

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

22 August 2014

Norwegian teachers walkout expands

Norwegian teachers continued their strike this week. On Thursday, a further 2,200 teachers were set to join the strike. On August 11, 5,500 additional teachers from 130 secondary schools joined the action.

The *Dagsavisen* newspaper reported Wednesday that principals at many schools have also joined striking teachers. The strike has severely disrupted schools throughout the country, with the exception of Oslo, where teachers negotiate separately and have already agreed a new contract.

The strike began in June when 36 members of the Union of Education of Norway (UEN) at a school in Bergen struck in opposition to a proposal ordering teachers to spend 7.5 hours of working time at school each day.

Following the Bergen action, 73 percent of teachers voted against a proposed collective agreement, which threatens to hinder their ability to deliver a good standard of education. President of the UEN Ragnhild Lied said, "This strike is about much more than the 7.5 hours. We are on strike for the opportunity to do a good job, for more time to follow up each and every student and for time to prepare teaching and learning in the best possible way."

Sections of the political elite have called for an end to the strikes with the mayor of Stavanger saying on state broadcaster NRK's national nightly newscast Tuesday that she wants KS, the local government employer, to drop its 7.5 work hours demand. "Views and News from Norway" reported that KS would consider ending the 7.5 hours demand, "but then the teachers also wanted more pay and other benefits, complicating efforts to reach agreement."

On Tuesday night some 100 teachers protested outside the Oslo headquarters of KS. Thousands of teachers also protested in the centre of Trondheim the same evening. Public opinion polls have consistently shown a high level of support for the teachers.

Norwegian oil workers union calls off proposed action

The proposed strike by Norwegian oil service workers due to begin last weekend was called off after their SAFE union accepted a pay increase of 12,000 crowns (\$1,960) backdated to June and a further 12,000 crowns (\$1,960) increase at the beginning of 2015.

Nearly 90 employees of Baker Hughes had been due to walk out. The deal will cover Baker Hughes employees and three other oil service companies.

Care workers in Doncaster, England to strike again

Around 75 care workers employed by Care UK in Doncaster are set to hold further strikes in pursuit of an increase in basic pay for all staff and a minimum starting pay of £7.65 an hour, the current so-called living wage. A three-week strike is due to begin on August 25, a bank holiday.

The care staff provide care to people including the elderly with learning difficulties. Care UK is owned by private equity investor Bridgepoint.

The workers, members of the UNISON trade union, have previously been involved in strikes in another dispute, staging 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.

That dispute 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.

This week Unison representative Jim Bell said that workers voted unanimously for the new strikes. He added, "I asked Care UK this morning if they wanted to negotiate and they said no, so I've given them notice of a three-week strike starting at 7 a.m. on Bank Holiday Monday. We're willing to sit round the table but the silence is deafening, and if they're not listening then we will have to make more noise until they start listening to us."

Airport workers at Madrid airport to strike at end of August

Workers at Madrid's Adolfo Suárez Barajas airport are to strike during the last weekend of August to protest Spain's state-owned airport operator, Aena, being privatised.

Workers had been due to strike August 15 to 17 but the action was called off by their trade union CGT-Aena, who called for negotiations with management. This week the union issued a statement saying that the Ministry of Public Works and Barajas authorities were not amenable to discussions.

The government plans to sell off a 49 percent stake in Aena. The CGT claims this move would put the Spain's tourism industry "at great risk" and have a "negative impact" on flight security. It said under private management jobs may be lost and called for Spain's airports to remain "financially, and socially sustainable".

Irish Rail workers set to take action

Staff employed by the partially, state-owned Irish Rail company are set to strike on August 24-25, September 8 and September 21. Irish Rail is seeking to cut the pay of employees earning less than €65,000 by 2 percent and those earning over €100,000 by 6 percent. Several unions representing rail staff have agreed to the cuts but workers in SIPTU and the National Bus and Rail Union (NBRU) have rejected the plans and voted for the series of strikes.

David Franks Irish Rail Chief Executive told the press: "I would remind colleagues that the Labour Court has described the measures being implemented as unavoidable if the future of the company and the employment that it maintains are to be protected."

Health workers in Algarve, Portugal to walk out

Health workers in Algarve, Portugal are to strike August 22 for 24 hours. The strike is to protest staff shortages and working conditions, with many staff working eight straight hours without a break.

The strike is the first in which doctors, nurses, assistant health workers and administrative staff take joint action. Nuno Manjua, regional coordinator for the Union of Portuguese Nurses, said the action would be a regional day in defence of the Algarve National Health Service.

The *algarvedailynews* web site reported the aim of the strike was to "bring about changes to the management of the region's health professionals, the number of staff which is well below the legal minimum and to increase the supply of medical products needed to run an efficient and safe service."

Margarida Agostinho of the Association of Physicians of the South said, "The doctors are taking early retirement and are leaving hospitals and health centres because the working conditions really have deteriorated a lot".

