

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

16 December 2016

## Europe

### UK rail catering staff strike

Staff working for the DHL global group, which supplies catering services to Virgin West Coast Rail services, held a 48-hour strike beginning at 10 p.m. Tuesday.

The members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union are striking against poverty wages. DHL offered a 2.2 percent pay increase backdated to July this year, but only to staff who did not receive increases in line with the National Minimum Wage of £7.20, which was awarded in April this year.

The workers are due to hold a 48-hour strike next week.

### UK high technology staff in Manchester hold further strike

Staff working for technology firm Fujitsu in Manchester struck for 72 hours on December 10. The strike is the latest in an ongoing dispute over the company's plans to reduce pension benefits and cut jobs. The members of the Unite union are also pursuing a pay increase. Initially Fujitsu said it was seeking to cut the workforce by around 18 percent, representing 1,800 jobs, but is now seeking to cut another 2,500 jobs.

### UK delivery drivers strike delayed

The Unite trade union suspended a threatened strike by drivers who deliver goods for the Argos retail store chain.

The drivers are employed by Wincanton, a logistics firm used by Argos to make deliveries, and were due to strike for three days on December 20. They are based at Argos national distribution centre in Burton-on-Trent.

The drivers voted by over 80 percent in favour of the action. The dispute is over the company's failure to pay holiday back pay amounting to an average of £700. Unite says the company failed to take into account overtime and additional shift payments when calculating the holiday pay figure.

On Wednesday, Unite called the strike off following talks between the company and union at the government's Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service. Unite regional officer Rick Coyle said, "We have had constructive talks with the Wincanton management today [December 14] and, as a result, we have hammered out a deal that Unite feels it can recommend to our members. The details of the deal are confidential and

we will be balloting our drivers on the offer."

The Burton-on-Trent centre distributes goods to seven regional distribution centres, which in turn supply Argos shops.

### UK post office staff to hold five-day strike

Post Office staff working for high street UK Post Offices (Crown Post Offices) are to begin a five-day strike December 19. They are taking action in opposition to job cuts and plans to end the superior defined benefits pension scheme. In April, the Post Office announced plans to transfer 61 of its post offices to be run in house by the book and stationery retailer WH Smith.

The workers are members of the Communications Workers Union and have taken previous days of action over the issue.

### British Airways cabin crew vote to strike

Around 2,000 British Airway (BA) cabin crew staff have voted to strike on December 21. The members of the Unite union are demanding a pay rise and have rejected the latest offer from BA of a two percent pay increase.

According to the union, basic cabin crew salary is £12,000 a year, with average pay, including allowances, just £16,000 a year.

Many of the cabin crew hold second jobs because they are unable to live on the low wages they earn working for BA. Some say they have to work even when they are sick because they cannot afford to take time off. Others report having to sleep in their cars, as they are unable to afford the petrol to go back home. More than eight out of 10 workers report suffering stress and depression as a result of their financial insecurity.

### Strike by UK teaching assistants

Teaching assistants in Derby struck Wednesday and Thursday of this week, with further strikes planned for December 19 and 20 and again on January 19 and 20. The members of the Unison union have been involved in a long-running dispute after Derby City Council imposed a 25 percent pay cut on the already lowly paid staff.

## **UK equality staff hold further strike**

Staff working for the UK government's Equality and Human Rights Commission held a further one-day strike Monday. It was the third strike in the dispute and was well supported at offices nationwide.

Unite and the Public and Commercial Services union members are opposing government plans to cut the commission's budget by 25 percent, which would lead to job cuts.

## **Strike by Dutch oil refinery workers**

Oil refinery staff at Shell's installation in the Pernis district of Rotterdam came out on strike on December 9. Initially announced as a five-day strike it was then extended until Thursday of this week. The action of the members of the FNV union led to a 20 percent reduction in output.

The strike is to protest the failure to agree a new collective bargaining agreement, which would cover March 2016 to March 2018. The agreement covers the 1,800 staff at the Pernis and Moerdijk plants.

