

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

2 August 2014

Europe

Italian steel workers oppose job cuts

Several hundred steel workers employed at the stainless steel plant at Terni, central Italy went on strike on Monday. They are opposing plans by the owner, the German company of ThyssenKrupp, to cut around 550 jobs and halve production in an attempt to cut costs at the plant. The company say that although the plant is one of the most modern in Europe it has been losing money for several years due to the state of the market and oversupply.

One of the employees has begun a hunger strike to oppose the cuts and is calling on the Italian government to intervene to prevent the job losses.

Italian oil refinery workers strike

Around 30,000 staff employed by the Italian multinational oil and gas company Eni went on strike Tuesday to protest the company's plans to close or convert some of its unprofitable refineries. The workers, represented by three unions, held a demonstration in front of the Chamber of Deputies in Rome.

Unions say Eni's plans would lead to the loss of around 6,000 jobs.

Care workers in Doncaster, England continue fight

Around 75 care workers employed by Care UK in Doncaster began a two-week strike on Tuesday in pursuit of a wage increase on basic pay for all staff and a minimum starting pay of £7.65 (\$13) an hour, the current so-called living wage. They provide care to people including the elderly with learning difficulties. They are members of the UNISON union. Care UK is owned by private equity investor Bridgepoint.

Up to September of last year the care was provided by the National Health Service on behalf of Doncaster council. Under the push to privatise services, UK Care took over the contract. The care staff has already held 34 days of strike action this year following the company's attempts to change the terms and conditions of staff, which would have meant a 50 percent pay cut for some. Many of the Care UK staff in Doncaster have worked to provide dedicated care to those with learning disabilities for many years, some having worked 30-plus years.

This dispute was ended when an employment tribunal ruled in favour of

the company, which got the majority of the changes it was seeking with only some minor concessions to staff. The union declared the dispute at an end, using anti-trade union legislation that states that after three months the staff would no longer have legal protection and could have been dismissed.

The new dispute launched this week takes the form of a claim for a pay increase.

UK passport workers strike

Nearly 900 workers in the UK government's passport service, part of the Home Office, held a 24-hour strike on Tuesday. They are members of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS). Staff from all of the eight UK offices throughout the UK, including, London, Glasgow, Liverpool and Belfast, walked out. They are protesting cuts in staff and are pushing for a pay increase. The UK passport service has been experiencing an enormous backlog of passport applications for several months, with some applicants having to abandon overseas holidays because their passports have not arrived.

The PCS told the BBC that the passport office has "cut hundreds of staff since 2010" and has only agreed to "seriously discuss jobs after recent media and political scrutiny."

Ambulance staff in North West UK vote for overtime ban

Ambulance staff working for the North West Ambulance Service (NWAS) have voted in favour of industrial action against the service's £6.5 million (US\$11 million) cuts which will mean cuts in allowances and staff cuts. Members of the general union (GMB), they voted 73 percent in favour of strike action and 94 percent in favour of action short of a strike.

Beginning next week they will refuse overtime shifts. Plans by NWAS to reduce weekend paramedic cover in the industrial towns of Blackburn, Burnley and Nelson have been suspended for a year.

The UNITE and UNISON unions who also have members amongst the ambulance staff have so far not announced any plans for action against the proposed cuts.

Greek civil service strike

Greek civil servants organised by the union ADEDY were due to strike

Monday to coincide with a court hearing discussing the legality of previous strikes organised by the union. The previous strikes have been to protest the government's plans to impose performance evaluations in the public sector as a means of reassigning or sacking staff.

Air France staff set to walk out

Ground staff working for Air France are due to walk out on strike on Saturday. The strike will affect main airport hubs including, Orly and Charles de Gaulle in Paris, Marseille and Toulouse.

They are opposing plans by Air France to restructure the company, which will result in the loss of 8,000 jobs over the next three years. They are also protesting plans by Air France to subcontract some of their existing services.

Irish bar staff stage sit-in protest over closures

Thirty-six bar staff who had worked in three bars in the city of Waterford, south east Ireland, have staged a sit-in following the announcement by the owners that the three bars will close on Monday.

The bars, the Showboat, the Mansion House and the Halfway House, are owned by Tom and Anna Treacy. Some of the bar staff had been employed for 20 years. The sit-in is being supported by local people who are supplying them with food and other help.

The Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) are liaising between the workers and the receiver appointed to wind up the businesses.

Middle East

Journalists call for Israel to be held to account for attacks on media workers in Gaza

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) has called for the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) to be held to account for attacks on journalists covering the attack on Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

The Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate (PJS), which is affiliated to the IFJ, has published details of attacks by the IDF to date which they say includes the murder of four media workers, injuries incurred by media workers and the attack on three media outlets including *Al Jazeera*.

