

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

30 December 2016

Europe

Pre-Christmas strike by Czech postal staff

According to the Czech Post Union, around 250 of its members went on strike at Czech Post's central sorting office in Prague in the early hours of December 22. They stopped work for around an hour and were then followed by workers in other facilities in Usti and Labem, Brno and Olomouc in a so-called chain strike. According to the union, 600 staff in total were involved.

The workers are demanding a pay rise of 2,500 Crowns (\$95) a month. Czech Post has offered 500 Crowns (\$20) a month. Currently postal workers' average monthly wage is 22,700 to 23,000 Crowns (\$870-\$890) a month. The national average wage is around 4,000 Crowns (\$155). According to a Czech Radio news item, the company had threatened employees considering joining the strike with fines, but the company denies this.

Number of strikes in Belgium highest in 20 years

According to figures from the Belgian national security office, 2016 will have seen the highest number of strikes in the country in 20 years. Between April and June there were nearly a quarter of a million days lost to strikes, the highest for a three-month period in 25 years.

At the end of May 60,000 workers took part in a national one-day strike against the government's austerity measures. This was followed one week later by a strike involving 10,000 teachers and civil servants. There were also large strikes by rail workers, prison guards, metal workers and other transport employees.

Blockade by French Uber drivers in run-up to Christmas

On December 23, French Uber drivers blockaded the two Paris airports for around five hours, forcing taxis to drop passengers off short of the airport terminals. Following the blockade, they held a slow convoy to Uber headquarters in Paris to stage a protest. Uber drivers in Lyon also blockaded main roads in the city. The drivers are organised by the Unsa-VTC union.

Uber drivers are protesting the low fares they must charge, which reduce their pay. Last year Uber reduced the minimum fare from €5 to €4.25 an

hour. Drivers are pushing for the minimum fare to be raised to €8 an hour, saying some of them are earning as little as €3.75 an hour. They are also protesting Uber's plans to raise its commission from 20 percent to 25 percent.

Irish health staff to be balloted over working conditions

The Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) announced on Wednesday that it would hold a ballot of its 25,000 members in Ireland working as health support staff. It will also ballot its members in selected hospitals working in emergency units. This ballot will be held in the third week in January.

The union accuses the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the Department of Health of refusing to extend concessions given to nurses to other health staff. It accuses them of breaching previously agreed terms.

Dutch court ruling postpones planned train strike

The Dutch rail company NS won an injunction just prior to Christmas forbidding a planned strike. The court ruled the strike a safety risk, as it was likely to lead to very high levels of crowding on railway platforms.

However, the ruling gave the union permission to hold the walkout from January 6 onwards. The rail staff union VVMC is still to decide whether to go ahead with the strike. Rail workers are in dispute with NS over new rostering arrangements.

Underground rail staff in London vote for action

A ballot of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union's 3,000 members working for the London Underground rail network has voted 85 percent in favour of a 24-hour strike due to begin at 6pm on January 8.

Members of the Transport Salaried Staffs Association will also be out. The strike is part of a long-running dispute over the axing of around 900 staff on the system, including the closure of all the ticket offices on the network. The RMT and TSSA argue the lack of staff on busy tube stations is leading to safety concerns for both staff and passengers.

Solid strike by cleaning staff at UK rail company

Staff working for Servest UK, which cleans trains belonging to Great Western Railways held a strike on December 23 and 24. They are members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union. The RMT, which described the strike as rock solid, balloted its 189 members, employed by Servest and they returned a 98 percent vote in favour of the action.

The Servest staff are seeking parity with other GWR staff for a pay rise, provision of safety clothing and for all Servest agency staff to be made permanent GWR employees, ending the two-tier wage system that the use of agency staff entails.

Hotel staff in Liverpool picket against “Victorian” conditions

Staff working at the Britannia Adelphi hotel in Liverpool held a one-day strike on December 23 to protest “Victorian era” conditions at the hotel.

The staff, who are members of the RMT union, held a picket line between 6 a.m. and 10 a.m. A majority of the 275 staff working at the hotel belong to the RMT union. They are seeking a pay rise, as currently they are only paid the national minimum wage of £6.70 an hour. They are also protesting cuts in staff while at the same time the time allotted to clean a room has been cut from 25 minutes to 20 minutes.

Work-to-rule action by firefighters in northern England

Firefighters in northern England working for the North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service began work-to-rule action just before Christmas; it is due to last until January 10. The action is in response to the introduction of Tactical Response Vehicles that carry a crew of three rather than the usual four. The Fire Brigades Union, which represents firefighters, claimed the new vehicles are “totally inadequate to meet the needs of firefighters.”

