

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

22 May 2015

Europe

Hungarian health care workers march for pay and jobs

In one of the largest protests in recent months, thousands of health care workers staged two simultaneous marches in the Hungarian capital Budapest on May 12. They were demanding higher wages and secure employment.

The demonstration voiced anger at Prime Minister Viktor Orban's government. "The protesters scoffed at recent growth numbers showing that Hungary's economy expanded by 3.6 percent in 2014," said Reuters. "We would like to get our money back from this robust Hungarian economy," Budapest nurse Maria Sandor told the protesters at Hungary's Parliament building, according to the news web site index.hu.

Health care workers have left Hungary in large numbers to work temporarily or permanently in Western Europe after many have been forced to subsist on wages of less than 100,000 forints (\$365.90) per month.

UK rail unions call off one day strike

On May 21, officials from the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), and the Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) called off a one-day strike scheduled for next Monday. They claimed to have entered into new negotiations with Network Rail, the UK state-owned track operator, over a revised pay deal.

Last week, workers at Network Rail (NR), overwhelmingly voted to strike against a derisory four-year pay deal and the threat of further job losses.

Over 16,000 signallers, maintenance and station staff represented by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) voted by 80 percent for strike action and 92 percent for action short of a strike in a ballot turnout of over 60 percent. The smaller Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) covering clerical, supervisory and technical staff also voted 53 percent and 79 percent respectively for industrial action on a 52 percent turnout.

Network Rail has carried out a reduction of its maintenance staff by 12 percent since 2009. It has set a target of 20 percent further cost-cutting by 2019.

The RMT announced the May 25 Bank Holiday as the date for a national strike, with an overtime ban to run on May 25 and 26. The action was also backed by the TSSA. The rapid back-down by the unions reflects their concern that the stoppage had the potential to become a focal point for broader opposition to austerity in the working class.

Former employees at Armenian chemical plant stage sit-in

Workers formerly employed at the Nairit chemical plant staged a sit-in protest May 14 outside the Armenian government building in Yerevan. They demanded 18 months of unpaid wages.

Energy and Natural Resources Minister Yervand Zakharyan said the ministry is trying to make payments periodically from the financial resources of other companies in the energy sector. He said this should allow the repayment of the debt completely before the end of this year.

Anahit Manukyan, a former employee at Nairit, responded, "The minister said at yesterday's news conference that the entire debt will be repaid before the end of this year, but we have heard such statements before." Workers were told "in October 2014 that we would have our money paid, but nothing like that happened, and therefore we don't believe the minister's promises."

Ninety percent of Nairit's shares were sold to British Rainoville in 2006. The remaining 10 percent belong to the Armenian government. The plant has been idle since April 2010 and accumulated unpaid wages now total \$12 million.

Middle East

Egyptian cement workers end six-week strike

Tourah Cement Company workers ended a six-week strike May 14. The *Egypt Independent* reported the 1,100 workers agreed to end the strike, when the company offered payment on delayed annual profits.

The newspaper reported, "The Italian investor announced that the company's losses amounted to LE14.5 million, adding that he would not be able to pay the annual profits to workers, which prompted them to go on strike."

Workers accused the investor of deliberately causing losses to the plant, and refused an offer of three months of payments. They only ended the strike once the administration agreed to pay an amount corresponding to 11 months.

Thousands of Israeli workers strike against unemployment

Thousands of workers in three southern cities struck on May 17 in solidarity with Israel Chemicals workers facing layoffs, as well as to protest widespread unemployment in the Negev region.

According to the *Times of Israel*, "In Dimona, Arad and Yeruham, city services were shut down, and some schools were closed and businesses shuttered in solidarity."

Around 2,000 staged a demonstration in Dimona, chanting slogans and holding signs calling for government intervention. The protest briefly blocked Route 25, a main highway leading through the city.

According to reports, workers at two subsidiaries of Israel Chemicals—Dead Sea Works in Sodom and Bromine Compounds in Neot Hovav—are facing layoffs.

Union chairmen at both companies are pressing for agreements for voluntary retirement and early retirement for older workers instead of layoffs, *Haaretz* reported. Avi Nissenkorn, the head of the Histadrut union federation, met on Saturday night with Nir Gilad, chairman of the board of Israel Chemicals.

Ynet reported that the mayors of cities in the south of Israel warn that the plan to lay off workers at Israel Chemicals could have long-term implications for employment throughout the south, as Israel Chemicals is

a major employer in the Negev.

Dimona has an unemployment rate of 15 percent, according to *Yedioth Ahronoth*.

The Manufacturers Association of Israel, which tracks only members of the association, reports that over the last decade 25 factories were shut down in southern Israel, mainly in the textile industry.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced Sunday that he would establish a special ministerial committee to focus on resolving employment problems in the south of the country.

“Despite the government’s repeated promises to invest in the Negev and the Galilee, no government ministry—including the Ministry for the Development of the Negev and the Galilee—keeps track of the number of factories there that shut down and the resulting loss of jobs,” said *Ynet*. “The fate of one in every five households in Dimona is tightly linked to the ICL plants in the south. And with no end in sight to the strike at the ICL operations, and mass layoffs just around the corner at other plants, the 40,000 residents of the city clearly realize that barring any significant changes, they are heading for a very bleak future.”

Iranian workers continue strike on city train construction project

Industrial action by 600 Iranian workers on the Ahwaz city train construction project over unpaid wages has entered its fourth week.

