

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

16 January 2015

Polish coal miners strike over pit closures

The Polish government, under its new Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz, is seeking to restructure coal mines in the Southern Polish area of Silesia. The state-owned coal company, Kompania Weglowa, is the largest coal mining concern in Europe, employing some 50,000 workers.

Under the restructuring plan, four mines would be closed, one would be sold and a new company created around the remaining nine pits. It would lead to the loss of 5,000 jobs. Miners at nine of the pits have gone on strike, whilst miners at other pits have taken other action such as disrupting train traffic.

24-hour walkout by London bus drivers

Bus drivers who are members of the Unite union held a 24-hour strike Tuesday. They work for 18 bus companies that cover the London area and are seeking a single London-wide agreement covering pay and conditions.

According to Unite, there are currently 80 different pay rates for bus drivers in the capital.

They are also seeking a pay increase. Speaking to the BBC, Jake, a bus driver explained, "My rate of pay is £9.30 (\$14) an hour, I just want something that's a bit better. ... It depends on the shifts I get per week. ... I can take home £300 (\$460) and rent in north London is like £1,000 (\$1500) a month."

Unite reported 20,000 members had come out on strike, affecting 630 out of the 670 routes normally operating. There were picket lines at 70 bus garages. The union stated further action is a possibility.

English and Welsh police civilian staff to take industrial action

Around 30,000 police civilian staff, members of the Unison union in England and Wales, are due to strike Friday of next week. They are then set to undertake industrial action short of strike action over the next four weeks. The action is to push their claim for a pay rise of three percent or £500 (\$760) whichever is the greater. The employer's offer was a one percent pay increase.

The roles undertaken by them include 999 (emergency) call takers, police support officers and crime scene investigators.

UK clothing workers end strike

Around 70 workers employed by the Barbour Clothing Company at a warehouse in Wardley, Gateshead in north-east England, returned to work Wednesday. They had originally come out on strike on January 5, protesting the company's plans to change working hours and cut extra payments for unsocial hours. They are members of the Unite trade union.

Following talks under the auspices of the government conciliation service ACAS, a deal was agreed to. The new shift pattern wanted by the company will be brought in but with concessions for staff with home-care commitments. A Barbour spokesman told the BBC: "It is essential we have the flexibility to manage the business to the good of our entire workforce. ..."

The deal also included a new pay offer, but details were not made available.

Irish nurses vote for work-to-rule

Nurses at four Irish hospitals, Limerick University Hospital, Ennis, Nenagh and Croom, have voted by a 93 percent majority to begin work-to-rule action February 3. The action will include non-performance of administrative, clerical and non-clerical tasks. The action is in response to severe overcrowding at the hospitals due to high patient demand for treatment.

Irish peat production employees seek pay rise

Workers employed by the partly government owned Bord na Mona, which produces peat sods to supply peat burning electricity stations, have warned they are prepared to strike over their claim for a 3.5 percent pay increase. They have been seeking the claim since 2009, and 1,000 of them held a strike three years ago over the claim. They are represented by three unions, SIPTU, UNITE and TEEU.

In spite of profits of €50 million (\$59 million) in their last financial year, the company is seeking to save around €23 million (\$27 million) through cuts in pay and jobs. The three unions held general meetings with more than 80 percent of the workforce attending, who mandated their respective unions to push for the outstanding pay claim.

In a meeting organised by the Labour Relations Commission, Bord na Mona management are due to meet with union representatives in the near future, where the company will respond to the claim.

Protest by Cyprus Airways staff

Former staff of Cyprus Airways staged a protest outside the Finance Ministry on Monday, demanding compensation after the airline was closed down last week. They were supported by members of the pilots' union.

Cyprus Airways was wound up last week, after the European Commission demanded the government majority-owned company pay back more than €65 million (\$77 million) to the government. This money had been paid out in 2012 and 2013, contravening European Union rules that stipulate companies can only receive state assistance once in every ten years. The airline had previously been bailed out in 2007.

Strike threat by Czech Republic Tesco staff

The announcement on Tuesday by the UK-based international supermarket chain Tesco that it would close two stores in the Czech Republic led to a union representing Tesco staff to issue a strike threat.

Tesco, which has over 200 stores throughout the country with around 13,500 employees, announced it would close a store in Prague and a hypermarket in Usti, north of Prague, leading to the loss of over 100 jobs. Tesco also announced 13 of its stores in Hungary would close. The company, which suffered poor profits results, is cutting back on stores throughout its international operation, including the UK.

Turkish miner first to die in the New Year

With the New Year only four days old, Ahmet Arsian, 43 years old, died in an accident at a coal mine in the northwestern province of Edirne. He was killed when a chain connecting underground coal wagons, in which miners were travelling, snapped.

According to his brother, Yalcin, the accident was a result of negligence by the private coal company. Another miner who survived the accident confirms the claim of negligence. He told the press the chains should be replaced every six months but had not been changed for three years.

A recently-published trade union report states that 361 miners were killed in Turkey last year. This includes the country's worst-ever industrial disaster, when in May, 301 miners died as a result of a fire which broke out in a mine owned by the Soma Coal company.

