

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

17 March 2017

UK: Train drivers' union attempts fresh sell-out in Southern Rail dispute

The ASLEF train drivers' union is pushing a rotten sell-out of the struggle against Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains on the Southern Rail franchise. Wednesday saw ASLEF proclaim that it had secured a "recommended deal" with Southern Rail's parent company, Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR), after "constructive talks".

Train drivers are to be balloted on the proposed deal and the result declared by April 3.

ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan claimed that the deal "offers solutions to our concerns, as well as restoring the confidence of all parties, and the travelling public"—the same claim made regarding an ASLEF recommended deal rejected by 55 percent of drivers in February!

Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union leader, Mick Cash, was scathing in his own estimation of the agreement—describing the latest proposal as the "old one in new envelope." Cash declared that the deal meant that drivers and passengers had "lost the cast-iron guarantee they once had of a guard on the train, which means they will now be more exposed and left vulnerable when something goes wrong ... The fact is that GTR have deliberately done this deal behind the backs of guards and their union."

RMT members on Southern have taken 30 days of strike action over the dispute, which began last April and ASLEF has taken five.

The latest deal comes just two days after train conductors at Southern Rail, as well as Arriva Rail North and Merseyrail struck Monday to oppose the introduction of DOO services, during which, at Merseyrail, many ASLEF drivers refused to cross RMT picket lines.

UK: Underground rail staff vote to strike

Train drivers, members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) working the London Underground all night service—which operates Friday and Saturdays—have voted by a more than 90 percent majority to take strike action. The staff recruited to run the overnight service are employed on a part-time basis of 16 hours and are not allowed to apply for full-time positions for a period of six months. They are also demanding to be paid overtime rates; at present, because they are on the 16-hour contracts, any additional hours are just paid at normal rate.

Protest by UK auto workers over pensions

On Wednesday, staff working for BMW held protests outside the company's car plant at Cowley, near Oxford and Hams Hall in the West Midlands. The protests were over BMW's plans to get rid of final-salary pensions, replacing them with inferior ones, which will lead to pension losses in excess of £100,000.

Cinema staff in southern UK town set to strike

Staff at the Duke of York cinema in Brighton are due to strike tomorrow in pursuit of the living wage. They are members of the BECTU trade union and voted unanimously for the strike. Picturehouse owns a chain of 23 cinemas. In turn, Picturehouse is owned by Cineworld, the second-largest cinema business in Europe.

They will be joined by Picturehouse staff at Crouch End, Hackney and the Ritzy in Brixton, London who are striking over the same issue. The London staff have conducted a long-running dispute over the living wage issue.

UK nuclear fleet workers vote to strike

Staff at the Faslane and Coulport naval bases, members of the Unite union, have voted by more than 95 percent to strike. They service the UK nuclear submarine fleet. Unite accuses the Babcock Marine company of victimising its members and refusing to negotiate with them. Other issues include the outsourcing of domestic servicing duties.

Strike by cleaners at prestigious London School of Economics

Around 250 cleaners at the London School of Economics (LSE) began a 48-hour strike on Wednesday. They work for Noonan Services Group and are represented by the United Voices of the World union (UVW). They are demanding pay and working conditions in line with workers directly employed by the LSE.

Belarus protest against tax on jobless

Several hundred protesters held a demonstration in the southwestern

Belarus city of Pinsk on March 11 against a tax on workers who work less than six months in the year. Other rallies took place the next day in Babruysk, Vorsha, and Rahachou. A rally was also planned for the capital Minsk.

The tax would also apply to those who do not register with unemployment centres. The planned legislation authorizing the tax has been postponed for a year by the authoritarian Belarus president, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, to allow for “corrections” to the legislation.

German airport ground staff walk out

Ground crew, members of the Verdi union, at the Tegel and Schönefeld airports in Berlin came out on strike Monday, returning to work on Wednesday. They are demanding a €1 an hour wage increase. Their strike led to the cancellation of hundreds of flights. They previously carried out two strikes in February over the same issue.

An offer from the employers of an 8 percent pay increase over three years—a €0.27 rise an hour—has been rejected by the union. The employer’s body has called for mediation in the dispute.

Deal announced in German airline dispute

Lufthansa, the German airline, and the pilots’ union, Vereinigung Cockpit (VC), announced Wednesday that they had struck a deal to end a five-year dispute. The deal will cover pilots working for the Cargo wing, the budget operation Germanwings as well as the Lufthansa Airlines.

Under the new agreement, pilots will get a staggered pay rise of nearly 11.5 percent along with a one-off payment of nearly two months’ salary. It will cover the period from May 2012 to June 2022. The VC union carried out 14 separate actions during the course of the dispute.

Irish bus strike back on cards as talks fail

The Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) representing drivers and other staff working for the Irish bus company Bus Éireann, says a planned strike is likely to go ahead following the breakdown of talks between the union and the company. Negotiations, brokered by the mediation service, the Workplaces Relations Commission, broke down Monday. Members of the National Bus and Railworkers Union (NBRU) are also involved in the dispute.

Bus Éireann is running at a loss of nearly €10 million last year. The company put forward a survival plan to achieve €30 million in savings, €12 million coming from cuts in the payroll. In total, 55 measures have been announced, including closing some routes, reducing the number of drivers and bringing in productivity measures.

For their part, the unions are agreeable to tackling “inefficiencies” but at this stage are saying they will not accept cuts in pay and conditions.

