

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

19 June 2015

## Europe

### Strike by French oil refinery staff

Some 20 employees at Total oil company's La Mede refinery near Marseille, France were on strike last weekend. They were responding to a call by the CGT trade union for an unlimited strike. The CGT called the action in response to Total's plans to cease the processing of crude oil at the La Mede refinery.

This led to the company closing down its crude oil processing operation. Total restarted production on Monday. According to the firm, the majority of its 430 employees did not join the strike.

Currently the facility refines 153,000 barrels a day.

### Walkout by Norwegian rail staff

Rail staff working for state-owned Norwegian Railways (NSB) walked out for three hours on Monday between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. local time.

The stoppage led to the cancellation of passenger and freight train services, including the Flytoget express service to Oslo's main airport.

The government is seeking to break up the NSB monopoly by creating separate companies able to compete on stretches of the network currently considered economically unviable.

### Icelandic parliament orders striking nurses back to work

On Sunday Iceland's parliament passed legislation ordering striking nurses to return to work. It instructed the nurses' representatives and management to begin negotiations to settle the dispute, giving a deadline of July 1.

The nurses, seeking improved pay and conditions, are members of the Icelandic Association of Nurses (FIH). The strike began on May 27.

If no agreement is reached, the dispute will be referred to an arbitration committee. The Icelandic Association of Academics (BHM), which includes vets, radiologists and midwives, began their strike in pursuit of a pay increase in April.

The FIH and BHM are both considering legal action in response to the strike ban.

Some nurses resigned from their jobs in response. More than 40 nurses at the National University Hospital of Iceland quit on Monday. This follows 21 radiologists at the same hospital who resigned in May in protest at low pay and poor conditions. Many Icelandic health care staff are leaving Iceland and taking up similar work in other Nordic countries.

### Ballot of London Underground staff

Beginning this week members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union working for London Underground are being balloted for

possible strike action.

Among the issues being balloted on are demands for an above-inflation pay claim, a safe and fully staffed underground service at all times, a shorter workweek and against the ongoing threat to station staff jobs through such means as lone working and the loss of safety-critical jobs.

Voting closes on June 30.

### Protest by Bulgarian interior ministry officers against pension changes

Interior ministry officers, including firemen as well as border police and prison guards, held a two-day protest in the Bulgarian capital Sofia beginning June 12.

They were opposing pension reforms, which would increase employee contributions and raise the retirement age. They are members of the National Trade Union of Firemen and Rescuers.

On Saturday, around 1,000 protesters held a rally in a park in front of the Interior Ministry offices.

### Air Malta staff oppose cost-cutting measures

Part-time air cabin crew are opposing plans by Air Malta chair Maria Micallef to outsource jobs to a company called Inspectra.

Under the plan, pay will be cut from its current €11 per hour to €6.70 an hour. Members of the Union of Cabin Crew protested the planned transfer and lobbied Tourism Minister Edward Zammit Lewis. Micallef wanted to outsource the part-time workers as part of a €230 million restructuring plan.

Following the lobby of Lewis, Micallef shelved the planned restructure. The jobs of part-time staff at Air Malta have been renewed until September.

Air Malta is considering a strategic partnership with Turkish Airlines.

### Rally of Ukrainian workers against cuts

On Tuesday, hundreds of Ukrainian workers rallied outside the Rada (parliament building) in Kiev. They demanded the re-indexation of salaries and pensions.

Representatives of five trade union organizations handed in an ultimatum to the parliament, demanding the halving of gas prices, a programme of job creation and the re-indexation of the wages of public sector workers, student bursaries and pensions.

Free Trades Unions Confederation chairman Mykhailo Volynets said if the government did not respond favourably the unions would call a national strike.

## Middle East

### **Protester killed at Iranian mine demonstration**

A protester, Mohammadali Mirzai, part of a crowd of more than 350 workers opposing the closure of a coalmine near the city of Zarand in Kerman province, was killed when police fired tear gas into the crowd.

