

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

27 March 2015

Belgian bus and tram strike

Staff employed by the Flemish local transport company De Lijn held a strike Tuesday. They are members of the socialist public-sector workers' union ACOD. The strike affected the Flanders area, with disruption to services in Antwerp, Mechelen, Ghent and Genk. It was in sympathy with protests and demonstrations in Antwerp the same day against government austerity plans.

French ferry workers lightning strike

Ferry workers employed by MyFerryLink held a lightning strike Wednesday over threats to the Calais-Dover service. MyFerryLink staff threatened to keep the vessel Berlioz in its berth in Calais, so blockading the port from entry by other vessels. The Berlioz sister ship Rodin was held outside the harbour. The union representing the ferry employees said the blockade by the Berlioz would last until 6 p.m. Wednesday evening.

The action follows a decision by the UK competition authorities that MyFerryLink must cease running its ferry service between Calais and Dover because the company has a partnership agreement with Eurotunnel. Ferry staff took similar action March 10.

Strike by French wine production staff

Over 3,000 vineyard and winery workers organised by the CGT held a strike last week to demand an increase in their bonus payment, following the announcement of sales of €4.5 billion by the region's wine producers. Some 800 held a march along the Avenue de Champagne in Epernay. They marched to the premises of the wine producer Besserat de Bellefon, whose workforce have been holding intermittent strikes over the last few weeks. They are calling for better working conditions.

The region was the scene of the Champagne riots in 1911, when discontented workers ransacked vineyards and the regional governor declared a state of civil war and brought in 40,000 troops.

Italian bank workers plan further strikes

Talks between banking unions and the employer's organisation, the Italian Banking Association (ABI), broke down Monday. The talks were

to broker a new collective contract for bank workers. In January, some 30,000 bank employees held a one-day strike. The banks have declared they will no longer abide by the current collective agreement after March 31. They are seeking to cut staff and increase productivity levels. The unions announced they will hold two further days of strike, but have yet to set dates.

Italian museum staff in Florence announce Easter strike

Some 400 staff working for the private company Opera Laboratori Fiorentini in Florence have announced they will go on strike over the Easter weekend of April 4 to 5. They are organised by the CGIL and UIL unions.

The company provides ticket office, cloakroom, bookshop and other services to the 15 publicly-owned museums in Florence including the Uffizi and Galleria dell'Accademia. The Easter weekend normally sees big numbers attending museums. Italian press reports spoke of rumours that the heritage ministry may intervene and demand staff work over the Easter weekend.

The proposed strike follows plans by the heritage ministry to invite tenders for the services at the museums currently provided by Opera Laboratori Fiorentini. The unions wanted the new contracts to include a clause pledging to maintain the current pay and contract conditions. In the absence of any such assurance, they called the strike.

Russian police detain trade unionists

Police briefly detained 15 members of the MPRA union over the weekend. They were meeting in the city of Kaluga to discuss plans by car plants in the area to cut jobs. Volkswagen plans to cut 600 jobs at its Kaluga plant and move to a four-day week. Citroen Peugeot is also planning layoffs at its factory in the city.

Police say the arrests were part of an investigation into a theft near the union office. However, the union reports its members were held by a police "anti-extremism" unit and were questioned for two hours about union activity in an effort to intimidate them. Employees at the Ford plant in St. Petersburg began a strike last week.

Hunger strike by Russian health care staff

Around 20 health care workers in the city of Ufa, capital of the Bashkortostan Republic, began a hunger strike Monday. They are protesting reprisals against their colleagues who had been demanding improved working conditions and a pay increase in earlier protests.

It is the third such protest since last April, and comes on top of a similar protest by a local ambulance service manager which began last week. Health workers were given pay increases following two previous hunger strikes, but many of their demands remain unmet.

Serbian teachers strike to protest salary cuts

Teachers, members of the Association of Labour Unions of Education Workers of Serbia, held a strike on Monday. Classes in the towns of Cacak, Gornji, Milanovac and Krusevac were cancelled as a result.

They were joined by members of the Labour Union of Education Workers of Serbia. They were protesting cuts in their salaries imposed by the Education Ministry. The two unions have been taking action since November last year over the issue. They have been cutting the length of classes by 30 minutes in protest at salary reductions.

Strike of Spanish teachers and students

Staff and students in universities and in the upper level of secondary schools began a 48-hour strike Tuesday. They were protesting government plans which include cuts in education spending, restructuring of the scholarship system, cutting the length of university degrees from three years to two and other measures which will restrict access to education.

The main union bodies, CCOO, UGT and CGT, were involved in the strike along with other unions and student union members. Protest marches were held in over 40 towns and cities including one in Madrid which ended with a rally outside the ministry of education building.

UK rail workers to be balloted

Rail workers employed by Network Rail have rejected their company's four-year pay offer and voted to hold a ballot for industrial action by a 90 percent majority. They are members of the Rail Maritime and Transport union RMT. Network Rail is responsible for maintaining the track and rail station infrastructure.

Under the deal offered by the company there would be no pay increase. A no compulsory redundancy component would expire after one year. The only offer was of an annual National Rail Card offering fare reductions for staff and their friends and families. Such cards are available to the general public, anyway. RMT had called for a free travel concession.

