

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

13 January 2017

UK: Bosses seek court injunction against strike at Southern Rail

Govia Thameslink Railway is taking the train drivers union, Aslef, to the Supreme Court in a legal action against the strike on the Southern rail line.

Workers on the line have been involved in a long and increasingly bitter dispute over the company's government-backed decision to impose Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains, first by eliminating the role of conductors in opening and closing doors and reducing their mandate to collecting fares. The move, endangering public safety, is aimed at the eventual elimination of conductors on the railways.

On Monday, 1,000 Aslef members and a small number from the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) union took 48-hour strike action against the moves, bringing Southern Rail—one of the busiest in the country—to a standstill. A further 24-hour strike was scheduled for Thursday, with three more walkouts due at the end of the month, on January 24, 25 and 27.

GTR has previously lost a court case and an appeal last year to prevent the strikes. In a statement announcing the latest legal action, the company said, "GTR is determined to protect its passengers and its business from unlawful industrial action. GTR is therefore prepared to continue its legal claim to the Supreme Court, as it believes that it has an arguable case that the industrial action is unlawful under EU law."

On Thursday, the RMT announced that conductors would walk out for 24 hours on January 23 in opposition to DOO. This is the day before the next Southern drivers' strikes begin.

UK: Union threatens dispute at Arriva Rail North and Merseyrail over plans to impose Driver Only Operated services

UK media reported Thursday that the RMT union have set a deadline for two rail companies—Arriva Rail North and Merseyrail—who both intend to impose Driver Only Operated services (DOO), to meet them and address the issue. The union's General Secretary Mick Cash said in a press release, "The RMT find this lack of clarity unacceptable and we have advised the company that should we not receive these assurances by Thursday 26th January 2017 then our two organisations will be in dispute."

The *Financial Times* commented, "Both Northern [Arriva] and Merseyrail have ordered new trains where drivers will be able to close the doors at stations. Northern's trains will be set up so that conductors can also close the doors, while Merseyrail's will be set up for driver-only operation." The newspaper cited the response from Arriva who said, "This is not the time to talk about a potential dispute. We want to sit down and work positively with the trade unions."

New industrial action threatened at London Underground

Maintenance workers on the London Underground, the capital's subway network, are to ballot on industrial action, the RMT union announced Wednesday. The union states that it is in response to management renegeing on agreements it had reached over the introduction of a night service and staffing levels. RMT general secretary, Mick Cash, also accused management of actively attacking reps for carrying out union duties."

The ballot comes on top of a separate dispute over job cuts and ticket office closures, which led to a 24-hour walkout on Monday that crippled the London Underground. Up to 4,000 station and ticket staff, members of the RMT and the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA), walked out at 6pm on Sunday in opposition to over 800 job losses, the closure of many safety-critical control rooms, displacement of staff, grading issues and the chaos and safety hazards brought about by the closure of hundreds of ticket offices.

On Thursday, the RMT—representing about 80 percent of the 3,700 station and ticket staff who work on London Underground—announced that its members would hold further strikes, from February 6, unless management addressed its demands.

British Airways cabin crew walk out at Heathrow, England

Low-paid cabin crew at British Airways began a 48-hour strike at midnight on Tuesday. The action involves 2,500 so-called "mixed-fleet" cabin crew, who comprise 15 percent of BA's crew. It led to the cancellation of 40 flights out of Heathrow Airport.

The cabin crew, who joined the workforce on inferior terms after 2010, are paid a basic salary starting at £12,192, plus £3 an hour "flying pay," totalling an average pay of £16,000, including allowances, each year. The Unite union said that these were "poverty level wages" that placed many "below the living wage and are among the lowest in the industry..."

The Heathrow-based crew was due to strike at Christmas, but the action was suspended due to a revised pay offer. Workers rejected the proposal by a seven-to-one margin.

According to *The Economist* magazine, BA's parent company, International Airlines Group (IAG), "made an estimated €2.5 billion (\$2.6bn) profit last year, most of which came from BA." The business journal notes that IAG's boss, Willie Walsh "earned €8.8 million in 2015, or 364 times that of his cabin crew," and that average property prices in London are "more than 23 times a cabin-crew member's salary, based on the airline's own [disputed] minimum figures."

On Thursday, Unite announced that the BA cabin crew, on long and short haul flights out of Heathrow, would hold a further 72-hour strike from January 19.

Manchester Fujitsu workers strike in ongoing dispute over pay, pensions and threat to jobs

Three hundred workers at IT company Fujitsu struck in Manchester Thursday, with a further strike planned today in an ongoing dispute over pay, pensions and job security. The workers are members of the Unite union and, as well as holding previous days of action, have organised a ban on overtime since October 31 and a work-to-rule policy.

Further strike days were scheduled by Unite for January 19 and 20, but the first of these dates has already been called off by the union, with the second day also threatened. Unite justified this on the basis that the firm has agreed to further talks. A union newsletter this week said Fujitsu had “indicated a little movement on some aspects of pay. Depending on progress in the talks on 19th, it is possible the action on 20th could be suspended.”

