

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

25 April 2014

Romanian rail workers hold two-hour nationwide strike

On Wednesday rail workers in Romania held a two-hour nationwide strike to demand higher wages and improved working conditions and in opposition to 2,500 scheduled job losses.

According to reports, 900 passenger and goods trains did not run during the stoppage. The strike began at 7 a.m. Wednesday and went ahead following a breakdown in negotiations between the Romanian Railways trade union and the transportation ministry.

According to the Train Drivers Federation, the workers have not had a wage increase in six years.

Public sector cleaning staff protest outside Greek finance ministry

On April 17, cleaning staff protested outside the finance ministry in Athens against their dismissal seven months ago.

In autumn last year the finance ministry placed 595 cleaning ladies, who are employed at tax offices nationwide on a low wage of around €500 a month, on the labour mobility scheme. Under the scheme public sector workers lose their jobs and receive just 75 percent of their salary for eight months.

The workers have not been placed in any other public sector jobs and their meagre payments are set to end in mid-May.

Barcelona bookshop workers strike to demand better pay and conditions

Workers at Fnac El Triangle, the French-owned department store on the Las Ramblas street in Barcelona, Spain, took strike action Wednesday to protest low pay and part-time contracts.

The strike coincided with La Diada de Sant Jordi (St. George's Day), during which books are generally given as presents, a Barcelona tradition dating back to the 1920s. Almost half of annual book sales in the Catalan region take place on St. Jordi's day.

The organisers of the protest said 60 percent of staff are on part-time contracts, earning less than €500 per month. They cited as reasons for the action "stress, an overwhelming workload, abusive behaviour, constant pressure to hit sales targets, control, constant vigilance and an obsessive control of their movements".

The Local web site reported that the strike was supported by 16 authors, including Juan José Millás and Enrique Vila-Matas, who cancelled their planned book-signing marathons in solidarity with the bookshop workers.

Care workers in Doncaster, England vote for further strike action

Around 100 care workers employed by Care UK in Doncaster in the north of England have voted for further strike action. They are members of the Unison union and provide care to people with learning disabilities in the Doncaster area. The company wants to push through changes to evening and weekend pay rates, which workers say will cut their pay by up to one-half.

They completed a second four-day strike on Tuesday and to date have taken 20 days of strike action to oppose Care UK's proposals. They marked the end of the current round of strikes by holding a solidarity march through the town followed by a rally.

They are determined to continue the fight against Care UK and on April 18 voted unanimously to hold a 14-day strike, the dates for which have yet to be announced.

UK teachers vote for further action

Members of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) voted at their Easter conference in Brighton to hold a strike in schools in England and Wales in the week beginning June 23. The strike is part of the teachers' campaign to fight the erosion of their pay and pensions.

The union did not commit to a date for strikes to begin, with NUT General Secretary Christine Blower stating action will be held only "in the event that significant progress is not being made" in talks with the government. The NUT is only committed to "consult with members about a series of strikes through the autumn term and into 2015". A proposal to hold a four-day strike in the autumn was rejected by the union.

The NUT have already sanctioned strikebreaking were any strike to go ahead, with Blower stating that strike action "will not disrupt exams". Any NUT member who is required to supervise an exam will be given exemptions from taking part in industrial action and allowed to cross picket lines.

The UK's other large teaching union, the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers, has again refused to back any strikes, including joint action with NUT members. This is despite its members voting at their conference last weekend in favour of industrial action if the government refuses to restore national frameworks on teachers' pay.

Icelandic airport workers dispute continues

Airport workers at all Icelandic airports, including Keflavik international airport, went on strike for five hours on Wednesday between 4:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. A further five-hour strike is scheduled for April 25.

The workers are in dispute with Isavia, the country's airports and air navigation service, in an ongoing campaign for increased pay. In March 88 percent of the members of the three unions with employees at Isavia voted in favour of holding four short strikes. Wednesday's strike went ahead following the breakdown of talks between the trade unions and the state mediator Tuesday.

In a separate dispute, Icelandair pilots are currently voting in a ballot for an overtime ban and possible strikes in pursuit of a pay increase. If pilots vote in favour, an overtime ban will begin with five strikes of a short duration planned over three weeks, beginning May 9.

The *icelandreview* web site noted that Örnólfur Jónsson, the negotiator for the pilots unions, was reluctant to call strikes, stating, "Örnólfur recognizes that the industrial action would be very bad for the airline, but adds that there is still over two weeks to come to an agreement and avert the strikes."

Lebanese workers set to strike to demand pay increase

Workers in Lebanon could strike in protest at government plans to push through a new salary scale for government employees and schoolteachers.

The *Daily Star* reported that the "Union Coordination Committee is gearing up for sit-ins and strikes on April 29", ahead of the release of a report by a parliamentary committee tasked with studying the salary scale.

The General Labour Confederation, representing private sector workers, announced it was calling a meeting for April 28 to approve a strike over pay.

Citing trade union representatives, the *Star* noted that "the purchasing power of the average Lebanese has fallen by 50 percent in the past two years" and "that the salary increase in 2012 did little to offset the high cost of living."

Business figures have insisted that the government not increase pay, while the International Monetary Fund has also advised against it.

Iranian utility workers protest

Over 100 Iranian contract workers employed by the city of Ahwaz Water and Sewage Office held a protest outside the Khuzestan Province auditor's office this week.

The workers, who have been employed between five and 15 years, have not received their wages since October last year. Their workers' insurance premiums have also gone unpaid.

South Africa: Negotiations restart in long-running platinum miners strike

Negotiations restarted between South Africa's three platinum mining companies and the Association of Miners and Construction Union (AMCU) on Tuesday. The strike has been ongoing for three months, with negotiations suspended since March. It is the longest strike since the end

of apartheid.

The three companies, Amplats, Impala and Lonmin, have put forward a new offer of 7.5 percent-10 percent increase over five years, suggesting this will raise cash "remunerations" to R12,500 (\$1,180) a month over five years. The union is said to be unhappy about the offer but as yet has not commented officially. Implats spokesman Johan Theron said although they have not received a reply from AMCU the resumption of negotiations is encouraging.

Long-running Nigerian education strikes continue

The strike by Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics (ASUP) members is now in its tenth month. They are protesting underfunding of Nigerian polytechnics, seeking a review of the working of the Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System. They are also calling for the full funding of the CONTISS 15 salary scheme and for ending the practice of appointing unqualified people as polytechnic rectors.

The Colleges of Education Academic Staff Union (COEASU) began its strike in December 2013 and will soon be in its fifth month. Their demands include recruitment of more staff to meet the current shortfall and for the implementation of previously agreed pay and conditions agreements.

Speaking on April 18 the supervising minister of education, Nyesom Wike, told the press that the ASUP and COEASU strikes would soon be resolved and that Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan was now intervening in the disputes.

Malawi court support staff discuss escalating action

Malawian judiciary support staff held talks Wednesday over the possible escalation of their current industrial action and the launch of an all-out indefinite strike.

They are currently taking disruptive action in support of their demands for a pay increase and payment of outstanding arrears.



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