

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

**Our reporters**  
**17 February 2017**

## **Train drivers at Southern Rail reject Aslef trade union sell-out deal**

On Thursday, train drivers employed by Southern Rail rejected a sell-out deal agreed between the Aslef trade union and the company. The deal was agreed February 2 by Aslef and management, in talks convened by the Trades Union Congress.

The deal was recommended to the workers for acceptance by Aslef but was rejected by drivers by a margin of 54 percent to 46. The drivers have taken a principled stand in the face of a concerted propaganda campaign against them by the company and Conservative government, who are demanding they impose an agenda that will lead to the loss of train conductors' jobs and attack the terms and conditions of drivers.

The drivers—and train conductors, who are members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union—have been involved in a dispute with the company for nearly a year, in opposition to their efforts to impose Driver Only Operated trains (DOO). This policy, accepted by ASLEF in the agreement now rejected, will result in the de-skilling of the conductor grade, the eventual loss of hundreds of conductors' jobs and is detrimental to public safety. Under the Aslef-Southern agreement, drivers would be forced to undertake the hazardous responsibility for operation of train doors.

Mick Whelan, general secretary of Aslef, responded to the vote by pledging further talks with management and the TUC. He said, "We understand and support the decision arrived at democratically by our members and will now work to deliver a resolution in line with their expectations."

Nick Brown, chief operating officer of Govia Thameslink Railway, the parent company of Southern, said, "We now need to understand the issues which led to this outcome and we'll be seeking to meet with the union as soon as possible to see how we can agree a way forward."

## **UK: Arriva North train conductors in strike ballot**

Train conductors employed by Arriva Rail North, which operates Northern trains and runs services across the north of England, are balloting for industrial action.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union is balloting its members due to Arriva refusing to give assurances on the future use of guards (conductors) on trains.

Arriva and Merseyrail—another train company running services in the north—both plan to introduce Driver Only Operated services (DOO). The result of this, as has been the case at other rail companies is the removal of conductors, who carry out more than 30 safety-critical tasks on board trains.

Arriva plans to introduce DOO trains as soon as next year. Merseyrail plans to run trains without guards from 2020.

Last month, 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."

RMT General Secretary Mick Cash said Arriva had "reneged on their previous position when they stated they were prepared to offer guarantees around a second person on board trains in addition to the driver."

## **London Underground staff to strike**

Drivers on the Central Line of the London Underground (LU) railway system are set to strike for 24-hours beginning at 9 p.m. on February 21. The strike follows previous action and is in opposition to LU's plans to move staff to other lines without negotiation.

## **UK BMW car workers prepared to defend pensions**

A consultative ballot of 7,000 Unite union members working for car manufacturer BMW in the UK showed 96 percent in favour of industrial action to defend their current pension arrangements.

BMW is proposing to move its entire UK staff from the current final salary scheme to an inferior defined contribution scheme from June this year. Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey is due to meet with BMW senior management on February 20.

## **British Airways staff to hold further four-day strike**

British Airways cabin crew staff, employed under the airline's "mixed fleet," are to hold further strikes in an ongoing protest over poverty pay levels. To date they have held 11 days of strike action and another four-day strike is scheduled to begin February 22.

Mixed fleet crew currently earn just £11,000-£12,000 a year, plus a £3 per working-hour allowance for expenses and maintenance between two flights—usually abroad. This amounts in practice to earnings of £16,000-£17,000 a year.

The 2,900 crew are members of the Unite union.

## **Irish supermarket staff strike**

Workers at eight Tesco stores across Ireland began an indefinite strike Tuesday, hitting three stores in Dublin. A further eight stores are due to join the strike today.

Strikes at stores in Ballina and Sligo did not go ahead due to a technical problem with the ballot.

Tesco is seeking to reduce the wages of around 250 long-serving staff who had joined the company before 1996, when an inferior contract was introduced. The Mandate union, who claim that 250 staff would suffer a 15 percent wage cut if forced onto the current contract, represents the workers.

## **Talks to try to avert Irish bus strike**

Talks are taking place under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) in an attempt to avert a strike by Bus Eireann staff, due to take place February 20. The company is seeking to cut wages beginning February 20 to overcome its budget deficit.

The strike of bus staff could also affect train services. Bus Eireann shares depots with the Irish Rail Company, Iarnrod Eireann, at sites such as Limerick, Tralee, Galway, Waterford and Sligo.

## **Strike threat by Macedonian journalists**

Macedonian journalists working for the *Utrinski* and *Dnevnik* newspapers were set to strike today over non-payment of wages. They have not been paid since December. Two weeks ago, the journalists held 30-minute protests outside the offices of the newspapers over the non-payment of wages.

