

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

11 July 2014

Europe

24-hour strike of Greek public sector workers

Public sector workers across Greece employed in hospitals, tax offices, prisons and archaeological sites held a 24-hour strike Wednesday. They were protesting cuts in jobs and plans to impose a 40 percent cut in salaries and pensions.

The strike was called by the Civil Servants Confederation (ADEDY). It was timed to coincide with the arrival in Athens of inspectors from the International Monetary Fund, European Union and European Central Bank—the “troika.” They are assessing the government’s compliance with EU austerity demands as part of its bailout of the banks.

The Finance and Administrative Reform ministries, who jointly have responsibility to impose the attacks, had filed a lawsuit against the strike.

UK firefighters announce eight days of consecutive action

Firefighters organised in the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) have organised a series of two-hour strikes over eight consecutive days beginning July 14. The action is part of a long standing dispute over government plans to make firefighters work longer, pay more and get less in their pensions.

Bulgarian road construction workers hold protest over unpaid wages

Around 500 road construction workers employed by Avtomagistrali-Tcherno More (Black Sea Highways) held a protest strike outside the municipal building in the Northern Bulgarian city of Shumen on Monday. They are currently working on the prestigious Hemus Highway. A majority of the staff are members of the *Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria*.

They were protesting the non-payment of wages for April and May. The company blames the Road Infrastructure Agency, a state body, for not passing on funds from the contract to be able to pay the wages. They called on the head of the Road Infrastructure Agency to resign.

French lawyers walk out

French lawyers across France were on strike Monday as part of an ongoing dispute over government plans to cut legal aid fees paid to lawyers. This will mean many people unable to pay privately for legal advice will be left without legal representation.

The action led to the full or partial closure of courthouses across France. Lawyers in Paris held a march to the prime minister’s office. They held a banner reading: “Lawyers defend justice for all.”

Action by French cultural workers impacts prestigious festival

So-called “intermittents” are continuing their programme of strikes to protest at government plans to cut their unemployment benefit

entitlement. The intermittents work in the cultural sphere as performers or technicians and receive enhanced unemployment benefits between phases of work in recognition of the precarious nature of their employment.

Their action led to the cancellation of two performances on the opening day of the internationally renowned Avignon theatre festival. Organisers had to cancel the musical “Coup Fatal” and Heinrich von Kleist’s tragedy “The Prince of Homburg.” Other performances may have to be cancelled throughout the festival, which is scheduled to run until July 27.

Other events which have had to be cancelled include a ballet and opera at the Paris Opera, a dance event in Montpellier and a Rossini opera in Aix-en-Provence.

French Prime Minister demands striking ferry workers end their strike

Prime Minister Manuel Valls has demanded that workers at the France-Corsica ferry operator SNCM end their strike and accept the restructuring of the company.

SNCM employees have been on strike since June 24. The company, which operates ferries between France and North Africa, is threatened with bankruptcy.

Valls said, “There needs to be a court-ordered restructuring, because this company is sinking, and in fact the days of strike that accumulate are only putting it more into trouble.” But workers oppose the plan, which will involve the layoff of some 500 employees and changes to existing working conditions.

Miners in Slovenia continue protest

The strike by 900 miners at the Velenje coal mine, which began on June 30, has continued into its second week. The miners began their spontaneous strike after not receiving their agreed holiday allowance bonus. They are also in dispute over cuts in wages and shortening of leave entitlement.

Irish rail staff face pay cuts

Staff working for Irish Rail are being threatened with a pay cut. Irish Rail wants to impose the cuts, which they claim will be only temporary, covering the next two years. The National Bus and Railworkers’ Union (NBRU) said it will ballot for action up to and including strike action if the pay cut is announced.

Rally in Spain in defence of right to strike

Thousands of Spanish workers held a rally Friday of last week in Madrid in defence of the right to strike. The rally’s slogan read: “To strike is not a Crime: We will not be silent.” Nearly 300 workers throughout Spain face legal measures, including fines and the threat of jail for recent strike and related labour activity. A recent change in the law has made it easier for employers to lay off people and impose cuts in wages and conditions.

Police break up three-month-long strike of Turkish dairy staff

This week police, at the behest of the owners of the Sutas dairy products company, have intervened to break up a sit-in protest of workers that was taking place in front of the factory in the northwestern city of Bursa.

