

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

3 February 2017

## Strike by French gas and electricity utility workers

A strike by French gas and electricity supply staff took place Monday to protest a wage freeze being imposed by the industries. It impacted electricity output from eight of the country's 58 nuclear power plants as well as hydropower facilities.

France relies on nuclear power for around 75 percent of its output. French energy sector unions called the strike.

## UK air cabin crew announce six days of walkouts

Cabin crew working for British Airways (BA) "mixed fleet" are due to begin a three-day strike on Sunday, followed by a further three-day strike beginning February 9. BA said it expects little impact from the walkout. Over 9,000 cabin crew from a different Unite branch voted to accept the deal.

The Unite union members, in dispute with BA over low pay and a two-tier wage system, have so far struck twice over five days. The latest strike follows workers throwing out, by a margin of 7-1, an offer made by the company after negotiations between Unite and management. The union now states that the company is refusing further negotiations.

## UK atomic weapons staff hold further strike

Around 600 staff employed at the UK nuclear weapons plants at Aldermaston and Burghfield in Berkshire held a 48-hour strike beginning Monday.

It was the second round of industrial action by the Unite members. They are protesting changes to their pension scheme, which will result in inferior pension rights. They originally worked as government employees and were promised their pension rights would be protected when they were transferred to the private sector in the 1990s.

## UK capital underground rail staff to walk out

Staff on London's underground tube system are set to strike next week. A 16-hour strike is due to begin at 6pm on Sunday and a further 15-hour strike is set for February 7.

The members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) are in a

long-running dispute over ticket office closures. The union representing clerical staff—the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA)—has taken part in previous strikes but will not support next week's. This week, the RMT has been involved in talks with London Underground—brokered by the government conciliation service ACAS—in an attempt to avert further strikes.

## London Woolwich ferry workers hold second industrial action

Thirty-six employees of Briggs Marine Contractors Ltd, which runs the Woolwich ferry service across the river Thames in East London on behalf of London Transport, are due to hold the second of twelve 24-hour strikes today. The Unite members are protesting over health and safety issues and allege instances of bullying and sexual harassment.

The health and safety concerns were highlighted last Saturday when an engineer was overcome by fumes when working on the ferry. An ambulance was called and the worker recovered after treatment.

## Unison union suspends West Yorkshire social workers' protest

Staff working for children's services in Kirklees in West Yorkshire who were set to strike on Friday January 27 had the action suspended at the last minute by their union, Unison.

The suspension of the strike was at the behest of Steve Torrance, Unison regional head of local government. At a January 24 meeting to discuss the upcoming strike, social work staff were informed of email correspondence between Torrance and Kirklees chief executive, Adrian Lythgo. In the correspondence, the council proposed the period of the ballot be extended until March 6 to allow for further discussion. The proposal was rejected by care workers at the meeting by a majority of 46 to one.

They had previously voted overwhelmingly for the strike in protest at the heavy caseloads they have to carry, bullying by management and chaotic state of the service. There is a high turnover of staff and around a quarter of the staff are agency workers.

A report by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, the official schools inspectorate, deemed the service inadequate.

Prior to the proposed strike date, Kirklees council, in which the Labour Party has the largest number of seats but with no overall majority, had threatened to seek a court injunction to prevent the strike going ahead but did not proceed with the threat. The Labour council had intended to use recently enacted anti-trade union legislation to outlaw the strike on the basis that the union had not informed them of the number of staff balloted

and their workplaces.

### **Walkout of Hungarian auto employees**

Around 1,500 employees at Audi's plant in Győr in northwestern Hungary walked out for two hours on January 26 demanding higher wages. The workers are members of the AFHSZ union.

The Hungarian automotive industry employs over 150,000 workers and nearly 90 percent of its production is for export.

### **Irish bus drivers protest pay cuts**

Bus drivers and other staff at the partly state-owned Bus Éireann are set to strike over pay cuts due to be imposed on February 20.

The cuts will be made up of a 10 percent reduction in pay, plus an 80 percent cut in Sunday overtime rates, along with cuts in sick pay and overtime. Overall, it means an average 30 percent cut in pay. Bus Éireann proposes to bring in more part-time posts in an effort to cut costs further.

The company says it is imposing the cuts because it has debts of around €9 million.

The National Bus and Railworkers Union (NBRU) and the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) already have a mandate for strike action, while the Unite union is also threatening to strike.

### **Irish food processing workers walk out**

Staff at the Kerry Group plant in Charleville in County Cork walked out on Monday. The company, which produces ingredients for the food and beverage industries, is seeking to worsen employees' terms and conditions.

The SIPTU union agreed to talks with the Workplace Relations Commission but the company failed to attend, which sparked the staff walkout.

### **Strike threat by Norwegian airline ground crew**

Norwegian ground crew working for Widerøe, SAS and Norwegian airlines are threatening to strike from Sunday over a new collective bargaining agreement relating to wages and conditions.

They are members of the Junit union, which has around 500 members, and are mainly employed by Widerøe Ground Handling. Other unions have new collective bargaining agreements. Junit, together with representatives from the three affected companies, are due to meet with the Officer for Mediation unit on Saturday, in attempt to stop the strike.

If it goes ahead, Junit says it will target one airport in each of the four geographical quarters of the country.

### **Call for general strike to defend education in Spain**

Last week in Madrid, trade unions, students and parents issued a call for a general strike for March 9 to call for the repeal of the education law brought in by the right-wing People's Party government.

