

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

24 February 2017

## Rail staff on Southern Rail in England hold further one-day strike

Train conductors held a further one-day strike on Wednesday in their long-running dispute with their employer, Govia Thameslink, which runs Southern Rail.

The conductors, who are members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) are opposing the rail company's plans to widen the use of driver only operated (DOO) trains. The RMT said Southern Rail were using bullying tactics, revealing that letters were sent out to conductors warning them of sanctions if they took part in the strike, and accusing them of being in breach of their contracts.

Southern Rail drivers recently voted narrowly against a deal that attempted to end the dispute on Southern's terms. The Trades Union Congress sponsored talks involving the drivers union ASLEF and Southern Rail. The deal was recommended by the ASLEF leadership. According to the ITV television news network, ASLEF met with Southern Rail representatives for "secret peace" talks on Wednesday in a London hotel.

## Staff at Gatwick airport to be balloted for strike

Staff at Gatwick airport, who give support to disabled passengers and those with reduced mobility, are to be balloted for industrial action.

The ballot opened on Thursday and is set to close on March 9. The workers are employed by OCS Group UK and are members of the Unite union. They are seeking an improved pay offer—the majority earn £7.65 an hour. They have turned down three pay offers that have been made by the company—the latest one was for a 5p an hour increase from April of this year. All the votes to reject the offers have had majorities in excess of 90 percent.

## London Underground workers fight contract breaches

Workers who maintain the fleet of trains operated by the London Underground rail system, have voted by 67 percent for strike action and by 88 percent for action short of a strike.

The RMT members are opposing breaches of agreements being pushed through by Transport for London (TfL). These include not consulting with the union, as TfL is reducing staffing levels and failing to recruit staff to cover the Night Tube service.

Tube drivers on the Central Line East, also RMT members, held a 24-hour strike Tuesday over management's efforts to forcibly transfer

nine drivers to take positions at other depots.

## UK atomic weapons staff hold further strike

The 600 staff at the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) plants at Aldermaston and Burghfield in Berkshire held a further 24-hour strike Tuesday. Workers from the two sites held a march in London the same day, which included a march to the offices of the Ministry of Defence.

They are protesting plans to replace their current final salary pension scheme with an inferior defined contribution scheme. This is in contravention of an agreement made in the 1990s when AWE was privatized. They are members of the Unite union.

## College lecturers strike at London campus to defend colleague

Lecturers at the College of North West London at the Willesden and Wembley campuses were set to strike on Thursday in support of a trade union representative. The representative was suspended for taking time off to represent a colleague. The workers are members of the University and College Union.

## Further strike by Derbyshire teaching support staff

Teaching assistants in Derbyshire, England held a further 24-hour strike Monday. The Unison trade union members have been involved in a long-running dispute with Derbyshire council, who want to end payments to the teaching support staff over the school holiday periods. This would lead to a 25 percent cut in pay, according to Unison.

## Strike closes historic Greek sites

Security staff at historic sites including the Acropolis, the Parthenon and Temple of Athena Nike held a 24-hour strike Monday over pay and their contract. They are seeking overtime pay and for additional staff to be taken on.

Their conditions are under attack as a result of the austerity measures being pursued by the Syriza-led government.

### **Strike of fixed-rail staff in Greek capital**

Staff employed on the STASY fixed rail system, which includes the tram, metro and Kifissia-Piraeus electric railway serving Athens, were due to hold a 24-hour strike yesterday.

It was to protest legislation that has been drawn up which will open up the publicly owned STASY facilities to OASA—the commercially run Athens urban transport network. Unions representing the STASY employees argue that opening up its facilities to commercial operations will lead to a cut in revenues and pave the way for privatization of the system.

Further 24-hour strikes are set for March 1 and March 3.

### **Work stoppages at Greek public broadcaster**

Staff working for the Greek public broadcaster ERT were due to hold three-hour stoppages on Wednesday and Thursday of this week, with further strikes planned.

The staff are members of the POSPERT union and their grievances include hiring policy, a too-close relationship with the digital television network operator Digea and the introduction of a new payroll system.

### **Irish supermarket strike spreads**

A strike by staff working for the supermarket giant Tesco, in Ireland has now spread to cover 20 stores.

The members of the Mandate union are in dispute over Tesco's plans to impose a new contract on the 250 long-serving staff, who had been taken on by Tesco before 1996. In 1996, Tesco brought in a new contract with inferior conditions for staff joining the company. According to Mandate, the imposition of the contract would lead to a 15 percent pay cut.

Last week, staff rejected a Labour Court ruling to resolve the strike after talks between Tesco management and Mandate broke up. While the strike has now spread to 20 stores, 11 stores have voted against joining the strike. According to the union, Tesco management have been putting pressure on staff not to vote in favour of joining the strike, with managers phoning staff threatening cuts in hours or the closure of the store in the event of a strike.

In total, Tesco owns 148 stores throughout Ireland.

### **Irish bus strike on hold for further talks**

Drivers at Bus Eireann were due to start an indefinite strike Tuesday. The strike, however, was put on hold for further talks under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC).

Bus Eireann had threatened to bring in a new contract this week, with lower pay rates and inferior conditions, in an attempt to cut costs. Bus Eireann reported losses of more than €9 million last year and €1.5 million in January of this year. The drivers and other staff are represented by the

National Bus and Railworkers Union (NBRU), the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) and Unite.

The company issued a document outlining its programme to reduce costs. Among its proposals is the closure of some routes, including the Dublin-to-Clonmel and Derry routes, as well as the Athlone-to-Westport route.