Jailed Iranian trade unionist ends hunger strike

Reza Shahabi, an executive member of the Tehran Bus Drivers Union, was arrested in 2010 because of his trade union activities. He was sentenced to six years in jail. He had been on hunger strike for 50 days but ended it last week. He did so after the prosecutor's department agreed to his demands that he be offered bail and be transferred to hospital for surgery on his spine.

Africa

South African metalworkers face lockout

Although the strike by 220,000 National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) has been settled with the Steel and Engineering Industries Federation of South Africa (SEIFSA), the National Employers Association of South Africa (NEASA) has refused to sign the deal, claiming it is too expensive. NEASA has said that it will begin implementing lockouts at their workplaces.

NUMSA members started to return to work on Tuesday, July 29, and the agreement was to be signed that afternoon. It offered the lowest paid employees 10 percent wage increases over the next three years.

NUMSA General Secretary Irvin Jim said a new formulation of section 37 had been agreed on with SEIFSA and he is "confident" that it is "legally sound and thus not disadvantageous" to NUMSA members in any way. He followed up by saying "matters that would materially impact on the cost of employment would not be raised for negotiation at company level."

The union has accepted the continuation of labour brokers and there is no reference to the R1000 housing allowance demand.

Ghanaian mall workers strike over no pay rise

Computer game shop workers at Accra Mall in Ghana came out on strike on July 24 protesting that they have had no pay increase for the last 14 months.

Vice Chairman of the Accra Mall Workers Union said that while the shop workers have received no increase, top management got a 10 percent rise from last July.

Namibian diamond workers walk out

Namibian diamond miners voted July 23 by a 95 percent majority to go out on strike against Namdeb, the Namibian Diamond Mining Company. Thirteen hundred of the 1,700 members voted.

They decided to strike after wage negotiations that started last November broke down in March. The Namibian Union of Mineworkers is demanding a 15 percent increase in basic wages across the board. They also want an 85 percent subsidy for their children's schooling fees; reimbursement of medical costs, to be increased from 20 percent up to 100 percent; and a 14 percent housing allowance. The company is offering 8.5 percent for the A-band workers, 8 percent for the B-band and 7.5 percent for the C-band, along with an 8.5 percent housing allowance.

Government threatens Nigerian doctors strike

The Medical Dental Consultants Association of Nigeria (MDCAN) accused the government of planning to use military and paramilitary medical personnel to break the Nigerian Medical Association's (NMA) strike. Speaking on July 28, MDCAN President Steve Oluwole gave details of the government plans to break the strike, including proposals to proscribe the MNA.

He said the plan would also include the privatisation of all public health

institutions and the enforcement of a “no work, no pay” principle, meaning that only doctors who accepted the government’s proposal would keep their jobs while those that didn’t would be sacked.

The Ministry of Health said, “There are things government can do to have its way by force—declare positions of those on strike vacant and replace them with unemployed and retired doctors.”

Swazi textile workers suspended

Last Friday, the company director at the Kang-Fa textile factory in Swaziland issued suspension notices to 30 female staff. The suspensions came after employees had struck the previous day over a number of demands.

The 30 workers targeted for suspension, all members of the works committee, refused to accept the notices and instigated another picket at the factory. Armed police were called.

Among the list of grievances is the non-payment of layoff allowances that were promised and back pay of salary increments that should have been paid from March. A worker said they would take their case to the General Alliance of Workers Union of Swaziland, which legally represents textile workers and others working in the private sector

Swazi sugar workers strike

Another strike is to take place at the Illovo Sugar Plantation in Swaziland after three employees were sacked after leading a month-long strike barely a month ago. Other workers targeted by the company are also threatened with disciplinary action.

All the company workers supported strike action to force the company to retreat. The workers are represented by the Swaziland Agricultural and Plantation Workers Union (SAPWU), which is taking the strike to the Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration Commission (CMAC) to be ratified.

Zambian rail workers take indefinite action

Last week more than 3,000 workers at the Tanzania Zambia Railway Authority began an indefinite strike action over five months’ unpaid wages. They stopped the movement of passenger rail transport from Kapiri Mposhi to Nakonde via TAZARA rail. TAZARA workers union spokesman Afrika Mkandawire said they would not return to work until they had been paid or retrenched, so they could collect what they are due, instead of continuing working without wages. The Zambian government has previously reneged on promises to pay unpaid wages.

South African broadcasters strike

Workers at Sentech, the South African broadcasting signal distributor, went out on strike Saturday, July 26, demanding a pay increase, a 13th cheque (end-of-year bonus) and a housing allowance.

The state broadcasting company provides signals for television and radio. Management is attempting to maintain production by doing the work of the strikers. Sentech is in the process of switching over from analogue to digital and is behind schedule for the planned turnoff of analogue in June next year.



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