UK meat inspectors set dates for strike

Meat inspectors, vets and support staff employed by the Food Standards Agency (FSA), a UK government body, are due to strike for four hours from 6:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. Tuesday, August 26 and Wednesday, August 27. They are responsible for maintaining food hygiene and animal welfare in UK slaughterhouses.

The FSA staff are members of the public service union UNISON, which has around 500 members in the FSA. Two thirds of the membership voted in favour of the strike.

They are striking against an imposed pay offer of only 0.75 percent, and are seeking an above inflation offer to attempt to recoup an estimated 15 percent loss in earnings power since the Conservative, Liberal Democrat government came into power in 2010.

Lebanese teachers may end exam boycott

The teachers United Coordination Committee (UCC) has announced it may end its boycott of the grading of the tens of thousands final exams taken by Lebanese students. It was imposing the boycott as part of its attempt to pressure parliament into agreeing to long promised salary increases.

The teachers have come under pressure from Education Minister Elias Bou Saab, who said he would just grant a pass to all students taking the exam without grading them. Teachers felt this was not fair to students and so were considering ending the boycott of the exam grading.

Indian women workers trapped in Saudi Arabia as a result of recruitment scam

Around 30 women from states in southern India are trapped in a shelter in Saudi Arabia. Recruitment agencies in India tricked the women, many of them highly educated and fluent in English, into thinking they were going to jobs other than in domestic service. They only discovered their fate once in Saudi Arabia.

Rich families in Riyadh are demanding the women be held until they are reimbursed for expenses ranging from SR16,000 (\$3,200) to SR 40,000 (\$8,040) which they claim they incurred to bring the women over from India.

Workers in Gaza lose jobs as result of Israeli military onslaught

The Gaza Labour Union estimates 30,000 workers in Gaza have lost their jobs as a result of the latest Israeli onslaught. This amounts to around 10 percent of the workforce. The bombardment has led to the destruction of large numbers of factories, workshops and commercial premises.

The group also added that since the imposition of the Israeli blockade in 2007, around 170,000 jobs have been wiped out. The death toll in the latest Israeli onslaught has now reached over 2,000.

South African metal workers remain locked out

Members of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) remain locked out at many South African metalworking and engineering companies, which come under the employers' body, the National Employers Association of South Africa (NEASA).

A pay agreement was settled through the Metal Industry Bargaining Council, bringing together the union, NEASA and the Steel and Engineering Federation of South Africa (SEIFSA), However NEASA, which represents small and medium sized companies, has refused to accept what it regards as an unaffordable settlement.

SEIFSA represents larger companies. The two industry employers' bodies are at odds, while metalworkers employed by NEASA companies remain locked out and without an income.

Kenyan medics strike over salary delays

The secretary general of the Kenyan Medical Practitioners and Dental Union instructed its members to strike on August 18 to demand the payment of their July salary. Half the nurses throughout the 47 counties have not received their July pay. County governors have accused the central government of paying the counties late, citing this as the reason for

not paying the salaries.

Namibian transport workers seek pay rise

Namibian transport workers have demanded Transnamib, the state-owned enterprise, put forward a pay increase offer or they will strike within two days, from August 19. Currently the company is refusing to make an offer. The Transport and Allied Workers Union is demanding an unspecified wage increase and housing and medical aid. The union requested wage negotiations on February 28, but they only started in June and continued in July. The shop steward also said the company was not prepared to negotiate seriously. There has been no further response from the company.

Namibian ocean bed diamond miners push for strike

As the strike by the Miners Union of Namibia has been brought to an end at Namibia's diamond mining company, Namdeb, the MUN is threatening to embark on strike action at Debmarine. Debmarine mines for diamonds on the seabed, using oceangoing vessels, and is jointly owned by De Beers and the Namibian government.

The union wants an 11 percent wage increase, 15 percent rental allowance and 12 percent seagoing allowance. They are also demanding a N\$600 (\$56) ticket allowance and N\$600 (\$56) benefit parity allowance for A2-B2 categories. Management's offer is a 10.5 percent wage increase, 14 percent rental allowance, 11 percent seagoing allowance, and a N\$400 (\$37) ticket allowance, which the union has rejected.

Striking Nigerian medics sacked

Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan ordered the sacking of all resident doctors in a directive August 13 effectively bringing the Resident Doctors Training Program to an end. The government's permanent secretary at the Ministry of Health is proposing to replace the doctors by part-time staff on the basis that they maintain good behaviour. Locum physicians are employed on six-month contracts, also renewable on the basis of good behaviour.

Resident doctors are the majority of doctors in hospitals, training to be specialist/consultants, and in many cases represent 90 percent of the doctors in hospitals. The Nigerian Medical Association, of which the National Association of Residents Doctors is a part, has been on strike since July 1. The response of NARD was to say the president's actions were illegal.



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