

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

3 March 2017

Europe

UK rail conductors vote to strike

This week, railway conductors at three UK private franchises voted for strike action against plans to increase the use of driver only operated trains (DOO).

The members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) at Arriva Rail North, which operates Northern trains and Merseyrail and plans to introduce a fleet of 52 DOO trains, voted by a more than 80 percent margin for strike action. They will hold a 24-hour strike on March 13. In addition, RMT members at Merseyrail will not work rest days from March 7.

RMT staff working for Southern Rail, operated by Govia Thameslink Railway, will also hold a 24-hour strike on the same day. RMT staff at Southern Rail have been taking part in strike action over the last year in opposition to the increased use of DOO.

Last month, train drivers at Southern rejected an attempt by the ASLEF trade union to impose a sellout deal, which aims at forcing drivers to operate train doors instead of conductors, leading to the destruction of hundreds of jobs of train conductors.

London underground maintenance staff to begin action short of strike

RMT members working for the tube fleet maintenance unit, which is responsible for maintaining the underground rail system in the UK capital, are to begin industrial action on March 7. They are taking action over management's refusal to abide by agreed procedures.

The action will include not agreeing to changes in shifts, not carrying out duties above their pay grade, and refusing to work on a site with no first aider.

Among the issues involved is the reduction of staffing levels, not following agreed processes when adjusting rosters, and not allowing RMT reps to carry out their duties.

Protests against low pay at Liverpool hotel

The RMT has organised a demonstration outside the Adelphi hotel in Liverpool on March 7, having held a demonstration on February 25. They are protesting low rates of pay at the prestigious hotel. In spite of

increasing profits, the hotel is cutting the time for cleaners to clean a room by 20 percent. The RMT also opposes the continuing use of zero hour contracts at the Adelphi.

British Airways cabin crew in further strike

British Airways mixed fleet cabin crew are due to begin a seven-day strike today in their ongoing fight against low pay. The strike will affect both long and short haul flights. To date, the cabin crew, who are members of the Unite union, have held 26 days of strikes.

Strike by technology staff in northern England

Staff employed for the international technology firm Fujitsu at its office in the Risley area of Warrington in Cheshire held a 24-hour strike Tuesday. It was part of an ongoing series of actions at various Fujitsu sites across the country. The strikes are in response to the company's plans to cut its UK workforce by around 1,800, as well as attacks on pensions and pay.

London borough street cleaning staff strike

Members of the GMB union working for Continental Landscapes, which provides street cleaning services for the London borough of Wandsworth, began a two-day strike Tuesday. They are opposing poverty levels of pay being imposed by the company, which is reporting increasing profits.

Social work staff in Huddersfield hold one-hour strike

Social work staff working for Kirklees council—based in the north England town of Huddersfield—were set to hold a one-hour walkout on Thursday. The Unison union members are protesting high caseloads, poor pay and an inadequate IT system. The authority was rated as inadequate following an inspection by the government inspectorate Ofsted in November last year.

A previous vote by social work staff for a one-day strike in January was called off after the intervention of a regional Unison official. The Labour

Party majority council has threatened to use recently-passed Conservative government legislation to ban the strike but did not go ahead with the threat.

Threat to action of Irish nurses

Nurses belonging to the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO) have been warned their industrial action—due to begin next week—could be in breach of the Lansdowne Road Agreement and that it should be deferred. The planned strike is to protest staff shortages, which are putting increasing pressure on nursing staff. Under the Lansdowne Road Agreement, any breach could lead to an imposed pay freeze.

The *Irish Independent* reports it has seen a document in which the Lansdowne Road Oversight Body (LROB) calls on INMO to enter talks with the Workplace Relations Commission or refer the issue to the Labour Court for arbitration.

The LROB is composed of Irish government officials and union representatives.

Irish bus strike to go ahead

Members of the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) and the National Bus and Railworkers Union (NBRU), who are employed as drivers and other staff at Bus Eireann, are due to walk out on strike on March 6.

On that date, the company plans to impose measures designed to cut costs. A total of 55 measures have been announced, including closing some routes, reducing the number of drivers and bringing in productivity measures.

Currently, school bus services operated by Bus Eireann are not due to be part of the strike, but SIPTU has announced it may ballot its membership to include them.

Train services operated by Irish Rail are not officially part of the dispute, but some services may be affected where they operate from facilities shared with Bus Eireann.

Irish garage workers continue their strike

Staff at the Tim Hastings Volkswagen garage in Westport, Ireland, which sells new and used cars, are continuing a strike which began February 3. The workers came out on strike over three of their colleagues who had been made redundant, and are demanding they receive their full redundancy entitlements.

A rally in support of the strikers is due to take place in Westport tomorrow.

Strike by Irish Tesco staff called off

After 11 days of strikes, Mandate, the union representing Tesco staff, called off their strike on February 24. This is to allow the union to attend

further talks at the Labour Court in an attempt to resolve the issue.

The strike had been called 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.

Workers at Irish college to strike

Staff providing student services at Cork Institute of Technology were set to strike on Thursday. The 45 staff held a one-day strike in December last year. The SIPTU members are seeking a pay rise. Currently they are paid between €9 and €11 an hour. Some of the staff have worked there for 20 years and none have received a pay rise in the last 10 years.