The journalists are members of the Trade Union of Macedonian Journalists and Media Workers.

## **Maltese medics declare dispute**

On Tuesday, the Medical Association of Malta (MAM) declared a dispute with the Ministry for Health and the Ministry for Family and Social Solidarity.

A collective agreement between MAM and the government departments expired in December. The government is insisting any new agreement must include provision for the privatisation of the Maltese health system.

MAM is resisting the inclusion of privatisation measures and has threatened to begin industrial action if no agreement is reached by March 14.

## **Strike threat by Spanish port employees**

Spanish dockworkers are set to strike on February 20, 22 and 24 over the Spanish government's plans to change the hiring of dockworkers.

## **UK atomic weapons staff strike**

Six hundred staff employed by the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) sites at Aldermaston and Burghfield, Berkshire, England held a further 24-hour strike on Tuesday of this week. The Unite union members are to strike again for 24 hours on February 2.

They are protesting AWE's plans to move their pension to an inferior defined contribution scheme. This is despite promises, from when AWE was privatised in the 1990s, that staff would retain their final salary pension scheme.

## **Strike by London cinema staff for living wage**

Cinema staff from four London cinemas, the Brixton Ritzy, Hackney Picturehouse, Picturehouse Central and Crouch End Picturehouse, held a strike February 11 as part of their campaign for the London living wage of £9.75 per hour.

According to the BECTU union, it was the largest-ever strike of cinema staff. Other demands included sick pay, maternity pay and pay rises for more senior staff. Staff at the Brixton Ritzy have already held several strikes in pursuit of the London living wage. They have won a 26 percent pay rise but still earn below the London living wage.

## **UK Equality and Human Rights staff sacked via email**

Some staff working for the UK government Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) have been made redundant by email and given six months pay in lieu of notice.

EHRC employees have been striking against government plans to close EHRC offices and cut staff. They are represented by the Public and Commercial Services union and Unite. One of the unions accused EHRC of targeting disabled and ethnic minority staff for redundancy by email.

## **Irish health staff strike vote**

Irish health support staff have voted by a 94 percent majority to hold a strike on Tuesday, March 7. They are members of the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU).

The strike by health support staff is expected to affect 39 acute hospitals. They are protesting the Irish Department of Health's (HSE) failure to adhere to binding agreements (Lansdowne Road and Haddington Road), which allowed for the reintroduction of a job evaluation scheme, incremental payments to interns and other measures.

SIPTU has made it clear they are open to discussions with HSE officials to avert the strike.

The strike will occur on the same day as around 30,000 Irish nurses are due to begin a work to rule over staff shortages.

Currently ports can only employ dockers from a pool company using unionised labour. The European Union states that this contravenes treaty agreements and that port companies should be able to hire dockers—directly bypassing unionised workers and enabling companies to further drive down wages and working conditions.

### **German airline announces deal with union**

On Wednesday, the German airline Lufthansa announced it had made a deal with Cockpit, the pilots' union, to settle a long-running dispute in which the union carried out 14 strikes. The strikes cost the airline €500 million in lost revenue.

The deal has still to be put to the membership. Under the deal, pilots will get a four-stage 8.7 percent pay increase plus a one-off payment of around €5,500. The proposed settlement does not address the issue of pensions and transitional payments.

### **Greek rail workers strike**

Greek rail staff held a further three-hour rolling strike on Wednesday. It was the latest of an ongoing series of strikes to protest the privatisation of the rail network. Athens suburban trains along with inter-city ones were affected by the stoppage.

### **Protest by Greek farmers**

Greek farmers held a protest outside the Greek parliament building in Athens on Tuesday. They were protesting the Syriza-led government's austerity measures, which would increase farmers' taxes and social security payments.

### **Israeli pilots resignation threat**

The dispute over the downgrading of salaries for around 40 El Al pilots aged 65 to 67 continues. The airline wants to cut the salaries of pilots aged over 65, as under international law such pilots are not able to fly commercial flights.

The pilots have to continue working until they are 67, when they are entitled to the Israeli state pension. The company is unable to let them fly and employs them as supervisor/trainers, but at a reduced salary. The pilots are demanding they continue to receive their full pay.

A meeting ordered by the labour court was held Monday in an attempt to resolve the dispute. It broke up with no agreement.

Eight of these pilots are threatening to resign, but this would leave the airline without supervisors or trainers and would result in flight cancellations. To circumvent the pilots' action, the company went to the labour court Wednesday in an attempt to get the proposed mass resignation declared an illegal strike. The court ruled that the pilots' union and El Al must continue negotiations until Friday.

