Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

29 May 2015

France: Eiffel Tower closes as staff strike over pickpockets

On May 22, the Eiffel Tower—the world's most visited monument—was shut down for six hours when the tower's workers went on strike to protest against the lack of protection for visitors and staff from pickpockets.

A temporary agreement was later reached, involving extra private security and more patrols in the area by the Paris police, to keep the monument open through the long weekend.

Around 80 workers are employed on the Eiffel Tower, welcoming tourists, selling tickets or cleaning the monument itself. Workers say the gangs are threatening them with assault or abuse. Stéphane Dieu, a spokesman for the CGT union, told reporters that pickpocketing incidents had increased recently.

According to reports, groups of pickpockets purchase tickets to go up the tower and stalk tourists on the first, second and third levels.

UK: Downing Street garden staff in pay strike

Staff at several of London's most famous parks and gardens including those at No 10 Downing Street, the official residence of the prime minister, and Hyde Park, Kensington Gardens, St James's Park, Green Park and Grosvenor Square are protesting against a move from weekly to monthly pay and to demand the official London Living Wage.

The plans to pay garden workers monthly rather than weekly would mean their employer, OCS, according to the GMB union, withholds two weeks' pay which staff would only get back when they leave.

Gary Carter, GMB regional officer, said, "OCS will offer the two weeks as a loan that they will deduct over 12 months, putting the employees into debt and wiping out any pay award. OCS will save thousands to the detriment of the employees who will be out-of-pocket."

UK: Steel workers balloted for strike over pension changes

North-East steel workers are being balloted on possible industrial action over changes by Tata Steel to the British Steel Pension Scheme (BSPS).

Tata Steel plans to close the existing pension scheme in April next year.

The National Trade Union Steel Co-ordinating Committee (NTUS) has urged a walk out, branding the consultation process attached to Tata Steel's pension proposals a "sham." If industrial action does go ahead, it will be the first national dispute to take place in more than 30 years.

The BSPS had 143,000 members as of late last year, with assets of around £13.6 billion.

Tata has warned its pension fund was facing a major shortfall, and has proposed various changes, including the removal of early retirement enhancements, which could force employees to work until they are 65.

Unions Community, GMB and Ucatt have all sent out ballot papers to members over a potential strike and ballots are due to end today.

The Unite union's result will close on June 5.

UK: Newsquest journalists balloted on job cuts and closures

Reporters at Newsquest are being balloted by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) in response to company plans to restructure and cut staff across its South London newspaper titles.

Newsquest is the third-largest regional newspaper publisher in the UK with around 300 newspapers, magazines and trade publications, including 17 daily publications.

The newspaper titles affected by the proposed cuts include: the *Croydon Guardian, Sutton Guardian, Epsom Guardian, Wimbledon Guardian, Wandsworth Guardian, Balham and Tooting Guardian, Mitcham and Morden Guardian, Kingston Guardian, Surrey Comet, Elmbridge Comet,* and the *Richmond & Twickenham Times.*

UK maintenance staff strike over 'faulty' tracking system

Some 300 maintenance staff, employed by the Finnish company Kone, operating service lifts, doors and escalators across the UK, including at Gatwick and Heathrow airports, are to strike until June 9.

The dispute is over the tracker system, known as VAMS, which is considered an unreliable method for measuring workloads.

Workers voted by 81 percent for strike action and by 91 percent for industrial action short of a strike. The main Kone sites are at Chertsey in Surrey, Gateshead, Glasgow, Keighley in Yorkshire and Warrington.

On Tuesday a 24-hour stoppage of driver engineers, who work the 12 hour, four days on, four days off shifts, was held. There is already a ban on overtime, a night call ban and an on-call ban in force since March 27.

UK probation workers to strike over pay

Workers employed in probation work in England and Wales are to stage a 24-hour stoppage on June 11, after employers failed to improve their

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zero percent pay offer.

The 24-hour strike will be followed by five weeks of action short of a strike from June 12. A ballot closed Wednesday with 73 percent of members voting yes for industrial action and 88 percent for action short of a strike.

Hungary protest against attack on higher education

Around 200 demonstrators gathered in Blaha Lujza Square and marched across central Budapest to the Human Resources Ministry near the parliament to demand the annulment of the higher-education law and the restoration of the school-leaving age to 18 years.

They also demanded a separate education ministry.

The *Budapest Beacon* said the "We won't give over the future!" demonstration was jointly organized by the Teachers Democratic Trade Union (PDSZ) and civil umbrella organization Human Platform.

Frequently mentioned was the fact that most teachers must live on HUF 69,000 (US$250) a month. Among other things, PDSZ is demanding immediate wage increases, a stop to school closures, and the restoration of the autonomy of universities.

Portuguese transport workers strike against privatization

Lisbon subway staff walked off the job for the 43rd time in four years against the government's privatization plans for public transport.

