Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

3 April 2015

Europe

Italian workers march against labour law "reforms"

Italy's biggest engineering union, Federazione Impiegati Operai Metallurgici (FIOM), organised a march through Rome last Saturday to protest the government's Jobs Act, large chunks of which have already been enacted. The act makes it easier for companies to fire staff. Even if a dismissal is subsequently judged illegal, the company, while possibly having to give monetary compensation, would be under no obligation to reinstate the worker. The changes are being pushed through by Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's Democratic Party.

Speaking the day before the march, Renzi gave his response to it, saying: "Tomorrow there's another march against the government—no news."

German union files suit to stop Deutsche Post creating two-tier wage regime

The Verdi union filed a lawsuit this week to prevent Deutsche Post's (DP) plans to expand its parcel delivery service using staff on lower wages than other DP staff. DP wants to cash in on the rapidly expanding parcel delivery business fuelled by online retailing. It wants to create 10,000 lower paid jobs as part of its parcel delivery service by 2020. To date it has taken on 4,000 such employees.

Verdi says DP's plans would breach an agreement it has with the company to limit the volume of business DP can outsource to third parties. However, the union has said it would be willing to forgo its opposition to DP's plans if the company would agree to shorten its current workforce's working hours from 38.5 a week to 36, with no loss of pay.

DP and the union are scheduled to meet for further talks on April 14.

Irish bus workers union to ballot over privatisation

The National Bus and Rail Workers Union (NRBU) will begin balloting its members next Monday on industrial action up to and including an all-out strike. This follows a breakdown in talks between the public sector union SIPTU (Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union), NRBU and the employers' representatives of Bus Eireann and Dublin Bus.

The bus companies have announced plans to privatize 10 percent of their routes. NRBU also intends to begin High Court action against the government implementing its transport privatisation programme.

UK Windsor Castle staff ballot on industrial action

A ballot began Tuesday of low paid administrative staff at the Queen's residency in southeast England. They are members of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS). The ballot closes April 14. Around 100 are taking part.

The Windsor Castle staff had grudgingly accepted last year's low pay increase on the understanding that allowances would be paid for additional duties such as acting as tour guides and translators and providing first aid cover. However, these allowances have not materialised. Newly recruited staff start on a salary of £14,400.

Protest march by young Portuguese workers

Several hundred young workers held a march through the streets of Lisbon Saturday to protest poor working conditions. The march was organised by Interjovem, a union for young workers, and by Portugal's largest union, CGTP (General Confederation of Portuguese Workers). Around a third of youth in Portugal are unemployed.

Strike by Portuguese health staff suspended

An indefinite strike by health care staff organised by STSS, the Union of Sciences and Health Technologies, due to have begun Tuesday, has been suspended after the government promised further talks. The union represents 10,000 health care staff and held a two-day strike in February.

Their concerns include the fact that more than half of diagnostic and therapeutic technicians are employed on a short-term or self-employed basis and that many are forced to work an extra five hours a week without pay.

They are also protesting the fact that career structures and salary rates have been frozen for the last 15 years. This is leading to recruitment problems and suitably qualified staff moving abroad to work.

Work to rule by Moscow medics

Doctors in general practice (GPs) and clinics in Moscow began a work to rule last week. They are protesting an increasing workload even as staff numbers are cut. They are also protesting against shrinking salaries. Many are on less than half their earnings compared to the recent past. Some neighbourhood GPs are on the equivalent of €640 a month.

Yekaterina Chatskaya, an obstetrician at a Moscow clinic, explained, "The workload is colossal….If we were at least provided with stationery supplies. Yesterday I was issued paper for my printer for the first time in five years. Usually…I have to buy supplies out of my own money…The main disaster is the lack of time for examining patients properly. The Health Ministry allots 10 to 12 minutes for each patient, but it is impossible to meet this standard."

Middle East

Egyptian bakers in Alexandria stop production

Last week around a quarter of Alexandria bakeries stopped making

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bread, protesting against the Egyptian government failing to pay state subsidies. The government normally reimburses bakeries that sell bread at a loss to poorly paid workers. The subsidy system is a new government programme that is gradually being introduced throughout the country.

Egyptian port workers strike

Around 1,000 workers employed by the Queen Service Company at the Red Sea port of Ain Sokhna went on strike last week, demanding their delayed profit share bonus and allowances. The strike began after a delegation of employees tried to discuss the matter with management, resulting in three being sacked. The striking port staff held a protest outside the Suez governorate office.

