

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

27 May 2016

Europe

The action could widen as university and college support staff organised by the Unite and Unison unions are currently being balloted on the 1.1 percent pay offer. Both unions are recommending rejection.

Strike of bus drivers in northwest England

On Tuesday, 700 bus drivers working for First Manchester bus company walked out on a one-day strike. First Manchester covers the Greater Manchester area and the strike affected the city along with areas such as Salford, Oldham and Rochdale.

The drivers, members of the Unite union, are in dispute with the company over changes to conditions and bargaining procedures.

Further strike by UK business department office in Sheffield

Staff working for the UK government Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) in Sheffield came out on a two-day strike Wednesday. They are members of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS).

They are opposing plans by the government to close the Sheffield BIS office, which employs around 250 people, and to relocate it to London. The government says this is being done as part of cost-cutting measures.

BIS staff held a 24-hour walkout last week over the same issue.

UK university and college staff hold two-day strike

University and college lecturers in the UK held a two-day strike beginning Tuesday. They are members of the University and College Union (UCU). On returning to work they will work to rule, refuse to cover for absent colleagues and not do overtime. Rallies of striking lecturers were held in several cities, including London, Manchester, Glasgow and Belfast.

UCU members voted by a near two-thirds majority to strike which is over a 1.1 percent pay offer made by their employers. UCU had been seeking a 5 percent pay rise. The employers came back with a 1 percent offer, which has now been increased to 1.1 percent as a final offer. According to UCU, their members have had a real terms pay cut of 14 percent since 2009.

UCU has said it will hold further strikes in June and July and is considering refusing to cooperate with the university clearing process in August, when A-level students receive university place offers, if an improved offer is not made by the employers.

Strike vote by UK airline cabin crew

Cabin crew working for Thomas Cook Airlines, members of the Unite union, have voted by a three-quarters majority for strike action. The vote follows the airline's reduction of break periods to one of 20 minutes for every 11 hours and 59 minutes worked. The union is saying there should be a minimum of two such breaks over that period.

The union held talks with the government conciliation service ACAS this week, with plans for further talks next week.

Greek port workers strike against privatization

Port workers in Greece began a 48-hour strike Thursday to protest plans by the Syriza-led government to privatize two main ports in Piraeus and Thessaloniki. The privatization plans are part of the stipulations of the bailout of Greece by the EC and IMF.

The Chinese company China Cosco Shipping has put in a bid for a majority stake in the port of Piraeus. Further 48-hour strikes, part of a rolling programme, are likely to be proposed following the end of the current 48-hour strike today.

Irish supermarket staff begin indefinite strike

Staff working for the multinational supermarket chain Tesco began an indefinite strike Thursday. The union Mandate represents around 12,000 of the 14,500 staff employed by Tesco in Ireland. Around 70 stores were affected by the action.

The strike was called over Tesco's plans to attack the terms of working for around 300 staff employed by the company prior to 1996. Staff appointed after that date were taken on with less favourable contract terms. Tesco is seeking cuts in pay of between 15 and 35 percent, cuts to rates for Sunday and unsociable hours working, reduction in the annual bonus and other changes.

Irish construction workers end strike over sacked builders reinstated

Around 300 building workers employed at the Poolbeg incinerator site in Dublin walked off site on Tuesday following the dismissal of three men on Friday. There had been complaints of migrant workers being paid at a lesser rate than Irish-born employees. The dispute was resolved following the intervention of the Unite union. The company agreed to reinstate the three who had been dismissed.

Municipal staff in Italian capital Rome hold one-day strike

Around 24,000 municipal workers in Rome held a one-day strike Wednesday. They are represented by the CGIL, CISL and UIL unions and are calling for the renewal of their contracts and the renegotiation of a 20 percent pay cut imposed by a former mayor of the city.

Those on strike included kindergarten teachers, administrative workers and traffic police. Tourist sites were affected when they closed early. A demonstration was held which lobbied Rome Commissioner Francesco Paolo Tronca to push their demands.

Striking Norwegian hotel staff return to work

Hotel and restaurant workers ended their month-long strike last weekend. Their union, Fellesforbundet, claimed victory after employers agreed to negotiate at a local level with the union and low paid staff were given a pay rise. Around 8,000 hotel and restaurant staff had been involved in the dispute.

Striking Portuguese dockers clash with police

Striking dockers in Lisbon clashed with police Tuesday as they tried to prevent port operators moving containers that have been held up by their strike.

The strike, which began on May 12, is scheduled to end today but the SETC union is pushing for the action to continue until June 16. A demonstration of dockworkers has been arranged for that date.

The strike is to put pressure on the employer in negotiations over a new collective bargaining agreement.

Train staff in Spanish capital Madrid hold partial strikes

Staff working on the Madrid Metro held a series of two-and-a-half-hour strikes over the weekend and on Monday. They were organised by the six unions representing Metro staff seeking a new negotiated contract and to oppose plans by management to attack working conditions prior to privatizing the service.