Speaking at a press conference, the president of CEAPA—a student and parents pressure group—called on the government to revoke the Organic Law for Improvement of Educational Quality (LOMCE). CEAPA say LOMCE makes it harder for students to complete their education and gain entry to relevant degree courses. They are also opposing cuts in education budgets imposed by the European Union.

### **Egyptian food processing workers acquitted**

Twenty-seven employees of the Egypt Company for oils and food industries, which produces edible oils, were acquitted after a court hearing on Sunday.

Security forces arrested the 27 in mid-January when they dispersed a strike at the edible oil facility in the Suez area. They were charged with inciting the strike and damage to company property. While they were acquitted of these charges, they were not reinstated as employees.

Reports state that a lawyer will follow up their acquittal with an attempt to win back their jobs.

### **Jordanian airline staff seek wage arrears**

The General Trade Union of Workers in Air Transportation and Tourism has called on the Ministry of Labour to intervene on behalf of the airline staff laid off by Royal Falcon Airlines, which operates between Jordan and three other Middle Eastern countries.

The airline, Royal Falcon Airlines, ceased operating in August last year following the suspension of its licence. It left around 120 staff with wages arrears going back five months. The ministry rebuffed the appeal made January 10, saying it was up to the former employees to individually sue the company to win back wages due them.

### **Africa**

### **South African delivery drivers strike over benefits and nepotism**

Fifty car delivery drivers, representing a workforce of 120, demonstrated at the company premises of CAT-WWL logistics on January 26.

The workforce began the strike at the Uitenhage Company on January 24 over unfair treatment towards job applicants and the lack of travel expenses to and from work.

CAT-WWL, which provides delivery services to Volkswagen South Africa, responded to the workers' grievances with a lockout. This was despite the fact that their union, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union, had received a strike permit.

According to VW, their deliveries were continuing as normal with the transport company using scab drivers.

### **South African market workers' action called off**

Members of the National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers at Goseame Wholesaler downed tools last week in a dispute over wages and bonuses. They are employed at the South African Polokwane fruit and vegetable market.

Although the strike was sanctioned by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) after an agreement could not be reached, it was called off.

The wholesaler got an injunction against the strike, claiming they did not receive the compulsory 48 hours notice. At protests held outside the market on January 25 and 26—before being sent back to work—workers complained they had not been paid their bonuses.

The wholesaler responded that they were prepared to discuss a pay increase, but it was not currently viable for the company to meet their demands.

### **Weeklong strike by South African bus workers ended by union**

Strike action has been ended Wednesday at the University of South Africa (UNISA) despite that fact that a wage offer supported by the university workers union, the National Education and Health Workers Union (NEHAWU), was rejected by its members.

UNISA management praised the union leadership, with *EWA* online reporting them saying, "It looks promising that the offer will be well-received. We can say the leadership has displayed excellent maturity and helped us to resolve the issues."

The union recommended acceptance of an eight percent and 6.5 percent increase to lower-paid and higher-paid workers respectively, but it was thrown out. NEHAWU's eight percent demand is six percent below the original claim of 14 percent.

The university has 300,000 students across Africa and internationally with its distant learning university facilities.

### **South African transport workers fight for wage and benefit increases**

The South African Transport and Allied Workers Union has threatened to strike as negotiations between bus workers and employers open. The South African Road Passenger Bargaining Council is offering a four percent wage increase, which the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa has rejected.

Workers are demanding a 30 percent wage increase, increases in allowances of R1,500 (\$110) for housing and R1,200 (\$90) for sleeping out. They also want time and a half as an overtime rate and double time for working holidays. The present basic wage is R6,000 (\$450) and the union is seeking a basic wage of R15,000 (\$1115).

### **Kenyan doctors' strike continues**

The two-month Kenyan doctors' strike continued this week. Doctors, members of the Kenya Medical Practitioners', Pharmacists' and Dentists' Union, (KMPPDU) —who were due to have gone to jail last

week—have twice had their sentences suspended.

A decision by the justices on further suspension or jail is due today. The union, through their lawyers, are pleading that they have attempted to get the doctors back to work but that they have refused to do so.

The doctors oppose ending the strike until there is a clear position on their 2013 collective bargaining agreement (CBA) demand.

The doctors claim the CBA covered not only their pay and conditions but promised an increase in funding of research and equipment, and the financing of training.

A settlement has been made more difficult as a senate health committee has declared the 2013 CBA illegal.

### **Zimbabwe teacher strike threat**

Zimbabwean rural teachers are threatening to strike if the government does not pay outstanding bonuses.

The Amalgamated Rural Teachers' Union of Zimbabwe (ARTUZ), which is already undertaking go-slow action, warned on January 30 that it would begin a strike in two weeks if the bonuses were not paid.

The 13th-month cheque (bonus) is relied on by the teachers as their monthly pay is below half the required income for a Zimbabwean family.

### **British-owned Zimbabwe mining company deprives workers of their pensions**

Clarity Capital, a British-owned company operating in Zimbabwe's Vhumbachikwe Mine, is being taken to court by the Associated Mine Workers Union of Zimbabwe. The union is taking legal action in an effort to get 50 miners reinstated after they were sacked following a strike last December.

They struck to demand the company repay their weekly 15 percent contribution from their wages into a pension fund. The pension contributions had not been remitted since 2013, amassing a debt of over \$3 million.

Clarity Capital has a majority share holding in Duration Gold, under which Vhumbachikwe Mine operates. Miners became aware of the deficit when widows and retiring miners could not access their pensions.



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