The report outlines areas that the company says offers scope for savings, including rostering, overtime payments and absenteeism. It seeks to increase productivity by cutting the number of full-time drivers from 1,378 to 986. According to the company, a driver, on average, is paid for 9.4 hours a day but only generates revenue for 5.5 of these hours, approximately 60 percent of the working day. The company plans to up this to around 90 percent of the working day. It also plans to bring in new contacts for new starters with flexible hours, although guaranteeing a set minimum hours.

### **Icelandic fishermen return to work**

Icelandic fishermen who had been on strike since mid-December returned to work on Monday. This followed a vote on the weekend in which they agreed to a new wage contract. The majority in favour of accepting the deal was slim, with 52 percent for and nearly 47 percent against.

### **Strike by Italian taxi drivers followed by transport strike in Rome**

Italian taxi drivers held six days of strikes, only returning to work after prolonged talks between taxi representatives and an Italian transport minister. They had held demonstrations in Milan, Turin and Rome. On Tuesday in Rome, street vendors joined the taxi drivers in protesting.

The taxi drivers were protesting against car hire vehicles using e-hailing apps such as Uber to ply for hire. They argue that the drivers are able to obtain licences at a lower cost in a small town and then use the licence to trade in big cities. Taxi drivers have to purchase more expensive licences to work in cities. They are also aggrieved at having to operate at fixed tariffs, whereas Uber drivers can set their charges at will.

On Wednesday, public transport workers in Rome held a four-hour strike, which disrupted metro, bus and train lines within the city.

### **Israeli pilots settle dispute**

Pilots working for Israeli airline El Al, who are over the age of 65, have settled their dispute after negotiations between their union representatives and the company.

Under international law, pilots are not able to fly on international flights after the age of 65. In Israel, however, the retirement age is 67, so El Al had been employing its pilots between the ages of 65 and 67 as supervisors or trainers, but on a reduced salary. The pilots affected had been taking action resulting in the disruption of flights.

Under the agreement, pilots over 65 will receive their full salaries, providing they work as flight simulator trainers and log 120 simulations a year. If they choose to retire at 65, they will be given an NIS 600,000 bonus if they are captains, or NIS 500,000 if they are first officers.

### **Sudanese port workers demonstrate to defend jobs**

Radio Dabanga reported that workers at Sudanese seaports demonstrated at Port Sudan's state government administrative centre to protest job cuts. The protesters included 150 of the 600 port workers who had been dismissed by the state-owned Seaport Corporation.

Port workers demanded the rescinding of the sackings, stating they were concerned about the impact of the January dismissals on their fellow workers and their families. The company, responsible for maintaining the country's three ports around Sudan, said they had dismissed only casual workers, claiming it is the way they adjust their operations in response to demand.

### **Sudanese medical interns strike over unpaid financial incentives**

Medical interns came out on strike in West Darfur's capital, El Geneina, on February 15. The recently graduated interns are demanding the payment of financial incentives, the form of payment they receive for work carried out in Sudan's hospitals.

Some 34 trainee doctors have had their incentives stopped by the Ministry of Finance (MoF) claiming there is no evidence of their graduation from university.

The interns came out on strike after MoF reneged on a promise to resolve the problem.

### **Zimbabwean doctors strike over wages and hospital conditions**

Senior and junior hospital doctors throughout Zimbabwe went on strike February 15 to demand a pay increase and improvements in working conditions.

Their union, the Zimbabwe Hospital Doctors Association, wants an increase in on-call allowances to \$720 for higher paid and \$288 for lower paid doctors, and an end to the freeze on recruitment.

The striking doctors were followed two days later by gynaecologists and obstetricians, who downed tools. The latter claimed they could not continue under the pressure of operating without their doctors, and were concerned such a situation may lead to mistakes and loss of life.

The government of Robert Mugabe threatened to sack anyone who withdrew their labour, with monitoring taking place of those responding to the strike call to identify them. Military medics have been brought in to work alongside clinical directors in an attempt to break the strike.

The government claims it has begun recruiting 250 doctors and 2,000 nurses to lift the hospital system out of crisis. But, as in Kenya and Nigeria, Zimbabwean doctors are leaving the country in droves, not just because of wages but because of the shortages of drugs and facilities to carry out their jobs.

### **Nigerian doctors demonstrate over collapsing health system**

Members of the Nigerian Union of Allied Health Professionals demonstrated over the deplorable condition of the health service on February 16. The union condemned the Health Ministry over conditions in the health service and the failure of government to implement a 2009 agreement.

They accuse the government of salary arrears, unpaid promotions, neglecting a review of health workers' tax payments and reneging on agreed deals.

The protesters warned they were being forced to strike and the union called an indefinite strike from February 27.

### **Nigerian premier football players demonstrate**

Premier football players and officials in Nigeria are demanding several months of unpaid wages. Players from the Sunshine Stars club protested at Ondo state government house demanding payment of eight months' salary arrears.

The club was all but ignored by the state governor, who recommended that Sunshine seek out the attorney general to pay their wages—prompting the club spokesman to say there was no solution in sight.

### **Kenyan University staff continue strike over inadequate wage offer**

The strike by Kenyan university staff is now in its fifth week. The University Academic Staff Union (UASU) is calling for a 30 percent wage increase and 20 percent allowance enhancement, as a settlement of the 2013 collective bargaining agreement. The workers recently rejected a government pay offer.

There is an enormous gap between the government's offer and the demands of workers. Broken down, the rejected offer represents a 3.2 percent wage raise and 1.6 percent allowance increase.

A job evaluation intent on reducing the public sector wage bill is being put into practice, denying any academic staff a settlement until July 1. The union's response has been to threaten not to return to work until their pay review is completed.



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