Last October, Fujitsu announced a plan to shed 1,800 jobs, over 18 percent of its 14,000-strong UK workforce, to “streamline operations in order to remain competitive in the market.” This was part of a “transformation programme” to enable it to “better support customers in the era of digital transformation.” Announcing the cuts, the company said it intended to lay workers off over the next 12 to 18 months.

Fujitsu employs workers at sites in England, including Manchester, Crewe, Bracknell, Solihull, Wakefield and Warrington, and at Belfast in Northern Ireland.

Unite is not opposed to job losses in principle but campaigns for them to be voluntary rather than compulsory and for “better redundancy terms.”

The newsletter stated, “Not only are our agreements and better redundancy terms beneficial for anyone made redundant, they act as an incentive to retrain and redeploy people rather than making redundancies, and help encourage volunteers rather than compulsory redundancies.” It added, “Whilst members have already won better redundancy payments in Manchester than elsewhere in the company, they have been eroded over the years and are now inadequate for the majority of the Manchester workforce.”

UK nuclear power workers to take strike ballot

Around 16,000 nuclear power workers across the UK are to ballot for strike action over an attack on their pensions. The workers are mainly involved in nuclear decommissioning and several unions are balloting, including Unite and the GMB.

This is in response to plans by the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority to make savings of £660 million that will involve the “reform” of final salary pension schemes by April 2018.

The workers are based at 19 UK nuclear sites including Sellafield (Cumbria), Magnox (Anglesey), Ayrshire, Dorset, Dumfriesshire, Essex, Gloucestershire, Gwynedd, Kent, Oxfordshire, Somerset, Suffolk, Direct Rail Services (Cumbria), Dounreay Site Restoration Ltd (Caithness), Low Level Waste Repository (Cumbria) and International Nuclear Services (Cumbria, Warrington).

An NDA spokesman said, “Government policy is that all public sector final salary pensions schemes should be reformed by 2018, and four million public sector workers have already moved to new pension arrangements.”

Slovak engineering workers picket over pay

Employees of the PPS Group engineering company came out on strike on Monday, with around 700 of them picketing the factory in the town of

Detva, central Slovakia. They had voted by a 97 percent majority on an 87 percent turnout in favour of the strike. They took the action over a new collective bargaining agreement and are seeking an improved pay increase offer.

Initially the company had offered a seven percent pay increase dating from July, but it then rescinded the offer and instead offered only 1.5 percent. They subsequently offered an additional 1.5 percent payable from January 1 2018, but workers turned this down.

Strike threat by Irish rail staff

Staff working for Irish Rail (Iarnrod Eireann), members of the National Bus and Railworkers’ Union (NBRU), are threatening strike action over a pay claim.

The union is seeking a 21 percent pay rise, but press reports note it would be likely to settle for 11.25 percent over three years. NBRU is due to meet with Irish Rail management under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission in February.

Irish airline crew oppose extra break duties

Cabin crew employed by Aer Lingus on transatlantic flights, represented by the Impact union, are to be balloted to carry out a non-cooperation policy against the introduction of additional drink and meal services for passengers on the flights. Around 1,000-cabin crew will be balloted.

The extra duties are in contravention of the current service agreement signed between the company and the union. If the ballot is in favour of non-cooperation, Impact members will be instructed not to carry out the additional duties.

Irish health care staff to be balloted for action

Health care staff, including health care assistants and radiographers at 40 Irish hospitals, members of the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), are to be balloted for possible strike action. The balloting will begin on January 23.

The workers are seeking full implementation of the Lansdowne Road and Haddington Road agreements relating to the reintroduction of a job evaluation scheme and other incremental elements of their pay. They are also demanding that concessions paid to nursing staff working in emergency departments be extended to other grades of staff.

Northern Irish teachers begin action in support of pay claim

Teachers in Northern Ireland, members of the Irish Nation Teachers’ Organisation (INTO), are taking action in support of a pay increase. They have rejected a one percent pay offer.

INTO members are refusing to cooperate with inspections carried out by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). Should an inspector ask to sit in on a class taught by an INTO member, the teacher will hand the

inspector a letter stating their refusal to cooperate and leave the classroom. Two other unions, the Ulster Teachers' Union and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, are set to begin similar action later this month.

In addition to boycotting inspectors, INTO has called a half-day strike for January 18.

Teachers in Northern Ireland belonging to the National Association of Schoolmasters and Women Teachers (NASUWT) are holding a one-day strike on January 31 also in support of an improved pay offer. The strike is expected to affect schools in Derry City, Strabane, Mid Ulster, Fermanagh and Omagh.

Kuwaiti Airways staff protest

Around 350 Kuwaiti Airways Company (KAC) staff held a sit-in protest at the company's headquarters on Monday. They were protesting the loss of benefits when KAC was privatized.