The protest had been ongoing for the last three months to oppose the company's de-unionisation policy. A senior official of the Tek Gıda-Is union was arrested as part of the police action.

Middle East

Lebanese civil servants vow walkouts

Lebanese civil servants including teachers have vowed to hold one-day strikes each Wednesday until the government agrees to implement a previously agreed pay increase. As part of the action teachers will also refuse to mark public exams. The civil servants are organised by the Lebanese Union Coordination Committee (UCC).

Saudi power workers strike

Several staff working for the Saudi Electricity Company (SEC) went on strike claiming they were underpaid and have not been made permanent employees despite two years continuous employment.

The staff are all young electrical engineering graduates and say their conditions of work are significantly worse than other established employees.

Abdalmaan Al-Sheikh, the company director, advised staff to "meet with me directly to discuss the problem" reminding them that "collective absence from work is an illegal action."

Tunisian cultural workers protest

Cultural workers in Tunisia began a three-day strike on July 9, impacting festivals and similar events. One expected to be affected is the International Festival of Carthage, which is the largest in the country and takes place from June 10 to August 16.

The workers had held a three-day strike in June. They are also calling for an investigation into corruption in the National Institute of Heritage for the publication of financial and administrative data relating to the national library service. In addition, they are opposing plans to privatize some Tunisian archaeological sites and museums.

Africa

South African metalworkers continue strike

The strike by 220,000 members of the South African Metalworkers Union (NUMSA) continues into its second week. They were originally demanding a 15 percent pay increase but are now seeking 12 percent over the next year. Other demands tabled are the scrapping of labour brokers and for a R1,000 (US\$94) housing allowance.

NUMSA rejected a 10 percent wage raise for the lowest paid workers offered by the Steel and Engineering Industries Federation of South Africa (SEIFA), the main employers' organization. The National Employers Association of South Africa (NEASA), with 3,000 affiliates, is maintaining its offer of 8 percent after failed talks with NUMSA on July 4. The national strike has halted production at General Motors through lack of parts and threatens around a third of

South African manufacturing output.

NUMSA members are out at Eskom, the power producers, which is also affecting construction at its power plant sites at Medupi and Kusile. Eskom is also maintaining its original below-inflation offer of 5.6 percent.

South African NUM platinum miners in wildcat action

A wildcat strike took place at an Impala Platinum mine in Limpopo South Africa on Friday, with National Union of Miners members demanding higher wages. The 2,000 NUM members at Marula mine are seemingly responding to the settlement the company made with the Associated Miners and Construction Union (AMCU) in a strike-ending deal on June 23.

The NUM signed a deal with the company last year before the AMCU strike.

NUM leaders were at pains to stress they had not called the latest action.

Strike of council workers in Zimbabwe enters second week

The strike of council workers in the dormitory town of Chitungwiza, which began last week, is now in its second week. It is over unpaid wages and the failure by the council management to remit contributions deducted from workers' pay.

The City Residents Trust, Chitrest, who are supporting the workers, say council staff have not been paid 14 months' wages and are owed in the area of \$10 million.

The council has begun a legal process to get the strike branded illegal, citing the Zimbabwe Urban Councils Workers Union as respondent.

On two occasions, in December and July, arbitration decisions have been given against the council to pay the wages with no response. The council has declared their services are in total collapse and appealed to the army to provide cover for all essential services.

Chitungwiza along with Harare municipal council are the two largest municipalities in Zimbabwe and both face an enormous financial crisis.

Zimbabwean workers sacked

Nine workers that led a group of 100 to demand their outstanding wages be paid have been sacked by ethanol fuel producer Green Fuel, Chipinge Zimbabwe. They were dismissed for organising an illegal job action last month. The majority of workers retained their jobs after being presented with a letter charging them with unlawful collective action.

NewsDay cited a worker explaining, "Many members of the workers committee were dismissed. They were dismissed on the basis that they led the job action, yet it was clear that the workers had just gone to ask for their outstanding salaries." He continued, "To us the company is trying to send a message that anyone who tries to stand for the rights of employees will face the music. We are disappointed by this and we will seek redress."



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