Turkish miners hold underground sit-in and hunger strike

Coal miners at a pit in the Black Sea area of Turkey have begun an underground sit-in and hunger strike to protest wage arrears. Around 240 miners at the pit have not received wages since the beginning of the year.

Prior to the sit-in, some miners had demonstrated on May 11 when they climbed onto the roof of a business centre and appealed to the governor's office to get their back wages paid.

Middle East

Protest by Egyptian teachers

Teachers demonstrated outside the Egyptian Ministry of Education Sunday, protesting the long distances they have to travel to reach their workplace. They were demanding to be transferred to work within the governorate in which they live. Currently they have to travel to neighbouring governorates, spending many hours travelling, and the travel costs are eating into their salaries.

One protesting teacher told the *Daily News Egypt*, "Some of us have to travel for more than 15 hours and the majority of our salaries are spent on transportation."

Striking Israeli driving test examiners return to work

Striking Israeli driving test examiners working for the Ministry of Transportation have returned to work after a 10-week strike, following the ruling of a labour court in Jerusalem. The strike was over plans to privatize the service. The ruling called on the Ministry to halt its privatization plans and reopen negotiations with the driving examiners' union. The ruling will be in force for 90 days to allow further negotiations to take place.

Kuwaiti oil workers receive pay increase

It was announced this week that Kuwaiti oil workers who held a three-day strike in April have been given a 7.5 percent pay rise. Newly appointed workers will get a 5 percent pay increase. They will also be entitled to an annual pay rise. Oil production fell by 60 percent as a result of the strike.

Moroccan steel workers attacked by police

Moroccan steel workers, employed at the Maghreb Steel Company, were violently attacked by police as they protested against sackings on May 12 and 17. Six hundred thirty workers demonstrated outside the bank that bailed the company out, demanding the reinstatement of their colleagues sacked for previous industrial action.

Workers had gone on strike in 2015 for a pay increase, but the steel company refused to recognise the union. Maghreb Steel eventually agreed

to accept the right of workers to be represented by the Maghreb Steel Union (MSU) but then went back on the agreement. After the company sacked several members representing the MSU, workers continued their strike and have been on out for five months.

Africa

Broadcasting workers strike in Nigeria

Radio broadcasting workers employed at the Bayelsa state radio station Nigeria have gone on strike over unpaid wages. They are striking alongside civil servants, who are demanding over four months of unpaid wages.

Attempts to close down the broadcaster by the strikers were obstructed by the Commissioner of Information and armed police. Although workers had to take cover from the police while senior management manned the station, the broadcaster was only able to air music.

Nigerian civil servants sent back to work on half pay

A strike by Nigerian civil servants in Bayelsa state, which began last week over unpaid wages, continued into this week. The Nigerian Labour Congress advised workers to stay away from work until negotiations were resumed.

Pickets at the state government complex were shadowed by a large contingency of the Joint Military Task Force, Operation Pluto Shield, and mobile police. Striking workers turned away a small number of strike-breakers. A no-work-no-pay rule has been threatened by the state governor.

According to a recent report, the strike was suspended after an agreement with the NLC, the TUC and the state government. Wages will be paid at half the agreed rate backdated to February this year, “until the economic conditions of the state improves.”

A proposal to make a 50 percent payment had been made by the state prior to the strike and rejected by the NLC. It is unclear whether the civil service workers have agreed to the union’s settlement.

Nigerian labour leaders undermine strike

The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) has called for workers to strike to oppose the lifting of subsidies on fuel prices. Police commissioners threatened arrest and legal action against labour leaders who advised workers and traders to stay at home to protest against the fuel price increase. The NLC sent pickets out to enforce the strike, while calling on civic society to stay at home as a part of their “total enforcement” of the strike.

Members of the Trade Union Congress opposed the strike and worked to make sure some state administrations stayed open. The leadership of the National Association of Nigerian Students openly agreed with the fuel price increases.

Workers in federal and state industries, such as university staff, civil servants teachers and nurses responded to the strike call. But even in these walkouts, conflicts broke out among employees. The situation was exacerbated when the NLC backtracked on their call for the total

enforcement of the strike after threats by police to arrest them.

South African miners pay for mining disaster

Miners have been coerced to accept very poor “voluntary” redundancy payments following a mining disaster. Three miners were trapped in the Lily gold mine after an earth collapse on February 5. A sinkhole the size of a football pitch opened up, swallowing up the three miners who were in a site hut at the head of the pit. Another 87 miners were brought out of the mine safely.

The collapse forced the company to suspend mining operations and the miners’ jobs were terminated. The miners rejected the deal and mounted a mass picket at the mine, which is owned by Vantage Gold Mines.

A further mineshaft collapse took place at Rustenburg’s, Impala Platinum mine May 17, involving nine rock drill operators. Seven were rescued, but two are still missing. Four miners died at the same pit as a result of a fire on January 22.



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