

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

25 July 2014

## Europe

### Further action against German arm of Amazon

The union Verdi has announced there will be further strikes at Amazon's distribution sites in Germany over the coming weeks. Verdi said it will not announce beforehand which particular distribution centres will be involved and there will be no prior announcement of the date of the action.

Amazon's operation in Germany is the second largest after America. The last strikes were at the beginning of June at the company's distribution centres in Bad Hersfeld and Leipzig. They are part of a series of actions which began in spring 2013.

German Amazon staff are seeking parity of wages and conditions with other national retail and mail order operatives. Amazon classifies its staff as more poorly paid logistic workers.

### Strike of Irish refuse workers enters second month

The strike of the more than 70 refuse workers at the Greyhound waste collection plant in Clondalkin has entered its second week. Greyhound is responsible for refuse collection in the capital city of Dublin.

The members of the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) were locked out by management after refusing to accept new contracts that would have meant a 35 percent pay cut. Greyhound hired strikebreakers who continue to collect refuse.

On Tuesday, supporters of the Greyhound strikers held a rally outside the Belfast City Hall in Northern Ireland.

### Irish hospital staff in work to rule

Around 500 staff employed at the five sites comprising the University of Limerick Hospital Group are working to rule and refusing to take instructions from the chief operations manager, Liam Casey. They include administrative staff, therapists and social workers, all members of the IMPACT union.

They are protesting Casey's appointment from a private-sector management company on an annual salary of 250,000 euro (\$336,000), which is more than twice the rate the Irish health service, HSE, would pay a public servant in such a role.

## Irish psychiatric nurses threaten walkout

Psychiatric nurses employed by the University College Hospital in Galway have threatened strike action in the next two weeks if more staff are not hired. They are members of the Psychiatric Nurses Association (PNA).

PNA General Secretary Des Kavanagh explained that some days the unit is more than six staff down on the normal roster of 15.5. The HSE has told the PNA that they are in the process of hiring additional staff.

### BBC unions call off planned action

Members of the National Union of Journalists and the broadcasting technicians union BECTU working for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) had voted overwhelmingly to strike for 12 hours on July 23 to push their demands for a pay increase. This was timed to coincide with TV coverage of the opening of the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow.

The unions called off the action after receiving a new offer for a two-year deal from BBC management.

Staff voting for the action had previously rejected an offer of a pay increase of £650 (\$1,110) for staff earning less than £50,000 (\$85,150) a year and a £500 (\$850) increase for those earning more than £50,000 (\$85,000).

The new deal is the same as the previously-rejected one but with an additional £150 (\$255) one-off payment on January 1, 2015 and a 2.5 percent salary increase from August 1, 2015. Union members will need to vote on whether to accept the new offer.

### UK health staff balloted on pay

Around 400,000 UK health staff are being balloted on possible strike action over pay. An independent pay review body recommended a one percent across-the-board pay rise. However, the government ruled the increase should not apply to any staff getting automatic progression-in-the-job rises.

Amongst the unions balloting are UNISON with around 300,000 members working in the National Health Service, UNITE with 90,000 and the general union GMB with around 30,000. Midwives, members of the Royal College of Midwives, are being balloted for the first time in their history. Strikes are scheduled to begin in October depending on the outcome of the ballot.

### **UK construction workers in unofficial walkout**

Around 900 construction workers building a £1 billion (\$1.7 billion) gas plant for Total in the Shetlands Islands in the north of Scotland walked out on unofficial strike for several hours Wednesday. They were protesting the decision by the site contractors, Petrofac, to pay a £15 (\$26) per-day travel bonus. UNITE and GMB union representatives are due to meet with Petrofac management next week.

### **Overtime ban on Heathrow (UK) express route**

Members of the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) employed on the Heathrow express railway line, which ferries passengers to and from Heathrow airport and the centre of London, have agreed an overtime ban.

The rail company is pushing multi-million pounds cuts and plans to halve staff numbers by bringing in driver-only trains.

The action began last Friday and is due to last one month.

### **Greek hospital workers strike**

Public hospital workers in the Attica region stopped work for five hours and held a rally at 11am outside the Ministry of Health. They were protesting the government's performance evaluation procedure currently being discussed.

Under the procedure, staff will be rated on their ability to perform their role; those given low scores will be sacked or moved to other roles. It is being used as an exercise to cull staff, with quotas of staff for each level of proficiency, meaning even if staff perform adequately they could still be classed as inadequate if a quota level has been reached for a particular level of performance.

### **Bulgarian road construction workers hold further protests**

Road construction workers employed by Avtomagistrali-Tcherno More (Black Sea Highways) held a protest on Tuesday, blockading roads between Shumen and Ruse. The action is part of an ongoing protest over non-payment of salaries.