Finnish airport ground staff set to strike

The Finnish Aviation Union has called strikes for March 6 and March 10 in a dispute with Palta, the body representing service sector companies in Finland. If it goes ahead, it will affect security checks and baggage handling at Finnish airports.

A threatened strike by cabin crew working for the Thomas Cook and Tui Fly travel agencies, due to have taken place next week, has been called off following talks between their union, Pro, and Palta.

Transport strike in Athens

Staff working for the STASY fixed rail system in Athens held a second 24-hour strike on Wednesday, with a third due to take place Friday. The fixed rail system includes the tram, metro and Kifissia-Piraeus electric railway serving Athens. Wednesday's strike led to traffic chaos in the city.

The workers are protesting 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 STASY employees say this will lead to a cut in revenues and the privatization of the system.

Middle East

Talks fail to settle Israeli crane operator dispute

Recent talks to settle a dispute involving Israeli crane drivers failed to resolve it. The talks reached agreement on pay and other conditions but failed to reach agreement over safety issues.

Around 1,200 crane operators working at construction sites across Israel held a one-day strike on February 23.

Africa

Gambian flour product workers strike over slave conditions

Workers at Gambia's Gambia Milling Corporation went on strike on Monday, claiming they were being treated like slaves. Several workers at the flour product company spoke to the FOROYAA newspaper about the issues that led them to strike.

They said promises of permanent jobs after six months of provisional employment were not followed through and many of the staff are on a one-year contract. Other issues include a pay rise and medical cover for workers and their families.

They also demand the provision of staff transport, access to loans and promotion opportunities. The Gambia Workers Union has been brought into the dispute at the request of management and workers, whereas a staff association, representing employees, has been disbanded by the company.

Zimbabwe teachers demand annual bonus payment

A civil service protest has been organised by Zimbabwean trade unions for March 6 in the country's capital, Harare. Apex Council, representing civil service unions, called the demonstration to protest the government's failure to pay annual bonuses for last year.

In the case of teachers, the government is trying to pass off housing stands (accommodation for teachers) as a form of bonus payment. Unions dispute this, claiming it is not a part of salary incentives.

The Amalgamated Allied Teachers Association called off its weeklong strike, using the justification of bringing it into line with the protest and demonstration organised by Apex Council.

South African coal truckers defy protest ban

Over 100 South African coal truck drivers blockaded roads around Pretoria Wednesday. They handed in a letter outlining their concerns that plans by Eskom—the electricity power generating body—to increase the use of renewable energy would lead to job losses. The truck drivers are employed by the Coal Transportation Forum (CTF).

The CTF, described as a not-for-profit organisation, provides coal hauliers for Eskom. Eskom is refusing to renew future contracts to CTF saying they have a three million metric tons surplus of coal at the power stations, an increase in renewable energy, a downturn in the economy, alongside power generation being farmed out to private suppliers.

Hauliers are appealing to the energy provider to phase in the transformation to cushion the impact on trade and employment.

Twenty thousand jobs are expected to go at several generating sites earmarked for closure by 2020. An Eskom spokesman said these are government decisions that it was unable to do anything about.

Kenyan doctors' strike enters twelfth week

Negotiations in the Kenyan doctors' dispute are at stalemate as negotiations have officially broken down. The government is not prepared to implement the 2013 Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) and insists on a new 2017 CBA.

Although doctors have reduced their initial demands on two occasions, the government claims meeting the medics' demands would swallow the whole national budget.

The bodies adopted for negotiations—the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights and the Law Society of Kenya—have sent a report to the courts on the state of negotiations which could determine whether the doctors will be jailed.

The seven-day extension given previously—postponing the jailing of the leaders of the doctors' union, the Kenya Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentists' Union—ended on Wednesday.

Requests for a further seven-day extension by the doctors have been opposed by the government, which would only concede to a two-to-three-day extension. It would appear that the duration is to enable possible secret negotiations taking place.

Gabon oil workers halt production at Onal oilfields

Striking Gabon oil workers at the Maural and Prom's Onal oilfield were aggressively attacked by the country's defence and security forces when they were removed from the site.

In response, the National Union of Oil Employees union is balloting its members on an oil industry-wide strike.

Workers at the Onal oilfield struck on February 22 after the takeover of the Maural and Prom's operation by Pertamina, an Indonesian company. Workers were demanding the payment of their bonuses due prior to the takeover.

The company operates in 12 countries and produced 28,000 barrels of oil per day in the last quarter of 2017 at the Onal oil field. The field is at a complete standstill, even though the company described the strike as illegal and attempted to sue workers in court to force a return to work.

Gabonese teachers continue extended strike

Gabonese teachers are continuing their strike, which began in October 2016. The strike is a continuation of an earlier walkout—going back to January 2016—in protest at the government's breaking of its promise in a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The National Union of Education had agreed a return to work in January 2016 on the basis of the MoU.

Their demands include better provision of buildings and equipment, payment of benefits owed, and competitive entrance examinations at teacher trainer colleges as promised. A further grievance is that the privatisation of education has now gone beyond 50 percent.

The strike is gathering momentum, with Catholic schools joining in with the public sector. Around 80 percent of Gabon's schools are closed.



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