On May 12, the Kison Company terminated another 60 of the tunnel-boring operators. On May 17, workers from other sections of the project resumed their strike in protest.

This is the fifth occasion in four years that workers on the project have stopped work to protest wages unpaid for anywhere between four and six months. According to *radiozamaneh.co*, “The company has periodically terminated groups of employees that have been more vocal in fighting for workers’ rights.”

Iranian mill workers continue strike

Around 1,000 workers from the Safa Pipe Rolling Mill in the city of Saveh, Iran, are continuing a three-week-old strike. They are demanding 16 months unpaid insurance premiums and four months’ wages.

According to reports, Safa Pipe Rolling Mill has been occupied by striking workers since May 12, following broken pledges by their employers and the refusal of the government to pay even one month of their unpaid salary.

On May 16, security agents arrested a workers’ representative at his home on the charge of inciting workers at the mill.

Turkish auto workers at major producers continue wage strike

Thousands of workers at the factories of major car producers Tofa? and Oyak Renault in western Turkey are continuing their strike over a wage dispute.

The strike began on May 14 in a plant in the northwestern city of Buras. Turkish carmaker Tofa?, owned by Italy’s Fiat, and local conglomerate Koç Holding announced May 18 they had halted production at a plant in Bursa. The factory is run by Oyak Renault, a joint venture between France’s Renault and the Turkish army pension fund Oyak.

Renault workers are demanding higher wages and say their grievances had been ignored for a month. They claim a similar factory had raised wages by 60 percent. The workers have resigned from the Metal Workers Trade Union of Turkey (Türk Metal). Türk Metal struck the agreement with Turkey’s Metal Industrialists Union (MESS) eight months ago.

An Oyak Renault representative told Reuters May 17 that the protest had reached a point where it posed “a serious danger” to the auto sector.

Hurriyet Daily News said, “Several auto parts companies joined the Tofa? and Oyak Renault workers in protest against their employers. Hundreds of workers from a leading equipment manufacturer in the city, Co?kunöz, have also been on strike, as well as workers from another auto parts maker, Mako.”

In a written statement May 18, Turkish Automotive Parts Industry Association (TAYSAD) head Mehmet Dudarolu said, “The spreading

strike in the automotive industry has put serious stress on almost all sector players. Unfortunately, we now see that several automotive parts producers have joined the strike wave...”

Tofa? CEO Cengiz Eroldu said he had met the striking workers on May 18 and asked them to return to work. He said, “We cannot make any change in the collective labour agreement, as it is valid until August 2017, but I’ll work to secure an additional financial contribution to you within one month.”

Together, the two automakers account for over 40 percent of Turkey’s annual car output. Around 80 percent of their production is for export markets.

Africa

South African call centre workers demonstrate and strike

Workers at the MTN call centre in Fairland, Johannesburg, South Africa went on strike Wednesday. A demonstration of hundreds took place outside the company headquarters demanding a 10 percent wage increase, an improved bonus payment and full-time employment for agency workers.

There was a heavy police presence at the demonstration.

The Communications Workers Union (CWU) is also demanding premium payments for working holidays and weekends. The CWU has called for a 16 percent bonus increase. The company is offering 4 percent, while remunerating the company CEO with a bonus payment of R2.8 million (US\$235,422).

Striking South African building worker killed

Over a hundred building workers travelled to picket a worksite at Kraaifontein in the Scottsdene area of Cape Town, South Africa on May 14.

Employed by Good Hope Construction, they have been on strike for five weeks. Their demands are for layoffs to go through procedure, provision of protective clothing, R1.4 million of pension contribution to be paid to the relevant authority and the end of using gangsters as security guards.

Violence was used by gangster guards against them, leaving one worker dead from a knife in the back. A spokesman from the National Union of Mineworkers, representing the 170 striking builders, said the gangsters were being used by the company to intimidate them.

Nigeria Abuja state workers strike

Abuja State workers are on strike over unpaid wages, allowances and other gratuities. The action was called by the Nigeria Labour Congress.

As a result of the strike by the Plateau Environmental Protection and Sanitation Agency (PEPSA), responsible for street cleaning and waste disposal, rubbish piles are building up around the state.

SA Power Company removes workers from hostels

Eskom, South Africa’s power generating company responsible for rebuilding the Medupi power station after it collapsed through lack of maintenance, has rebuffed an appeal by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA).

An eight-week strike by 5,000 power workers was deemed illegal by a court ruling and the workers forced back to work. NUMSA’s appeal was against a court ruling supporting Eskom’s removal of workers from their hostel accommodation. The interdict is also against workers returning to their accommodation.

NUMSA was held responsible for Eskom’s court costs.

The power station will become the world’s fourth largest coal-fired power plant, and the largest dry-cooled power station of its kind.

Teachers strike in Uganda

Ugandan teachers struck nationwide on May 18, demanding payment of

an outstanding 10 percent pay increase. The strike coincided with the beginning of the second school term.

The Uganda National Teachers' Union, an umbrella body of teachers groups, accused the government of reneging on its promises

Zimbabwe council workers resume strike

Gweru City council workers in Zimbabwe resumed their strike on May 15 after promises to pay outstanding salaries were not honoured.

Workers suspended their two-week strike after assurances were given they would be paid February and last month's salaries by May 14. The representative of the workers' committee said they would not return until wages are paid for the agreed dates.



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