The company accuses the state-owned Road Infrastructure Management Board of failing to pass on money owed to the company, who could then in turn pay their staff. The employees are ready to hold further strike blockades to recover the money owed them.

### **Finnish rail infrastructure staff pledge further industrial action**

Electricians maintaining the electrical infrastructure of the railway operating company VR went back to work July 19 but warned they will

begin a five-day strike on July 26. Other unions have pledged solidarity action on the last day of the action July 30.

The members of the Finnish Electrical Workers' Union are pushing to come under a collective agreement as electricians with their own shop steward structure, rather than coming under the collective bargaining agreement for rail workers in general. They are also protesting threats by the company to axe 14 jobs.

The company has responded by stating it will begin a three-week lockout of VR Track staff beginning July 31.

### **Middle East**

### **West Bank SodaStream workers sacked**

The Israeli-owned SodaStream factory operating in the West Bank has sacked 60 of its Palestinian employees. The night shift workers were sacked after protests that they were not able to eat after ending their 16-hour Ramadan fast. According to their union, the SodaStream company does not allow workers to bring their own food on to site.

### **Striking Palestinians threatened**

Palestinian workers employed in the West Bank industrial zone of Mishor Adumim at the Zarfaty Garage came out on strike at the beginning of the week following the dismissal of their workers' committee chairperson, Hatem Abu Ziade. They are members of the WAC-MAAN independent trade union.

On Wednesday, Zarfaty workers on a picket line were threatened with violence by factory owners if they did not dismantle their picket line. They called the police, but when they arrived they arrested WAC-MAAN coordinator, Yoav Tamir and charged him with "inciting Palestinians."

### **Africa**

### **Strike of Namibian gas station operatives**

Petrol service employees joined the strike throughout Namibia launched July 21. The union is demanding an increase to the current figure for monthly pay of between N\$250 to N\$800 (\$24-\$76) to a figure of N\$4500 (US\$425) a month.

The General Secretary of the Namibia Fuel Allied Workers Union said negotiations for a minimum wage have been ongoing since 2006 with no progress. A 2008 study showed petrol workers were receiving the lowest hourly rate in the country at that time, between N\$300 (\$29) and N\$2000 (\$190) per month. This means that six years on, their pay has dropped significantly.

The manager of a Total service station said, "The ongoing strike is unprotected, therefore employees who participate should expect deductions at the end of this month or possible dismissal."

### **Liberian maritime workers protest wage arrears**

Liberian maritime workers demanded their wages as they protested at the office of the Minister of Finance on Tuesday, 22 July.

Workers have not been paid for six months and threatened to disrupt the Independence Day celebrations on 26 July if they were not paid their arrears. Wages in the past were paid by the Maritime Authority, but that role had been taken over by the Finance Ministry. A worker said the ministry had used their wages to fight the Ebola outbreak.

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### **South African steel workers strike may end**

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) looks close to a settlement of the near four week strike with the South African Steel and Engineering Industries Federations, (SEIFA).

Vuyo Lufefe, Secretary-General for NUMSA in Western Cape Province dressed up the deal saying, the workers have long wanted a double-digit wage increase and are likely to accept the 10 percent offer. "This 10 percent covers a majority of our workers because, from the first year, Grades F, G and H will get 10 percent. And, on the second year, Grade G and H will get 10 percent, and then, on the third year, Grade H will get 10 percent."

Management is calling on workers to accept the deal, on the condition that they give up Section 37 of Collective Bargaining rights. Dropping the Section 37 clause would stop the union or the employer renegotiating an existing deal.

The union was originally seeking a yearly agreement of 15 percent pay increase, later reducing it to 12 percent over a year. NUMSA originally rejected a 10 percent one-year agreement for the lowest paid. Other demands tabled were scrapping of labour brokers and R1, 000 (US\$94) housing allowance; these demands are not addressed in the current deal.

The most controversial and reactionary element of the deal is the so-called "peace clause". This is a de facto no strike agreement preventing unions from pursuing other issues not in the three-year deal at plant or company level. It will allow free rein to impose job cuts that have already been widely trailed by employers.

### **Nigerian medics strike continues**

The Nigeria Medical Association (NMA) is continuing its national strike which began earlier this month. It is seeking a resolution to 24 demands on the federal government, including an adjustment of doctors' salaries to maintain relativity as previously agreed.

The NMA point out that the Chief Medical Director is a medical doctor, and that the government should speed up passage of the National Health Bill to include all Nigerians.

The Medical Health Workers Union of Nigeria and four other health sector unions went to court to challenge the doctors' right to strike. While the pharmacist, nurses, laboratory scientist and other unions have demanded the government send the NMA back to work, they themselves have been subject to President Goodluck Jonathan reneging on signed deals.



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