THF) set up in 2011 was to pay an incentive bonus to midwives at US\$59 per month. While the bonus has not been paid since June of last year, the *Herald* newspaper revealed that senior government ministers had been "dipping into it."

Midwives wrote to Health Secretary Dr. Gerald Gwinji stressing the point that women losing blood through delivery were losing their lives through lack of blood transfusion units, costing about US\$200 a pint. The midwives say there is a severe lack of blood products that the US\$430 million THF was also instituted to overcome.

Kenyan nurses threaten action

The Kenyan National Union Nurses have threatened to return to strike action if the county government of Uasin Gishu does not honour an agreement on payments and allowances. Branch Secretary John Bii said the nurses will strike on April 5 if their demands for payment of three months outstanding salaries are not met. The county health executive had agreed with the union that payment would be made before 21 March, but this was not carried through.

Strike by South African bus drivers in Johannesburg

Drivers working for the Rea Viya rapid transit bus system in Johannesburg began an indefinite strike on Monday. They parked their buses at the Dobsonville bus depot and held a demonstration.

The drivers, members of South Africa Municipal Workers Union (SAMU), are demanding senior drivers be able to choose their shifts, that the six-month probation period be reduced to three and contract drivers be given permanent positions. SAMU shop steward, Sipho Ngubane, says these demands have been made since 2011. The union says it is taking the company to court to make the company respond to its demands. Although the union says their action is protected the company is threatening the union with court action claiming the strike is illegal.



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