The Associated Press reported that workers at the Lisbon bus company Carris and national railroad company Comboios de Portugal, both state-owned, have staged dozens of strikes since Portugal imposed austerity measures to pay for a 78 billion euro ($85 billion) bailout in 2011.

Many workers expect to lose their entitlements and benefits under private management.

Ukraine: Thousands protest price hikes of rightist government

Protests are mounting against decisions by the NATO-backed regime in Kiev to drastically increase prices for energy, water, and other basic necessities. Protesters reportedly set up a mock gallows near government buildings in downtown Kiev last weekend.

The right-wing government in Kiev is slashing spending on subsidies to basic goods to funnel the money to the Ukrainian regime's international creditors and to boost military spending on the war against Russian-backed forces in east Ukraine. Consumer prices for basic necessities are skyrocketing.

On May 1, hot and cold water prices rose by 71 percent. A month before, natural gas prices had increased by 285 percent, passing from just over 1,000 hryvnia (US$48.20) to over 4,000 hryvnia per thousand cubic meters of gas.

On May 16, a 5,000-strong march took place in Kiev to protest the price hikes.

Turkey: Auto workers' dispute continues

Reuters reported Tuesday, "The Turkish unit of Ford Motor Co has suspended operations at one of its plants after a week-long labour dispute flared up again just days after the company resumed production at another Turkey plant."

In a statement issued Monday, Ford Otosan said it had stopped production at the Inonu Plant as a precautionary measure after some of the striking workers refused to leave the plant.

The dispute over working conditions and pay started late last week at factories in the northwest city of Bursa and spread to a number of parts suppliers in the area, where Turkey's auto industry is centred.

Workers said the dispute was sparked after union Turk Metal last month negotiated a 60 percent wage hike for workers at a plant run by parts-maker Bosch Fren, but failed to secure a similar deal elsewhere.

A strike by Renault workers in the western Turkish province of Bursa has reached two weeks as the company administration refuse to compromise on a wage increase demand.

Libya: Air transport strike forces flight cancellations

The *Libya Herald* reported Tuesday: "In a rare if awkward sign that Libya is not completely split into two, airport handlers and airline caterers have gone on strike across the country, forcing delays and cancellations at Tripoli's Mitiga and Misrata airports as well as at Labrak."

Workers in the General Union of Air Transport Workers (GUAT), along with staff at the Libyan Company for Ground Handling and the Libyan Company for Air Catering, say they have not been paid for two months and announced over a week ago that they would go on strike on May 25 if they were not paid.

Tunisia: 3-day public hospital strike

Staff in all public hospitals in Tunisia took part in a three-day strike this week.

A health ministry official said it had failed to reach an agreement with the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) to postpone the action. UGTT called for the strike in protest at the government's "negligence" over previous agreements on employees' rights.

Kenya nurses suspended for go-slow

Fifty-one nurses have been suspended at the Pumwani Maternity hospital, in Nairobi, Kenya for mounting a go-slow.

Out of 186 nurses at the hospital, the action by the 51 has been deemed illegal by the Health Executive (HE). Benard Muia of the HE, representing Pumwani and the largest maternity hospital in Nigeria, said their punishment would be dismissal.

The Kenya National Union of Nurses described the hospital as a "slaughterhouse."

Nigeria government employees strike for outstanding wages

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Government employees went on strike at Cross Rivers State, Tuesday demanding payment of outstanding wages.

The Joint Action Council (JAC) of the Labour Congress and Trades Union Council called out the civil servants after promises to pay wages were broken. The unpaid wages were committed to be paid before the Goodluck Jonathan administration was to leave office.

Industrial action is also taking place in Osun State, Nigeria, over six months of outstanding wages. Workers were demanding payment of deductions for their contributory pension scheme and payment of pensions and gratuities. A spokesman for the state said that they would be paid as soon as the economy improves.

Nigeria school teachers strike

Schools were closed as teachers took industrial action Monday in the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria. Teachers were demanding implementation of promotions, a 100 percent housing allowance and 27.5 teaching allowance.

Although the FCT Secondary Education Board promoted 689 teachers at the beginning of the strike, they said only “deserving” teachers would now be promoted. The FCT board’s response to wages and allowances was to redirect their housing claims and the salary increases to the Salaries and Wages Commission.

South Africa call centre workers in pay strike

Communications union members continued their strike at the South African call centre company MTN in Fairland.

Different forms of industrial action have taken place since March. The Communication Workers Union (CWU) reduced their pay demand from 10 percent to 8 percent, and a bonus claim from 16 percent to 12.

Other issues such as premium rates for weekend and holiday periods and full time employment for agency workers were initially rejected. The company demanded workers earn their increases by achieving set targets. It wants a settlement imposed by arbitration, but the CWU wants mediation so it says it can continue to use its action to influence the outcome.

The company said the issue of premium pay would be looked at in relation to the employment act and offered an 8 percent bonus, up from 4 percent. MTN said it was going to check if the union had the 30 percent subscribers so as to qualify to represent the workforce.

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