Protest of Lebanese teachers and civil servants

Teachers and civil servants held a one-day strike Tuesday, and protests throughout the country. They were organised by the Union Coordination Committee as part of an ongoing three-year campaign to pressure the government to approve a bill giving them a pay increase. Around 100 protesters held a sit-in outside the Education Ministry building in Beirut. Rallies of teachers and civil servants took place in Western Beqaa, Tripoli and other towns and cities.

Palestinian civil servants demonstrate

Civil servants in the Gaza Strip held a protest last Thursday when Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah visited the territory. They were protesting not receiving their salary cheques for several months.

Africa

South African manganese miners' strike

Miners at the BHP Billiton Manganese mine in South Africa went on strike Friday, demanding bonuses be paid before a proposed new company is formed. Around 800 miners walked out at BHP's Wessels and Mamatwan mines near Hotazel in the Northern Cape.

The National Union of Mineworkers is attempting to wind up the strike, asking its members to return to work while they negotiate with the company. Striking workers say the company owes them bonuses from before the proposal to spin off the new company (South 32) was made.

South African telecom staff strike threat

South Africa's Telecom Union is threatening an all-out strike, escalating the current go-slow. The Communications Workers Union (CWU) is demanding the sacking of the CEO and management team and an alternative to the company's privatisation plan.

The threat of an all-out strike follows the company's plans to push forward the automatic transfer of its staff in call centres, supply chain and information technology due to begin the end of April.

The CWU is refusing to give its majority approval to voluntary redundancy packages in opposition to Solidarity and the South African Communications Union, the two other unions in the industry. The CWU's concerns are that the break-up of the state enterprise into privatised units would undermine the union's bargaining position.

Since restructuring began, 62,000 out of 80,000 telecom jobs have been shed.

South African civil servants' dispute

Wage negotiations for South African civil servants officially came to an end Wednesday, April 1. The government has initiated the move to independent arbitration to overcome the gap between the unions and the state, indicating the two sides are in dispute.

The Public Service Association is claiming the action is premature and is concerned that if arbitration breaks down the union would be pushed into strike action. Government has offered public sector workers the rate of inflation plus 1 percent this year and 0.5 percent increase next year in a two-year deal, whereas the union is demanding 10 percent over one year.

South African power station construction staff sacked

South African power generating company Eskom has sacked 1,000 workers involved in the construction of the Medupi Power Station. The workers were fired for striking and other sackings may follow. Construction employees of Eskom's subsidiary companies went on strike for a day and half last week demanding an end to layoffs, better allowances and accommodation, and a bonus payment. On March 27 the power companies' subcontractors issued a circular declaring the workers need not turn up for work.

The contractors proceeded to lock the workers out. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) has demanded the workplace be reopened, threatening broader action.

Kenyan vegetable process workers drive out scabs

Workers at a vegetable factory in Limuru, Kenya, drove out labour brought in to take over their jobs during a strike last Wednesday, March 25. A worker said the scabs had been brought in when the strikers boycotted work over poor pay and conditions. "We felt they were destroying our deal," he said.

Namibian mining company suspends half of workforce

Mining company Purity Manganese in Namibia suspended half of its workforce, without pay, for striking March 26. Of 240 jobs, 121 are dependent on the outcome of a company inquiry into allegations of misconduct.

The long list of charges stem from what the company regards as illegal strike action. The list includes desertion, participating in an illegal strike, assault or attempted assault, gross insubordination, intimidation, major breach of contracts, using insulting, abusive or racial language or behaviour, and an insolent attitude to management.

A letter was sent out to the suspended workforce last Friday demanding a return of all keys and property to their supervisors. The Miners Union of Namibia said foreign companies use these tactics when going bankrupt, using legal loopholes to tie up the process while they leave the country. Purity Manganese is Israeli-based.

Gabonese telecom workers strike continues

Gabonese Telecom workers have continued their strike action into April, demanding pay parity, unpaid bonuses and the implementation of a worker share scheme. Gabon and Morocco Telecom merged in 2007 with the private company Libertis. An agreement at the time promised a merged wage rate, bonus system and a share scheme giving workers a 5 percent stake in the company.

Eight years after privatisation the company still refuses to implement the agreement. Workers action has interrupted Internet and telephone communication in the capital, Libreville. The government has accused the telecom workers of sabotage.

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