The Shell workers have rejected a pay offer of 1 percent for the first year and 1.25 percent for the second year. They are also concerned over Shell's plans to cut in half the amount of money available to fund pay progression scales.

## **Strike by Eiffel Tower staff in French capital**

Around 300 staff employed at Paris's landmark Eiffel Tower came out on strike for 24 hours on Tuesday. This was the third strike this year by the members of the CGT union, who struck twice in June over the government's draconian labour reforms.

The current dispute is over health and safety concerns around a paint stripping operation being carried out ahead of a re-painting of the structure next year. The workers accuse the SETE company, which runs the tower, of not being transparent about the possible health risks.

SETE has agreed to talks with the union. Last year nearly 7 million people visited the tower.

## **Strike threat by refuse collectors in Hungarian capital**

Refuse collection workers employed by the Budapest Public Area Maintenance Company (FKF) are threatening to strike in the run-up to Christmas.

The FKF staff are responsible for clearing the domestic waste of around 800,000 households in Budapest, as well as cleaning public spaces and snow clearing. They rejected a 4 percent pay increase made by the employer and are seeking an 8 percent rise.

The workers are members of the Local and Industrial and City Economy Workers Union 2000 (HVDSZ).

The city mayor brokered talks between FKF and union representatives, but FKF broke off the negotiations. The union has applied to the courts to receive the legal sanction to go ahead with the stoppage.

## **Irish nurses protest low staffing levels**

Nurses are staging lunchtime protests at Cavan and Mayo general hospitals against unsafe staffing levels.

According to the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO), across the country there is a near 10 percent vacancy rate with 140 vacancies for staff nurses.

INMO pointed out that on one recent day, there were over 500 patients waiting on trolleys for admission to emergency departments across the country. This figure compares to around 330 waiting on trolleys the same day last year. It noted that 180 acute beds are currently closed nationwide.

## **Icelandic teachers accept new pay offer**

This week grade school teachers in Iceland voted by a 55 percent majority to accept an 11 percent pay rise. The wages of Icelandic teachers are 20 percent below the country's national average.

They have twice before walked out of school to protest their low wages and in early November held a rally outside the city hall in the capital, Reykjavik. They have handed in a 3,000-signature petition.

## **Portuguese airport staff to strike**

Baggage handlers working for Portuguese firms Groundforce and Portway are to strike December 28-30. They will be joined by employees of Prosegur and Securitas, who provide security services at Portuguese airports, with a total of 1,300 staff taking action. Groundforce staff are also due to strike on Christmas Eve.

The portugalnews web site reported that the Sitava union accuses the National Civil Aviation Authority "of having 'illegally licensed' Irish low-cost airline Ryanair and aviation recruitment agency Groundlink to provide assistance services on the ground in airports." The report said this was the cause of collective firings in the Portway company.

## **Irish bus union agrees to route closures**

The National Bus & Railworkers' Union (NBRU) recently announced it would be willing to support the closure of up to seven bus routes currently operated by the Expressway Service of Bus Eireann. This would lead to the loss of around 150 jobs. It is estimated that this year Bus Eireann is expected to lose around €6 million on its Expressway Service operation.

NBRU represents the majority of drivers working for the company. The Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), which represents some drivers, has currently ruled out agreeing to any route closures.

## **Middle East**

### **Iranian petrochemical workers win pay arrears**

Iranian petrochemical workers at the Bushehr complex returned to work December 10 after beginning a strike five days earlier in a pay dispute. The company does not recognize trade unions and the action was unofficial.

The workers struck over the non-payment of due wages and returned after receiving wage arrears for July, August and September. However, administrative and support staff, who were also in arrears of wages but had not been part of the walkout, then came out on strike. The state-owned National Petrochemical Company runs the complex.

### **Crackdown on migrant workers in Lebanon**

Two Nepalese migrant workers have been arrested by the Lebanese authorities for campaigning for rights for migrant domestic staff. Sujana Rana was arrested in November and subsequently deported. Roja Limbu was arrested on December 5 and is currently being detained without access to a lawyer. They were both members of the domestic workers union and had legal status to work in Lebanon.

