

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

24 October 2014

## Europe

### Rail drivers in Belgium block tracks

Rail locomotive drivers have been involved in a number of wildcat strikes in Belgium since Sunday, blocking the Liege-Guillemin and Liege Namur rail axis.

The action, which was completely unforeseen by the rail trade unions, is to protest the imposition of even further austerity by the new coalition government. Formed after a four-month deadlock, it consists of the Flemish Liberal Party, the Dutch-speaking Christian Democratic Party and—for the first time—the separatist New Flemish Alliance.

It plans to cut 2.1 billion euros from the state-run rail service and to separate it into private or semi-private regional rail companies. In preparation for this, it has proposed the introduction of a legal requirement for the maintenance of a minimum rail service in order to counter strikes.

### Belgian shop workers in wildcat action

Warehouse workers employed by the Delhaize chain of supermarkets in Belgium, walked out in an unofficial strike October 16, leading to the complete closure of the more than 100 shops the following day. The employees are protesting management proposals that would mean staff would not be paid for official breaks and their leave entitlement would be cut.

### Serbian teachers in one-day action

All four unions representing teachers in Serbia held a one-day strike on Wednesday affecting around 800 schools. They also held a protest on Nikola Pasic Square in Belgrade. Their action is in response to the Serbian government's plans to cut teachers' wages by 10 percent in the budget to be announced in November.

The teachers have said they will hold further strikes if the government does not reverse the proposed cuts, but Education Minister Srdjan Verbic threatened that the cuts in salary were inevitable.

### Protest by Bulgarian government workers

On Saturday, October 18, Bulgarian government workers including police, prison guards, rescue workers and firefighters held a protest in the Bulgarian capital city, Sofia. They were protesting proposed detrimental changes to their pension schemes.

### Walkout of teachers at UK school

More than 30 teachers at Swinton High School, Salford, north west England, walked out on strike on Tuesday, the first day of a planned five days of action. They were due to continue the strike on Wednesday, followed up by three further days of action beginning November 4.

The strike is in response to what the teachers have said are unacceptable working practices and bureaucratic policies. One of the striking teachers told the local media, "There's excessive monitoring and observations, unreasonable targets and a complete lack of dialogue with experienced professionals who want their views to be listened to. We have a great love for the school and the pupils and we know what is best for them. But these measures are punitive."

### Parisian hotel staff strike against low pay

Following strikes by hotel staff at two Hyatt hotels in Paris last month, staff at the Qatari owned Royal Monceau-Raffles luxury hotel in Paris came out on strike Tuesday. The presidential suite at the hotel costs 25,000 euros (\$31,700) a night to book, more than the annual salary of most of the staff.

Chambermaids, valets, bartenders, cooks and other hotel staff took to the streets of Paris demanding a 2 euro (\$2.5) per hour increase and better working conditions. A maid told the press: "I've worked in this hotel for 15 years and my salary has never increased."

### Strike by German civilian staff

Around 500 civilian staff employed by the US and other foreign military forces in the southwestern German municipality of Landstuhl went on strike Monday. Their demand was for a three percent rise, or the equivalent of a minimum of 90 euros (\$114) a month. Many civilian staff have not received a rise since 2010.

The strikers marched through Landstuhl chanting: "Raise our wage or we won't shut up". They then held a rally in the city hall.

### **Health workers in Wales vote for strike**

Members of the Unison trade union employed by the National Health Service (NHS) in Wales have voted by a margin of four-to-one in favour of strike action and nine-to-one in favour of action short of a strike against a pay offer made by the Welsh government.

They rejected an offer of a £160 (\$260) annual pay increase, approximately £3 (\$5) a week. The union health committee will now consider the ballot result before announcing any possible strike action.

#### **Middle East**

### **Protest by Iranian textile workers**

Around 200 employees and retirees of the Mazandaran Textile Company in northern Iran held a protest on Tuesday to demand payment of overdue wages and benefits. Their protest was held outside the Governor of Mazandaran's provincial office.

Following a similar protest held in May of this year, government officials promised they would receive the outstanding money owed to them, but this has not materialised.

### **Israeli employment service workers shut down all offices**

A strike of Department of Employment services workers, organised by the Histadrut labour federation, has led to the closure of all employment services offices throughout the country this week.

Amongst the employment service workers' grievances are a shortage of staff, plans to cut some offices and the implementation of changes by management without discussion.

### **Jordanian port workers return to work**

Port workers belonging to the General Union of Port Workers in the Jordanian port of Aqaba, employed by Aqaba Container Terminals (ACT), went on strike last week. The strike was sparked by ACT's attempt to impose a new contract. Police responded to the strike by immediately raiding the site and imprisoning 150 workers including their union leaders.

Following intervention by the International Transport Workers' Federation, the ACT employees have been released from police detention with 23 sacked workers reinstated. They have returned to work pending a national labour court hearing into ACT's contract changes proposals.

#### **Africa**

### **Strike of South African miners**

Five hundred members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM)

came out on strike October 17 at Glenore's operations in Koorfontein, South Africa, calling for better redundancy payments.

Job losses had been agreed to in talks between the company and union under the auspices of a government mediator, resulting from a restructuring programme at the mine. Whilst agreeing in principle to the job cuts, the mediation process broke down over disagreement on the level of compensation for each year of employment. The union claims that elsewhere in the company, redundancy compensation packages are higher.

### **New pay offer put to South African postal workers**

A new pay offer has been put to the striking South African postal workers in an attempt to bring the eight-week strike to an end.

The new offer was made on October 17 and consists of a 6.5 percent pay deal backdated to April, with a further 0.5 percent in January. Some 8,000 casuals are to be brought into full-time employment within 30 months.

The Communications Workers' Union (CWU) is demanding the reinstatement of 400 casuals sacked in the course of the strike, but there is no indication this has been accepted. A Post Office management spokesman said the South African Post Office continues to discuss options with unions to address issues. The ballot result over the new pay offer is expected before the end of the week.

### **Zimbabwean doctors threaten walkout**

Zimbabwean doctors have threatened to strike October 27 if there is no improvement in salaries and working conditions. The Zimbabwe Doctors Association (ZDA), working at state hospitals, said they had lost confidence in the government through fruitless meetings and any ability to review their working conditions. The ZDA said the strike will only be called off if, through formal communications, the employer agrees to our demands.

The doctors want an increase in their US\$250 housing allowance and a review of their US\$525 monthly salary. A strike by junior doctors, which has become common, took place earlier this month over withdrawal of allowances.

### **Liberian hospital workers strike**

Health workers at the JFK Medical Centre in Monrovia, the largest referral hospital in Liberia, have gone on strike after receiving a letter notifying them of a change of status after returning to work following a two week quarantine break. Under the change of status, the 110 workers were transferred from employment by JFK to the Ministry of Health.

According to the JFK administrator, the hospital was being downgraded due to a shortage of patients. A spokesperson for the striking workers stated: "How can the country's largest referral medical facility lack the capacity in these critical times?"



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