Tunisian transport employees walk out

Tunisian public transport drivers for bus and light rail services, along with drivers of mining products, came out on strike Monday.

The workers, organised by the Tunisian General Labour Union, are demanding the payment of their promised end-of-year bonuses as agreed on December 8. A government cabinet meeting on Tuesday called on the union to suspend the strike.

Egyptian tax workers threaten action

The Independent General Union of Real Estate Tax Authority workers

(IGURETA) has threatened to stop distributing tax notifications followed by strike action if its call for parity with other tax employees is ignored by the Egyptian government.

Currently, they receive bonus payments for only six months a year compared to public taxes employees who receive 11 bonus payments a year and sales tax employees who get 13. Union representatives are due to meet with ministry of finance staff on Saturday to discuss the issue.

Israeli chemical company plans job cuts

Israel Chemicals Ltd (ICL) is planning to cut 600 jobs over the next two years. It summoned 135 of its employees at the Dead Sea Works to a pre-dismissal hearing. The Dead Sea Works extracts minerals from the Dead Sea.

ICL is continuing with efforts to sack 144 of its employees at its Bromine Compounds works at Neot Hovav. The company plans to restructure its head office operations, which would lead to 30 job losses.

Strike of South African platinum miners

South African platinum miners at the Zondereinde mine in Limpopo came out on strike on Tuesday. According to the National Union of Miners, which organises 80 percent of the workforce, the strike was in response to the non-compliance to agreed policies by management.

It was later suggested that the strike of 7,000 workers was provoked by the company refusing to pay sick leave and a worker being installed in an official position without consultation, both a breach of agreed policy. The company has applied to the courts to have the strike outlawed.

Ghanaian transport staff strike

Employees of the Ghanaian transport system went on strike Monday, demanding the removal of the Metro Mass Transport Limited (MMTL) board chairman and deputy director. They claim the activities of the two threaten the survival of the company.

The Petroleum, Transport, and Chemical Workers Union issued a report accusing the two board members of the disappearance of 12 buses.

The drivers are also protesting poor working conditions and poor pay of GHc200 (US\$61) a month. The company has a fleet of 800 buses, out of which 150 are laid up. One worker commented that on occasion, he arrives at work to find there is no bus to drive and has to sit about all day.

The Ghanaian transport minister was booed as she addressed workers, saying she did not have the power to dismiss the board member and deputy director. Following the intervention of the union and the transport minister, the drivers returned to work on the promise of the situation being resolved within 16 days. The union has said it would take the matter to the president to get the two removed if his minister could not.

Kenyan textile employees demand improved pay, conditions

Seven thousand workers from three textile companies operating out of a Free Exporting Zone in Mombasa, Kenya, went on strike January 5, demanding better wages, conditions and the right to form a union. While protesting the companies' strikebreaking on January 8, strikers were attacked by police using tear gas and shooting into the air.

The affected companies work under the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA). The act facilitates duty-free access to the large markets such as the US. The three companies operate under one management and produce a large amount of garments for export to the US.

Kenyan teachers' strike in second week

Officials of the Kenyan Union of Post Primary Education Teachers were arrested and had their newly-acquired bus seized by police. This followed action by union members against strikebreakers.

Around 288,000 teachers across the country have been out on strike since January 5, after rejecting a government offer that would give Sh9.3 billion (\$102 million) in allowances but no wage increase.

The Kenyan nurses' union threatened to take solidarity strike action next week if the government does not confront issues affecting teachers, expressing that they are all parents and are affected by the strike.

Nigerian university staff begins indefinite action

This week, lecturers and non-academic staff began an indefinite strike at the Cross River State University of Technology, Nigeria, over unpaid salaries for the past two months as well as other issues.

The chairman of the University branch of the Academic Staff Union of Universities said four unions had contacted the government over unpaid wages and allowances but to no avail. The unions are also demanding the implementation of a N500 million (\$2.75 million) upgrade in facilities and an increase from N169million (\$0.92 million) to N250 million (\$1.37 million) in state subsidies.

Protest by Ebola nurses in Sierra Leone

Nurses employed in hospitals across the Western area of Sierra Leone held a noisy demonstration outside the offices of the National Ebola Response Centre on Monday. They were protesting not receiving their allowance payments over the last two months. One nurse complained that she is not allowed to travel on local transport for fear of her infecting other travelers with Ebola and has to walk to work.

The World Health Organization's most recent report says the Ebola virus has infected 21,000 people in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia since the current outbreak and at least 8,300 people have died

Strike at Tanzania Zambia railway

Rail workers at the Tanzania and Zambian Railway Company (Tazara)

went on strike Monday demanding six month's unpaid wages, bringing train operations to a halt. The reports are of Tazara employees in Tanzania taking strike action, but there are indications that rail workers in Zambia are joining the action.

The line is important for transporting copper ore from Zambian and Democratic Republic of Congo mines to the port of Dar es Salam.

The 1,860 kilometer line is jointly owned by the governments of Tanzania and Zambia, who claim they cannot afford to maintain rolling stock, and pay for fuel and wages. It has not made a profit for the last 10 years.



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