Strike by Palestinians in Israel over demolition of homes

Palestinians living within Israel held a one-day strike Wednesday affecting businesses and schools. The strike was in response to the demolition of 11 Palestinian homes in the Palestinian town of Qalansuwa in northern Israel. The homes had been built without permission, but it is virtually impossible to gain such permissions.

Ugandan rail workers strike for reinstatement

Rail workers at Rift Valley Railways, members of the Ugandan Railway Union, went on a two-day strike last week demanding the reinstatement of two of their colleagues who had been sacked after being accused of stealing fuel from the company.

An investigation by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, (MGLSD), into the accusations came up with no evidence, and the company agreed to reinstate the workers at the beginning of the New Year. However, the two were not reinstated on January 1 and their colleagues walked out.

Negotiations with the international railway construction company and MGLSD are taking place. A plan to revitalise and develop the old colonial rail system is being inaugurated and a collective bargaining agreement between union and management is due to be signed January 17.

Swaziland public sector workers demand wage increase

Swaziland public sector workers are threatening to strike for a wage increase. A spokesman for the National Public Service and Allied Trade Union said they wanted at least a 70 percent pay enhancement.

On average, public sector workers were awarded a 17 percent increase last year but the largest percentage went to the upper sections of public service staff with members of parliament getting a 32 percent increase.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) suggests that the Swazi

administration, appointed by King Maswati III, is already overpaying its public servants. The Fund expected a reduction of employees in the public sector, with corresponding reduction in the wage bill, with fiscal consolidation throughout 2016-17.

No date has been set for the strikes to take place.

Nigerian Nasawara State judiciary strike threat

Nigerian judicial staff in Nasarawa state threatened to withdraw their labour on Monday if their demands were not met.

Three unions involved, the Judicial Staff Union of Nigeria (JUSUN), the Magistrates Association of Nigeria (MAN) and the Area Court Judges and Members Association of Nigeria (ACJUMAN) are demanding the repayment of illegal deductions from their salaries.

They are also demanding, on threat of indefinite strike, the repayment of all previous illegal deductions. Apart from the deductions, the judicial staff is pressing for incremental payments going back as far as 2013.

Nigerian Petrol and gas union demands government takes on oil companies

The Nigerian Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas workers (NUPENG) was due to begin a three-day strike on Wednesday.

The union is in conflict with government over the lack of control it asserts on the international oil companies operating in the country's oilfields.

NUPENG is complaining about the arbitrary nature of the oil companies abandoning previous agreements. Pan Ocean, for example, is renegeing on annual pay increases. Oil contractor Tecon Oil Services is going back on agreements made with the union on layoff pay. Several other issues have come up provoking the strike, as oil companies downgrade or pull out their operations in Nigeria.

The government called a meeting of the union, the oil companies, and its labour ministry on Wednesday in attempt to head off the strike. The union says the three-day strike is just an opening move, which could lead to indefinite strike action if the government does not intervene.

Oil workers operating pipelines in the Niger Delta went on strike Tuesday over unpaid wages and union recognition. The ten striking operatives control the flow of crude oil at the Oleh hub in the Niger Delta and their action has stopped the flow of oil, which is affecting production from the state-owned National Nigerian Petroleum Corporation facilities.

Kenyan nurses defy back-to-work order

Nurses striking in Nakuru County, Kenya refused to return to work last week. Twelve hundred nurses refused to be intimidated by threats of sackings by the County Public Service Board, although it threatens their accommodation as well as their jobs.

The members of the Kenyan National Union of Nurses have been on strike for over five weeks and say they will not return until a 2016 collective bargaining agreement is implemented

The 2016 agreement specifies, in part, an increase in nursing staff, a pay rise and improved working conditions.

Contract workers have been brought in to substitute the nurses and are handling new hospital equipment for which they are not trained. The nurses say the strikebreaking labour force have no experience of these machines and threaten to make them inoperable.

Action by Kenyan health care workers continues

Striking Kenyan doctors deny they have arranged a meeting with President Uhuru Kenyatta to end their six-week strike. The doctors union, Kenya Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentist Union (KMPDU), also denied they had been offered two deals to end the strike.

Talks, which took place last Wednesday collapsed when the industrial court put out arrest warrants for the KMPDU leaders. They reaffirmed they will only end the strike with implementation of a collective bargaining agreement. They also deny that they have been offered a 300 percent pay rise, saying the strike is not about money, but better internships and investment for research.

More medical-related organisations have joined the strike, with the Emergency Service medical practitioners and medical school lecturers in the University of Nairobi coming out. The 300 strikers, members of the KMPDU, are demanding the implementation of the 2013 collective bargaining agreement.

Nationally, a further 5,000 members of Kenya's Union of Clinical Officers walked out.

Kenyan service workers strike

On Monday, the Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospital and Allied Workers union, whose members provide hotel services to hospitals and universities, came out on strike. In addition, Kenyan universities' unions are also poised to strike as they demand a settlement of their 2013 collective bargaining agreement.



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