

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

10 July 2015

UK capital hit by underground rail strike

Around 20,000 staff employed on the London Underground rail system (the Tube) began a 24-hour strike early evening on Wednesday. The majority of the staff are represented by the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union. They were joined by Tube workers in Aslef, Unite and the TSSA unions who began their strike later the same evening.

The strike took place after negotiation between the unions and London Underground (LU) broke down Tuesday. Ballots held earlier over the proposed action returned votes in favour of strike action with around 90 percent majorities and high turnouts.

The dispute is centred on plans to introduce all-night tube services on Fridays and Saturdays on five of the LU's lines. The service is due to begin in September. The unions are seeking improved pay and conditions for those operating the service. LU has offered a two percent average pay increase plus a £2,000 one-off bonus to be only paid to drivers. This is an attempt to divide the workforce, as it would only benefit around 1,000 staff.

Walkout by UK rail staff working for First Great Western

Rail staff, members of the RMT, employed by First Great Western (FGW) began a 48-hour strike 6:30 p.m. Wednesday. FGW serves the western region of the UK, running services between London and South Wales and to cities such as Bristol. A ballot at the end of June returned an 80 percent majority in favour of strike action.

FGW staff are concerned over plans by the company to run Hitachi "bullet trains" on the network from 2017. Their concerns centre on the safety issues and job losses. Under current proposals to use the Hitachi trains, the carriage doors would be operated by the driver rather than by the guard under current arrangements. There are also concerns that maintenance of the new rolling stock would be outsourced and buffet cars would supersede the current trolley service. The 48-hour strike is set to be followed by an overtime ban.

UK criminal defence lawyers work to rule

From the beginning of July, criminal defence solicitors in England and Wales have refused to carry out legal aid work. This is a means-tested subsidy payable to those on low incomes.

The action is in response to Justice Secretary Michael Gove's decision to impose further cuts in legal aid. Previous action by solicitors led to a

postponement to additional cuts in legal aid until October, but Gove has now overridden this.

Legal aid has long been under assault by Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour governments alike. Barristers are being balloted with a view to boycotting legal aid work, which would bring Crown Courts to a halt.

German union calls off post strike

Verdi, the union representing postal workers, has called off its strike which began in April in opposition to Deutsche Post-DHL's plans to create regional companies paying employees at a lower rate. The proposals will go ahead, but the company's plans to do the same in the letter delivery service will be delayed until the end of 2018.

The company also agreed to no job cuts until the end of 2019, offered permanent posts to 4,500 staff on temporary two year contracts and a small wage increase to cover the next three years. Around 30,000 of Deutsche Post-DHL's workforce of 140,000 were called out on strike.

German Lufthansa pilots announce further strikes

Talks between Cockpit, the union representing Lufthansa pilots, and the company broke down Monday.

The dispute revolves around plans to end the right of pilots to retire at 55 years of age and draw their full employer-funded pension. The company wants to raise the retirement age to 60. To date, the more than 5,000 Lufthansa pilots have taken part in 13 separate strikes over the issue. Cockpit has not yet announced a date for a further strike.

Protest by Hungarian health workers

Thousands of Hungarian health care workers held a protest near the parliament building in Budapest at the end of last week. They were demanding higher pay. Several hundred professional nurses signed a petition declaring they would quit their jobs unless they receive a substantial pay rise before September 30.

Swedish unions to join Ryanair action

Swedish trade unions Seko and ST have announced they will take action alongside the Danish airline workers' unions Flight Personnel Union (FPU) and the Services Union when they strike on July 18 against Ryanair.

The Danish unions are taking action as part of a long-running effort to reach a collective agreement with Ryanair. The Irish low-cost airline has so far refused to enter into negotiations with the Danish unions.

The sympathy strike by Swedish unions would mean airport staff refusing to load and unload baggage from any Ryanair flights diverted to Swedish airports from Copenhagen and Billund.

Irish brewery workers to strike

Employees of Bulmers brewery in the Southern Irish town of Clonmel have voted to come out on strike on July 15. They are members of the Unite union. They voted unanimously to strike in opposition to Bulmers' decision to renege on a 2009 collective agreement on redundancy terms.

General strike call by Israeli trade union federation

The Israeli trade union federation Histadrut has called for a general strike to begin July 22 over contract workers.

Speaking out on Tuesday, the head of Histadrut, Avi Nissenkorn, condemned the widespread use of contract staff in professions such as teaching and social work. Teachers on contracts are paid for only 10 months out of the year. He went on to call for permanent employment status for professions such as social work. He reported that two-thirds of pre-medical staff working at the Tel Hasomer hospital are on temporary contracts.

If it goes ahead, the general strike would hit bodies such as the Tax Authority, Airport Authority, National Insurance Institute, local councils, port authorities and private companies unionised through Histadrut.