RMT said it was "available for talks" and hoped the company would return to talks with an improved offer.

UK government department cleaning staff protest

Cleaners employed by DECC, who clean the offices of the government

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), held a protest Wednesday against low pay. They are represented by the PCS union. The workers are on the statutory minimum pay rate and are calling on DEFRA to pay them the "living wage," which currently stands at £9.15 for workers in London.

DECC employees who work for the government Energy and Climate Change department are employed at the living wage rate.

Rail workers in Scottish capital to strike

Rail workers employed by Virgin Trains East Coast in Edinburgh have announced they will hold a one-day strike on Good Friday, April 3. They are members of the RMT trade union. They are taking the action in support of a colleague, Mark Doughty, who was sacked while working for the company's previous owner, East Coast Trains. According to RMT, he was sacked after informing customers that a cooked breakfast could not be supplied because of staff shortages and a broken boiler.

Demonstrations of Cypriot hotel workers

Hotel workers held a demonstration Tuesday in Nicosia. The protest was organised by the SEK, PEO and DEOK union organisations. Hotel staff fear employers are seeking to impose work schedules of six 12-to-13-hour shifts a week for a monthly pay of €500–€600. They were also protesting non-payment of wages. Following the demonstration, they marched to the parliament buildings where they submitted a resolution. The hotel workers' union PEO leader, Lefteris Georgiades, has threatened strike action in the summer, the height of the tourist trade, if the proposed work schedules are pushed through.

Dutch care firm seeks to re-employ staff on freelance basis

According to the Abvakabo trade union, care staff employed by Sensire, which provides residential home care, were told at a recent meeting that the company plans to sack its 600 staff but to re-employ them on a freelance basis. As freelancers they would not be entitled to rights such as holiday and sick pay. The staff were told their only other options were to work in a different sector or take early retirement.

Other Dutch care companies employ staff on a similar freelance basis as does PostNL the postal delivery company.

Knesset employees object to working Passover holiday

Administrative staff at Israel's national legislature, the Knesset, are opposed to the speaker's proposal to cancel the Passover holiday and for the staff to work. Their union has written to the Knesset Director General Ronen Plot, to say there can be no change to work procedures without official talks with the union.

South Africa Telecom staff strike

South African Telecom employees took strike action last week after the mobile telephone operator announced restructuring and retrenchment plans to close 90 stores. They held a protest on March 20 outside the company's head office

The company plans to farm out large parts of its operations, which would affect 10,000 jobs. Management accuse the unions of sabotaging daily operations by closing call centre systems, imposing a go-slow and intimidating working staff.

The Communications Workers Union said the phone utility has shed 60,000 jobs since 1999, but was willing to meet the company to discuss retrenchments. Unemployment in South Africa currently stands at 8.2 million, or 35 percent.

South African bus workers continue strike action

Piotrans, the bus operating company in Gauteng, South Africa, is carrying out a reduced bus service, with some workers breaking the strike and going back to work after six weeks. Sixty new drivers have been recruited through agencies and set to work. A total of 158 striking drivers were sacked for what the company regarded as illegal action.

The drivers abandoned their busses when Piotrans refused to respond to complaints about the use of labour agencies and refused to recognise their union.

The bus drivers elected to bring in the South African Municipal Workers Union to represent them. The company continues to use recruiting agencies against the demands of the drivers. The union has represented the bus drivers in a hearing held by the South African Road Passenger Bargaining Council. The fate of the 158 driver's jobs has yet to be resolved.

Nigerian maritime workers strike

The Maritime Workers Union of Nigeria began a three-day warning strike Monday. The union said it announced the strike to prevent aggrieved workers taking the law into their own hands. It was called after the employers' negotiating body resisted beginning new two-year contract discussions now nine months overdue.

The strike is expected to close ports nationwide, crippling all commercial activities.

Strike of Gabon teachers and public-sector staff

Teachers, who have been on strike in Gabon for a month, have been joined by twelve other public-sector unions. The unions have rejected an 18 percent temporary wage offer by the government and are demanding a more than trebling of their wages.

The teachers at present earn the minimum monthly income of 80,000 CFA francs (\$129 dollars) and they want it increased to 300,000 CFA francs (\$500). The temporary offer was proposed by the state to offset the strike, with a new proposal to be made in July. The strike has paralyzed

government ministries and hospitals are on skeleton staff.

Miners walk out in Madagascar

Mine workers went on strike at Sherrit International Corps mine in Madagascar on March 16, protesting the neglect of an injured miner and the lack of health care for indigenous workers. The union called the strike at the nickel and cobalt producer after a mine worker died because he was not transported 80 kilometers to the capital's hospital where he could receive adequate treatment.

The workers state that a foreign worker had an accident and was transported to South Africa for treatment. A spokesman for the Union of Workers, on the company committee, said they wanted the same treatment for all employees. Sherrit International Corps owns 40 percent of the Ambatovy mining venture alongside Sumitomo Corp Japan, Korea Resources Corp. and Canadian SNC-Lavalin Group.

Togo government employees strike ahead of election

Togo government employees have gone on strike a month ahead of national elections. They are seeking a pay increase of 30,000 CFA Francs (\$50) a month. The strike, which started Tuesday and was planned to continue until Friday, had a severe effect on education and health but little impact on commercial interests.



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