Middle East

Kuwaiti staff working for Public Disabled Authority hold protest

Several members of staff working for the Public Authority for the Disabled, a government agency, held a one-hour protest outside the headquarters on December 24. The protest was over low pay but also to demand the resignation of the director of PAD. The employees are angry at the slow response by PAD in providing handicap signs and other facilities.

Africa

General strike in Sudan

A general strike was called in Sudan on December 19 against the imposition of austerity measures affecting workers and small businesses. Government employees were threatened with losing their jobs if they participated and were made to sign in at their place of work.

Transport workers and staff in displacement camps responded to the strike call.

In spite of shopkeepers in Nyala, the capital of South Darfur, being faced with fines if they did not open, two-thirds of them heeded the stay-away. Some students responded to the call and stayed away and held demonstrations, which were attacked by riot police who used tear gas grenades.

A government radio broadcast warned residents of North Darfur not to get involved in the general strike.

Kenyan university staff threaten walkout over pay demand

Employees at Kenya’s public universities have threatened to strike January 11 if their pay demand is not met. University lecturers are demanding a pay increase of 300 percent, representing Sh350, 000 (\$3,400) for assistant lecturers, rising to a maximum of Sh1.9 million (\$18,600) annually for full professor status. The lecturers union, the University Academic Staffs Association, is demanding their pay be raised to international standards, pointing out that they make less than professors in neighbouring Sudan.

Governors of Kenyan states have not paid striking doctors their December salaries

Doctors in Kenya have been on strike for over three weeks demanding the implementation of a 2013 collective bargaining agreement. Counties throughout the country are considering whether to pay striking doctors. The Kenyan council of governors has instructed their members not to pay the doctors.

Recruitment has taken place of replacement doctors on casual contracts to scab on the national strike. The strike-breaking doctors, complained the Kenyan Medical Practitioners, Pharmacist and Dentist Union (KMPPDU), were inducted into hospitals with only a week of recruitment, when it would normally take months.

Nakuru County, where 275 contract doctors have been employed on seven-month contracts, is only admitting patients to the private wings of the hospital.

Arik Airline Nigeria reneges on promise to pay wage arrears

The strike by Arik Airline workers, called off after the company promised to pay part of a backlog of wages, could reignite. Workers at the airline company came out on strike briefly to demand wage arrears and improved working conditions.

Promises made to end the strike, with assistance of the National Aviation Authority, were for the payment of two months’ pay before the end of the year, and a third payment for December made in January. The date for the first payment passed without workers receiving anything.

The three unions involved, the National Association of Aircraft Pilots and Engineers, the National Union of Air Transport Employees, and the Air Transport Services Senior Staff Association of Nigeria, have not committed to any further industrial action as yet.

Nigerian medical unions threaten action in new year

Hospital staff at the Abidan University College Hospital, Nigeria, combined in the Joint Health Sector Unions (JOHESU), are threatening to strike over unpaid wages.

A spokesman for the several unions involved said they had not received wages since September and that this was a similar reoccurrence of 2014 and 2015. He went on to say if the outstanding salaries were not paid by January 3, they would come out on indefinite strike.

Members of JOHESU proceeded to bar the gates of the Abia State Teaching Hospital, also demanding several months of unpaid salaries. The joint unions have declared they will not participate in discussions until three months of outstanding wages are paid. They also raised the issue of 20 months of unpaid pensions owed to their retired colleagues.

Two other Nigerian states were confronted with the prospect of striking medical workers. Kogi and Bayelsa state members of the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) are proposing to strike on January 13 unless they are paid several months wages.

The Kogi state governor had promised doctors' wages would be paid by December 20 but this was not fulfilled. NMA members were particularly annoyed at hearing other public sector employees had received their salaries and a no-work no-pay rule is being implemented against the Association of Resident Doctors after less than 49 days on strike. Normally the no-work no-pay rule should only come into effect after 100 days of strike.

A further medical union, the National Association of Resident Doctors, is lined up to strike on January 2, after postponing action on three previous occasions.

Swaziland electricians protest lack of bonuses

Workers employed at the Swaziland Electricity Company went on an unofficial strike December 21 protesting the non-payment of a traditional bonus at the end of the year.

Union negotiators who had met with management to discuss the issue were held responsible for the wildcat strike and they were issued with a court injunction.

A return to court after an immediate initial hearing will take place between January 8 and 17 where the eight union respondents will claim there is no proof of a strike, only some workers late for work.



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