

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

20 March 2015

UK North Sea oil workers ballot on industrial action

The Rail, Maritime and Transport workers' union (RMT) is set to ballot its 3,000 members who work in the North Sea offshore oil facilities. They are facing layoffs and pay cuts as the oil companies use the recent fall in oil prices to push through the reductions. They are also protesting changes to pensions, sick pay and plans to introduce a three-on-three-off shift pattern.

The Unite and GMB unions are also balloting their North Sea offshore oil members. It is due to close on March 27.

General strike by Portuguese public-sector workers

Public-sector workers organised by the CGTP and UGT unions held a one-day general strike last Friday. According to reports, around 90 percent of public-sector workers organised by the two unions took part in the action, which affected hospitals, schools, courts, government offices, public transport and refuse collection.

The strike was called in response to pay and job cuts in the public sector and the lengthening of the working week.

Further action by German airline pilots

Pilots working for German airline Lufthansa were on strike Wednesday and Thursday. Wednesday's strike targeted short- and medium-haul flights, with Thursday's affecting long-haul and cargo flights. Lufthansa announced it had cancelled more than half its scheduled flights over the two days. However, Lufthansa subsidiaries Germanwings and Eurowings had normal service.

Pilots represented by the Vereinigung Cockpit (VC) union are protesting Lufthansa plans to scrap the scheme whereby its pilots can retire at 55 but still receive 60 percent of their pay until reaching statutory retirement age at 65. They are also protesting the airline's plans to expand its budget flights sector with reduced conditions and the company's plans to offer new younger recruits diminished pay and working conditions.

The strike by Lufthansa pilots is the second this year and the twelfth in its series of strikes over the early retirement issue. The strikes have cost Lufthansa around €230 million so far.

German public-sector pay talks falter

Union leaders representing public-sector staff in schools, hospitals and fire stations warned of possible further strikes after a third round of pay talks broke down this week. The 3 million state workers are seeking a 5.5 percent pay rise. According to Verdi union head Frank Bsirske, the employers made no counter-offer and wanted to reduce retirement benefits.

Strikes took place in schools, hospitals and some regional airports last week ahead of the talks this week. Unions and employers' representatives are due to meet again at the end of March.

German Amazon staff threaten strikes before Easter

Staff working for the German arm of Amazon have threatened strike action before Easter over the company's refusal to sign collective pay agreements. The Verdi union says it will hold flexible strikes in the lead-up to Easter, which it expects to affect most Amazon depots.

Staff at the Amazon depot in Leipzig walked out last Friday, and around 150 of them went to the book fair to plead their case to visitors.

UK emergency call staff lobby parliament

Telephone operators taking emergency calls for the Essex County Fire and Rescue service in south east England were on strike last week over the introduction of new shift patterns. The majority of the operators are young mothers, many of whom are unable to manage the new shifts. They are members of the Fire Brigade Union (FBU).

On Wednesday, the operators lobbied members of parliament in London. Further strike action has not been ruled out.

Irish wind farm service staff set to walk out

Some 100 staff employed by the German company, Enercon, were due to begin a three-day strike today. The workers are members of the Technical, Engineering and Electrical Union (TEEU). They are seeking a pay rise and restoration of allowances at previously paid rates prior to the company unilaterally cutting them in January.

The union has announced it will call off the threatened strike action if the company agrees to talks. Enercon, which has its headquarters in Tralee, County Kerry, is Ireland's largest wind farm service provider.

Belgian public-sector union sets general strike date

The Belgian public-sector trade union, ACOD, has given advance notice of a general strike on Wednesday, April 22. It is to protest government cost-cutting measures that affect the rules on early retirement.

Two other unions representing public-sector workers, VSOA and ACV, have said they will announce whether they will join the protest before the end of March.

Latvian care staff plan rally for EU health ministers' meeting

The Latvian Council of Trade Union of Health and Social Care Employees has announced it will hold a protest rally in the Latvian capital of Riga on Monday, April 20.