There are estimated to be around a quarter of a million domestic migrant staff working in Lebanon. They are excluded from protection under Lebanese labour laws.

## **Africa**

### **Kenyan court orders tea plantation to reinstate sacked workers**

Kenyan tea plantation and process employers at Eastern Produce Kenya have been instructed to reinstate sacked employees. Two thousand plantation workers who went on strike to demand their employers honour the second half of a two-part pay deal have been summarily sacked.

The Kenyan industrial court ordered the international company, which has tea production and other concerns in African countries, to stop sacking and throwing workers out of their company houses and reinstate strikers already sacked. The order came several days after workers had been shot on plantation picket lines by Kenyan security forces, with one worker dying from his wounds.

### **Strike by Kenyan doctors and nurses continues**

The all-out strike by Kenyan doctors and nurses, which began on December 5, is continuing. They are demanding the implementation of a 2013 collective bargaining agreement, which addressed promotion issues, wages and working conditions.

The doctors' union, the Kenya Medical Practitioners and Dentists Board, rejected a pay offer of Sh36,000-42,000 (US\$350-410), saying similar offers made in the past had not been followed through.

It is reported that the Kenyan National Union of Nurses has signed a pay deal with the government, but according to the union's secretary any such offer would have to be put to the nurses. Other reports state that nurses have turned it down. The deal is reported to be between Sh17,000 and Sh20,000 (\$165-195).

Army doctors from the Kenyan Defence Force are being drafted into

hospitals.

### **Namibian fruit processing workers complain union in cahoots with management**

Namibian workers employed to process grapes and dates at the Al Dahra factory, in the Naute Dam area, have demonstrated against slave labour. The demonstration took place outside the company offices, which management ignored.

Workers called for better wages and an end to abusive conditions in which they have to work long hours and overtime without payment. A worker read a petition outside the company offices, comparing their circumstances to those in colonial days, and said this should not be tolerated today. He said workers were forced to live in crowded rooms, with no pensions and with low wages of N\$1500, (US\$110) a month. Some workers have had to continually renew their contract on a monthly basis, even though they have been at the company for two years.

Workers complained over the relationship between the Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union (Nafau), management and the Minister of Labour, saying they were in cahoots with each other. The protesters said they have lost confidence in Nafau, complaining that it stops them from striking, and every time there is an issue at dispute, the company wins.

### **Nigerian parliamentary staff strike**

Workers in the Nigerian parliament went on strike after a two-week warning period expired. They walked out after the Delta state authority ignored the union's strike notice a month ago.

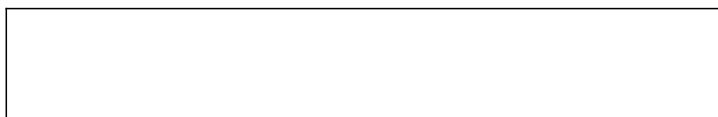
PASSAN, the Parliamentary Staff Association of Nigeria, is calling for the position of the deputy clerk of the legislative house to be filled. The union also wants a commitment to a Memorandum of Understanding involving wardrobe allowances and benefit payments owed to heirs of deceased staff of the House of Assembly Service Commission.

### **SA Gauteng forensic staff threaten to resume strike**

Staff at Gauteng's forensic labs in South Africa are threatening to resume strike action. Lab employees are demanding wage increases and clearer job descriptions. A previous strike held two weeks ago ended when the state authority took a court injunction out against them, forcing them to return to work.

Workers say they will strike again if their two-year-old grievances are not addressed. Employees are aggrieved over the lack of recognition of how hard, dangerous, and undervalued their work is.

They have been demanding registration of their job description with the Health Professional Council, but without success. In a guarded threat, Gauteng's representative for health, Qedani Mahlangu, said that while the officers had the right to strike, disruptions in service delivery were unacceptable.





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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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