

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

30 September 2016

One-day strike by French power workers

Workers employed by the power grid operator RTE held a one-day strike last week to oppose plans to privatize the company. They are members of the CGT trade union.

The government plans to sell a 49 percent stake in RTE to private capital. Currently RTE is 100 percent owned by the state power company EDF, but is not operated by EDF.

RTE power workers have held a series of strikes this year over diverse issues, including the threat of privatization, closures, and against the reactionary labour law changes pushed through by the Socialist Party government.

Protest by Belgian Caterpillar workers over redundancies

Employees working for the Caterpillar construction machinery plant near the Belgian city of Charleroi recently protested after the company announced its closure. On September 16, up to 10,000 workers and their supporters demonstrated in the centre of Charleroi against the closure.

Caterpillar announced September 2 that it plans to close the plant by 2017, making over 2,000 staff redundant. As part of cost-cutting measures, some of the production will be transferred to Grenoble in France.

The closure threat follows a 1,600 cut in jobs in 2013. At the time, workers were given a commitment that the plant would remain open until 2020.

UK rail staff announce further round of strikes

Rail staff working for the private Govia Thameslink railway company, Southern Rail, are to hold a series of further strikes in their long-running dispute over the increased use of Driver Only Operations (DOO).

The introduction of DOO would mean eliminating the role of guards on trains. The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) has announced two sets of three-day strikes in October, a three-day and a 48-hour strike in November and two 24-hour strikes in December.

The current boss of Southern Rail, Dyan Crowther, has stood down. Nick Brown, the former managing director of London Underground, is taking her place. His appointment was welcomed by Mick Cash, general secretary of the RMT, who said it “opens the door to the real possibility of a new approach and new talks over the threat to the role of the guards...”

Rail staff to strike UK's East Coast route

Rail staff working for Virgin East Coast, which runs passenger services between London and the northeast of Britain, are to strike for 24-hours beginning midnight Sunday.

The RMT union is taking action over plans by Virgin to cut operating costs it says could lead to 200 jobs being cut, with the remaining staff having to cover their roles. A previous planned strike was suspended by the RMT, with the union claiming there was the basis for talks to reach a settlement.

Virgin only took over the running of the East Coast franchise 20 months ago. Railway industry monitors consider Virgin paid too much for the franchise and now need to cut their costs at the expense of employees.

London cinema staff hold strike to win London Living Wage

Staff at the Ritzy cinema in the Brixton borough of London struck midday on Saturday September 24, returning to work the following day at 5 a.m. They are members of the BECTU union.

The low-paid staff are demanding to be paid the London Living Wage (LLW), currently standing at £9.40 an hour. They also seek improvements in sick and maternity pay. The workers voted by a 93 percent majority to strike.

Two years ago, the staff held a series of 13 strikes in an attempt to secure the LLW. Their struggle won wide support, including from media personalities.

The cinema agreed to increase wages towards the LLW figure over a two-year period. The company was due to enter into negotiations with BECTU, in talks mediated by the government conciliation service ACAS beginning in June this year. According to BECTU, the company has refused to negotiate or attend at ACAS.

BECTU members at the Hackney Picturehouse, part of the same group, are currently balloting staff for industrial action over the same issue. The ballot closes on October 6.

Work to rule action by journalists in London

Journalists working for Newsquest, which owns several local newspapers in the London area, began a work to rule on Thursday.

The National Union of Journalists is taking the action in response to Newsquest's proposals to make most of the newsroom staff redundant. They are also protesting health and safety concerns, staff shortages and

excessive workloads.

Refuse collectors in Sheffield, England to hold one-day strike

Refuse bin collectors in the northern city of Sheffield are due to strike for the day on October 5 in a pay dispute.

The workers, members of the GMB union, are employed by the multinational company Veolia, which is contracted by Sheffield City Council to provide the service. The collectors had originally pushed for a 5 percent pay rise, with Veolia offering 1 percent. Now the GMB is asking for a 2 percent rise while the company is offering 1.5 percent over two years.

Georgian fertilizer factory employees protest wage arrears

Staff working for Georgian fertilizer company Azot held a demonstration outside the offices of the company September 15. The protest was organised by the Trade Union of Metallurgy, Mining and Chemical Industry Workers of Georgia.

Azot ceased production at its factory on July 27 and has been paying its 2,000 staff less than half their normal wages since that time.

The protesters demanded the resumption of production, payment of arrears of wage shortages and a pay increase. Following the demonstration, the owner promised to restart production but as of September 22, he was still to honour the promise.

Saudi construction staff strike

Around 500 workers from the Philippines, India and Pakistan, employed by the Saudi construction firm United Seemac, have been protesting outside the company offices over the nonpayment of wages arrears. The workers have held two strikes. Some have not been paid for over a year.

The protests and strikes took place despite such action being illegal in Saudi Arabia.

They are also protesting declining living conditions at their company-supplied accommodation in Riyadh. Workers report a lack of water in the toilets and washrooms. The company responded by telling them that if they want to get back their passports, they must sign papers relinquishing their rights to the arrears of pay.

United Seemac is facing growing financial difficulties resulting from the collapse in oil revenues in the country.

Foreign hospital staff in Saudi Arabian hospital continue fight for pay arrears

Foreign workers, mainly Indian and Pakistani staff working at a privately run hospital in the Eastern province, are continuing protests to be paid wages arrears going back more than seven months. The hospital is owned by the Saudi construction firm, the Saad Group.

On Tuesday, some staff blocked a main road running through the Eastern Province. On Monday, a second hospital in the province also took

strike action after not receiving wages since May. Foreign medical and nursing staff blocked the hospital corridors demanding their back pay.

Kenyan medics continue to fight for wage arrears payment

Nairobi County medics held a protest outside Nairobi City Hall in Kenya last week demanding six months of wages arrears. Nairobi state officials said they would hold meetings Thursday and Friday this week to try to resolve the strike by doctors.

Across the country, around 2,000 medics are out on strike in Migori, Kakamega, Nakuru and Nyeri counties.

In a separate development, the Kenya National Union of Nurses has threatened to call a nationwide strike in November.

South African platinum miners strike

Around 500 platinum refinery workers, members of the National Union of Mineworkers at the Impala Platinum Holdings refinery, struck on Tuesday.

They walked off the job at the mine, some 20 miles east of Johannesburg, following the breakdown of talks over pay and benefit entitlement. The refinery workers also seek improved housing and shift allowances, as well as other benefits.

Nigerian airline baggage handling staff threaten strike

Staff working for the Skyway Aviation Handling Company in Nigeria have threatened a nationwide strike. They are members of the National Union of Air Transport Employees. The workers have given the company a two-week ultimatum for a review of the conditions of service.

Strike of university lecturers and students in Niger

University lecturers and students across Niger began a weeklong strike this week. Bakasso Sahabi, the head of Niger's union of teachers and researchers, told the *africanews* web site: "We have begun a seven-day strike to demand the payment of salary arrears and research grants."

University students also boycotted lectures, demanding the payment of outstanding student grants. They also demand that more lecturers are recruited to deal with the shortage.



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