It is timed to coincide with an informal meeting of European Union (EU) health ministers the same day. They are protesting the underfunding of health provision in Latvia.

Turkish health workers hold one-day strike

Turkish health workers including doctors, nurses and laboratory technicians held a one-day strike on March 13. They were protesting long working hours and low pay. Amongst their demands were better working conditions, pay and pension increases, and free and equal access to good health care for all. Protest rallies were held in Istanbul and Anzara.

Egyptian steel workers hold sit-in

A report in the *Egypt Independent* on Wednesday stated that more than 350 workers at the Egyptian Iron and Steel Company in Suez held a sit-in demanding a pay increase and the disbursement of the annual bonus payment.

A member of the labour union at the company told the paper, "We are demanding our legitimate rights."

Kuwaiti oil workers hold sit-down protest

Oil sector workers staged a sit-in at the end of last week in front of the headquarters of the Union of Workers. They accused the union of not taking up the demands of workers.

Strike of Nigerian medics

Nigerian Medical Guild doctors at some government-owned Lagos State hospitals went on strike Monday. Consultants working at the Isolo hospital in Lagos turned up for work and threatened junior doctors with

sanctions if they did not do likewise. A Guild spokesman outlined their grievances, saying: "The issues in contention include the continued employment of doctors as casual (contract) workers; the non-employment of resident doctors in the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital (LASUTH); and the discriminatory application of the state's 'no work, no pay' policy to members of the Medical Guild in the period between April-May 2012 and September 2014."

The Medical Guild came out on sympathy strike in support of their colleagues in the Nigerian Medical Association last year. The government declared both the previous strike and this strike action illegal.

Kenyan truckers protest

Kenyan truckers have gone on strike, bringing transportation on the northern corridor to a standstill. The 80 truckers have parked their vehicles until the company Agility Logistics recognises their union and stops demanding drivers work up to 24-hour shifts.

The trucking service is depended on to convey goods throughout Kenya and on to Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and Tanzania. Unions in other industries and countries along the corridor have pledged solidarity action, and Mombasa dock workers are threatening to boycott unloading at the port terminal.

The company has applied to the labour court to force the transport workers back to work while the International Transport Federation has warned the company of its concern that other unions are being drawn into the dispute.

Strikes and protests close Zimbabwean universities

The Zimbabwean authorities closed down universities throughout the country for a week starting Tuesday. This is in response to a strike by university staff after the non-payment of pay and bonuses for the month of February, which followed the late payment of wages in January. The government repudiated an agreement to pay the back wages by Tuesday.

Students supported the actions of the staff. The government sent police on to the campuses and called on all students to vacate their halls of residence.

Zambian construction workers arrested

Sino Hydro workers constructing the 120-megawatt power station were attacked by Zambian riot police using tear gas on March 12. They had stopped work, protesting non-implementation of an agreed wage deal going back to last year.

Five out of the 400-plus casual workers were arrested at the \$5 million water and sewage utility in Itezhi Tezi.

Namibian miners suspended

Purity Manganese mining company has suspended 50 workers who went

on strike. They are accused of taking illegal strike action, assault and desertion.

The strike was in protest at the slashing of wages by half and the company imposing forced leave, without pay, between November 27 and January 12. Two weeks later, the workers were laid off again without pay for a further fortnight, and when they asked for their wages, the company brought the police in.

The company's action has left workers in debt, pension payments not remitted with policies subject to default and closure. Five miners have lost their lives and many others have suffered injuries without compensation over the last 15 years as a result of unsafe working conditions.

A hearing to consider their suspension took place on March 17, but the result has yet to be announced.

Gabon forest workers in dispute

Forestry workers in Gabon employed by Rain Forest Management are protesting the sacking of 38 workers for taking strike action on February 17. They have been in an ongoing conflict with the company over working conditions, lack of contracts and legal working hours. The company has refused to negotiate with their union, the Entente Syndicale des Travailleurs du Gabon (ENSYTG), and is accused of intimidating active members, calling on police to evict them from their dormitories.



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