Mirzai was temporarily blinded by the gas and fell into the path of a coal trailer trying to force its way through the protesters.

The mine closed three months ago. The protesters are demanding it be re-opened or that they are put on employment insurance. The company argues that as contract workers they are not due unemployment insurance.

### **Hunger strike by West Bank municipal workers**

Thirteen employees of the Jenin municipality began an open-ended hunger strike last Saturday. They were protesting against poor working conditions and deductions from their pay.

The 13 are among more than 400 workers who have been involved in a partial strike over the last few weeks.

## **Africa**

### **Strike by South African mobile phone workers**

On June 12, MTN, the South African cell phone service provider, imposed an interdict on strikers. The ruling prevents strikers from coming within a 100-metre radius of the company premises.

The interdict is based on the company's accusation that the strikers are intimidating workers who have returned to work.

Communications Workers Union (CWU) members have been on strike for a month and are demanding a 10 percent wage increase, improved bonus payment and full-time employment for agency workers. The CWU is also demanding premium payments for working holidays and weekends.

### **South African public sector staff may vote to strike**

South African public-sector unions have walked away from a pay agreement with the government. Trade unions representing the workers claim it entails an illegal deduction from an already agreed pay rate.

The unions started wage talks eight months ago when they put in a claim for a 15 percent pay rise. This was whittled down to 7 percent.

With the agreement seemingly settled, the government arbitrarily reduced the pay rise from 7 to 6.4 percent. The government imposed the 0.6 percent decrease on the basis that public-sector workers were given a 0.6 percent overpayment in their 2012 settlement, based on the consumer price index.

The unions are threatening to call a strike vote.

### **South African Power Company labels strikers as traitors**

Eskom, the South African power generating company, labelled construction workers who are continuing strike at the Medupi plant as traitors.

The strike started March 25 over complaints of conditions at the workers' hostels, a living-out allowance and a completion bonus. The company said the workers are continuing what they claim to be an illegal strike and are harassing those that have returned to work.

An anonymous bomb scare halted production at the plant on Sunday. The following day two Medupi workers were shot and wounded.

### **Nigerian judicial staff continue strike**

Nigerian judicial workers in Edo state are continuing their five-month strike despite the threat of dismissal by the State Judicial Service Commission. They are demanding autonomy from state government financing, which was granted by the Federal High Court in June last year.

They are also calling for payment of outstanding salary arrears for the months of July 2014 and January 2015. The State Judicial Services Commission previously demanded the employees return to work June 10, otherwise they should consider themselves dismissed.

### **Strike threat at Nigerian university**

Non-academic workers at Abadan University, Nigeria have warned management to resolve all outstanding matters or they will strike in the next two weeks.

The Joint Union of Non Academic Staff, encompassing three trade unions, says the decision was made because of the insincerity of the management. The issues include the nonpayment of earned allowances since 2009, which were promised by management as part of the process of privatizing the university staff school and a career structure.

### **Madagascar miner commits suicide in response to mine closure**

One miner committed suicide and another attempted to do so last week in response to the announcement by Canadian multinational Sherritt to cut 1,100 jobs at its Ambatovy nickel mine in Madagascar.

Workers turning up at the mine June 5 were told they had lost their jobs. Some were stripped of their work clothes and had to walk home barefooted. The international company is downscaling its operations worldwide by 12 percent, but the Ambatovy mine was said to be exempted.

Although workers had taken home loans on the idea of having secure employment, they were given just one month redundancy.

Trade unions at the plant claim the redundancies are the company's response to previous strikes over unfair dismissals and equality of pay. They have rejected further strike action, saying they need to calm the situation in fear of a social explosion.

### **Strike of lecturers at University of Zambia**

University lecturers at the University of Zambia are on strike demanding their employer implement their contract. They are refusing to return to work to assess final examinations running from June 22 to July 14 unless their demands are met.



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