Teargas used to end sit-in by unemployed youth in Tunisia

Last Sunday, police using teargas broke up a sit-in of unemployed youth in an industrial zone in the coastal Tunisian city of Gabes. The sit-in, which began May 31, was to protest youth unemployment. The sit-in blocked the railway line used by the Tunisian Chemical Group to transport phosphate from its production units. The blockade led to the complete cessation of phosphate production.

South African logistics strikers shot

Four striking logistic drivers have been shot as they slept in their vehicles. Two died of their wounds and the other two have been admitted to hospital. They were shot in the early hours of Monday morning. The unidentified gunmen drove off.

The four had been part of a group of 20 drivers currently on strike and mounting a picket outside Willowton Logistics office in the city of

Pietermaritzburg in KwaZulu-Natal province. The strike and picket have been going on for the last month.

Police took 15 minutes to respond to the attack, even though the drivers had parked their vehicles within 20 metres of the police station in the vain hope this would offer them some protection.

Witnesses to the shooting described it as "an organised hit." Willowton Logistics runs one of the largest freightliner fleets in South Africa and delivers goods throughout the country as well as to neighbouring countries.

The striking drivers are seeking to set up their own union. The company has refused to recognise the union, saying working conditions and employee salaries are regulated through the Transport Bargaining Council to which it belongs.

South African chemical workers seek pay increase

Chemical workers in three unions have rejected the single-digit pay increase offer made by the National Bargaining Council for the Chemical Industries (NBCCI). After an initial four percent offer the NBCCI increased it to six percent. The union have a mandate from their members for a minimum R6,000 a month salary.

The three unions have organised in a labour caucus and are seeking to bargain collectively for all the union members.

Kenyan port authority evicts strike leaders

Last week, around 5,000 dock workers in the Port of Mombasa went on strike over the introduction of a new National Hospital Insurance Fund (NHIF) deduction from wages and other issues. According to the Kenyan Port Authority (KPA), the two-day strike led to a backlog of 2,500 containers and cost millions in revenues losses.

Following the strike, the KPA dismissed 28 port workers including Dock Workers Union (DWU) steward, Yakub Mohamed, who they accused of instigating the action. The KPA then attempted to evict the 28 workers from the housing units it controls. The attempted eviction was led by a KPA official along with a goon squad. When the attempted eviction was resisted by the dock workers, police were called out to complete the process.

The eviction was overturned by an Employment and Labour Relations Court hearing in Mombasa on Tuesday which ruled the 28 employees must be reinstated in their accommodation pending a hearing of their case against dismissal.

National oil strike threat in Nigeria

The Nigeria Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas workers (NUPENG), this week, threatened a national strike over issues at oil producer Chevron.

The issues include the reinstatement of sacked Chevron Chapter NUPENG chairman, Shabi Dada. Temporary contract workers employed by Chevron have also been on strike for two weeks over their terms and conditions.

Until 2012, contract staff employed by Chevron came under a collective bargaining agreement signed with the union. Three years ago the company

unilaterally ripped up the agreement. The union is now seeking to negotiate a new one covering the employment of contract workers.

Nigerian state staff in Osun vow to fight pay cut

Government workers in Osun state have vowed to oppose last week's announcement by the local authority that it intends to reduce by half the salaries of political office holders as part of an austerity drive.

Protest of Liberian Ebola staff

Last week, around 100 staff picketed the Ministry of Health building in the Liberian capital Monrovia. They were protesting the non-payment of a promised \$5,000 each hazard payment for health staff working with Ebola patients. They said they would return the next day if their demands were not met.

Liberia bore the brunt of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, with nearly 5,000 deaths. The country was declared Ebola free in May, but since the declaration there has been a further two cases declared.

Strike of Namibian salt producers

Around 160 salt processing workers employed by the Walvis Bay Salt Holdings (WBSH) company came out on strike Monday. They are members of the Mineworkers Union of Namibia, (MUN).

MUN accuses the company of salary grade discrimination leading to big pay packages for an elite while the majority suffer low pay. The company responded by saying some of the pay discrepancy arose from some employees being redeployed to lower ranking positions on protected salaries and that this had been done with the union's agreement.

Other grievances include the reduction of leave allowance by five days, changing shift hours to inconvenience staff and capping medical aid benefit payments.

WBSH and its subsidiaries is one of the largest solar sea salt producers in sub-Saharan Africa. It exports its salt to other countries in Africa as well as Europe.

Call by Zambian rail union to resolve TAZARA rail crisis

The president of the Crews and Allied Workers Union of Zambia, Bevis Silumber, has called on the Zambian authorities to replace the Zambia management board of the Zambia-Tanzania TAZARA railway to resolve the issues facing workers on the Zambian section of the rail line. The Zambian employees are on strike and the whole Zambian leg of the system is paralysed. They are demanding the payment of five months' salary.

Staff on the Tanzanian leg of the rail line recently had the money for salary arrears released by the government and the backlog of owed wages has been distributed.



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