### **Strike by Golan public transport workers**

Around 45 drivers employed by the Golan public transport system in Rama, Israel came out on strike Tuesday to protest their conditions of employment. The Histadrut labour federation is representing the drivers, but was unable to reach a settlement.

The transport system carries around 70,000 passengers a day.

### **Strike of Uber drivers in Qatar**

Taxi drivers using the Uber phone app in Qatar stayed away from work Monday, in a protest against Uber cutting the price of taxi fares and requiring drivers to present an upfront cost prior to the journey.

Uber drivers say the upfront pricing can leave them out of pocket if a client requests detours or additional stops. Uber is imposing the lower fares in an attempt to compete with local firms. Many taxi drivers in Qatar are immigrant workers, many from Ethiopia, Nepal and India.

### **Kenyan doctors union officials jailed**

Seven union officials of the Kenya Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentists Union (KMPPDU) were sent to jail on Monday. The doctors' representatives were jailed for a month for continuing a strike deemed illegal by the courts.

The incarcerations have been deferred on three occasions, to give the union the opportunity to capitulate on their demand for the implementation of a 2013 collective bargaining agreement (CBA).

The doctors have won the support of the majority of the population. The ratio of doctors per head of population is one to 17,000, as opposed to the World Health Organisation's stipulated ratio of one per 1,000.

The shortage of doctors is on top of a severe lack of drugs and equipment and the widespread dysfunction of existing facilities. The 2013 collective bargaining agreement was signed to provide a substantial pay increase for doctors, who were leaving the profession in droves, and to confront the inadequate service.

After the decision to jail the doctors, the court immediately lifted the imprisonment on the proviso that the union leaders come up with a solution to call off the strike. The KMPPDU was instructed to present their plan to the courts on February 23.

### **Kenyan academic staff continue strike**

Kenyan academic staff at the country's universities are continuing a three-week strike over their 2013 collective bargaining agreement (CBA).

Three unions comprising the Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC), the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU), the Kenya University Staff Association (KUSA) and the Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotel, Educational and Allied (KUDHEA), together with the university employer's representative, the Inter Public Universities Consultative Council Forum (IPUCCF), have agreed to form a further committee.

The committee is to look at ways of getting around the stipulations of the CBA and coming to a settlement. The government is seeking to reduce

workers' pay and attack conditions with their new offer.

The unions say another grievance is that the employer's (university council) pension contributions have been included in the Sh10 billion (US\$97 million) deal on offer—something they had not agreed to with the IPUCCF. The IPUCCF has not yet committed any of its proposals in writing.

### **Nigerian polytechnic staff continue strike**

Staff are continuing their strike at the Auchi Federal Polytechnic Nigeria, over non-implementation of agreements.

Union members at the university struck on February 6 over the issue of staff not being integrated into the CONTISS Migration Salary Structure. CONTISS is the salary grading structure for Nigerian university staff. However, staff on grades 11 and lower have not been included.

The three unions involved in the dispute, the Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics, the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Polytechnics and the Non-Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics, also complained that promotion arrears are not being paid, and say the polytechnic owes the unions N1.8 billion (US\$5.7 million).

### **Nigerian airline staff threaten strike**

Nigerian airport staff have put the government on notice of a strike if they are not properly compensated during a transition from Abuja airport to Kaduna. Abuja airport is being forced to refurbish its facilities, particularly its runway, as airlines are reluctant to land there.

Workers are being relocated to the Kaduna state airport for a projected period of six weeks while the Abuja restoration takes place, starting March 8. The National Union of Air Transport Employees is demanding a package for the Abuja workforce is put in place prior to the move.

The union claim management has not involved them in the planning of the move, and there has been no mention of proposals for the redistribution of the workers.

Previous experience of government operations of this nature have seen workers treated unfairly and left with millions of naira owed to them.

### **Cote d'Ivoire oil workers return to work after union ends strike**

The SISPOO oil workers union has sabotaged a strike by its members at the Canadian Natural Resources oilfields in Cote d'Ivoire. Workers initially planned to strike for 72 hours on February 11, before extending it to an indefinite stoppage. They were protesting against adverse working conditions and the employment of contract labour.

SISPOO called off the strike on February 15, instructing its members to return to work on the basis of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) agreed between the union and the company. No details of the MOU have been released as yet.

### **Burkina truck drivers extend their collective bargaining agreement**

Truck drivers in Burkina Faso came out on a three-day strike last week but were forced to return to work after the first day. The members of the Truck Drivers Union (UCRB) were striking over the renewal of a collective bargaining agreement and security issues affecting their jobs.

According to reports, the rapid conclusion of the strike came about in response to drivers blockading roads.

UCRB agreed to end the strike in collusion with several government departments involved in transport and security, along with the employers' federation and the Burkinabe Trade Union Federation.



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