Dublin college staff vote for industrial action

Non-academic staff at Dublin’s Trinity College, members of SIPTU and the Unite union, have voted by 90 percent majorities to take strike action. The main issue is over the increasing use of temporary contracts for new staff and the loss of permanent positions. The unions are due to meet with college management in an attempt to resolve the issue.

Maltese broadcasting staff protest bullying

Staff working for the Maltese Broadcasting Authority (BA), represented by the UHM union, held a one-hour strike on Tuesday, demanding the removal of the BA chairwoman, Tanya Borg Cardona, who was appointed just over a year ago. The BA staff accuse Cardona of imposing a regime of bullying and intimidation and called for her immediate resignation. The UHM said the strike was a last resort, as a petition sent to the Maltese Prime Minister, Joseph Muscat, has had no response.

Spanish dock workers set to strike

Dock workers in Spain are due to hold a one-day strike today followed by further one-day strikes on March 20, 22 and 24. However, previously planned strikes had been cancelled.

The Sea Workers’ Union (CETM) called the strikes in response to a European Union ruling that the system requiring Spanish ports to give preference to dockworkers organised in stevedoring societies in each port, known as a Public Limited Company of Dockworkers Management (SAGEP), was a restraint on trade and must end. The SAGEPs recruit and train port workers before they are made available to employers.

Belgian truck manufacturer strike

Employees at the Volvo truck manufacturing site in the northwestern Belgian city of Ghent held a strike Tuesday. The plant produces 50,000 vehicles a year. One striker, who brought along a cow to the demonstration held outside the plant, told the media that the workforce were being milked dry by the company.

A spokesman for the strikers explained the company wanted to increase productivity 3 percent by increasing the already fast pace of the production line. He said older workers were already having problems trying to keep up with the pace of work. Last week, the company put forward a proposal which was rejected by over 80 percent of the workforce.

Talks between the unions and Volvo management over increased flexibility are continuing.

Firefighters demonstrate in Paris

Firefighters from across France held a demonstration in Paris Tuesday. They were protesting French government austerity measures, which has led to cutting the number of firefighters. They let off explosive flares as part of their demonstration to emphasise their opposition to the cuts.

Parisian rodent control staff strike

Staff responsible for catching rats in the city of Paris held a one-day strike on Tuesday. They are members of the CGT union. Around 50 of them, almost the whole of the workforce, held a demonstration outside the city hall. Among their demands are for more staff, they are not able to keep up with the demands for their services, and for the reinstatement of a €2,000 bonus they used to receive.

Portuguese nurses call strike

Portuguese nurses have called a strike to take place from 8 a.m. March 30 through midnight March 31, covering five shifts. Their demands include the return to a 35-hour week in line with other public service staff. Nurses' union representatives are due to meet with the Portuguese health minister next week in an attempt to circumvent the strike.

Protest by Iranian teachers

Hundreds of current and retired teachers held a rally outside the Iranian parliament on March 10, demanding teachers' pay be increased in line with other government staff. They also protested legal action taken against activists.

Israeli health staff two-hour strike to highlight abuse

Israeli hospital and community clinic staff across the country were due to hold a two-hour strike Wednesday between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. local time. The stoppage was sanctioned by the Histadrut labour federation. It had been called to highlight verbal and physical abuse against health staff. According to the Health Ministry, there were 800 such attacks last year.

Kenyan doctors capitulate to Kenyatta's demands

Kenyan doctors are reported to have returned to work on Monday, after signing an agreement. Direct negotiations with the unions and President Uhuru Kenyatta ended with the president declaring talks would not continue until the doctors returned to work.

Further reports suggest the Council of Governors—the official negotiating body—have agreed to a submitted “Return to Work Formula” presented to the Court of Appeals by the doctors union.

The agreement is based on an allowance increase, with negotiations on the doctors' central demand, the implementation of the 2013 collective bargaining agreement (CBA), to continue after a return to work.

The Kenya Medical Practitioners and Dentists Union has conceded to a previously rejected pay offer and a promise of continued negotiations over

the 2013 CBA that has since been put off.

Government officials are said to be monitoring the return to work of the 5,000 doctors. President Kenyatta has said that any doctor refusing to return to work would be sacked. Contrasting reports are emerging, suggesting “streams” of doctors returning to work, and others of virtually empty hospitals.

Kenyan university staff return on government reduced offer

On Monday, Kenyan lecturers agreed to return to work and were expected to be back in class on Tuesday. It represents a capitulation by their union, the University Academics Staffs Union (UASU), mirroring that of the Kenya Medical Practitioners and Dentists Union.

It was only last week that the union rejected an offer from their negotiating counterpart, the Inter-Public Universities Councils Consultative Forum, for an 18 percent pay increase pursuing a demand for 30 percent. It has now settled for a 17.5 percent pay rise

The union is celebrating the government's acceptance of the 2013-2017 collective bargaining agreement (CBA) that is due to end in the summer. The UASU see this as a basis for a new CBA to be extended over a similar period. As part of the settlement, union members are expecting four years' back pay based on the 2013-2017 agreed rate.

UASU vice chairman, Professor Muturi Mberia, thanked the government for signing the CBA and promised time lost during the course of the strike would be made up by his members.

Kenyan teachers threaten action

The Kenyan National Union of Teachers is threatening that it will strike in May. It is demanding the government increase its education budget to employ an additional 5,000 teachers.

Teachers are also demanding a timetable for the implementation of a collective bargaining agreement. Another continuing issue is the lack of parity of housing allowances.

Nigerian university staff walk out over unpaid wages and subscriptions

The members of three non-academic unions at the University of Ibadan went on strike Monday. They are protesting short payment of wages and interference with their pensions.

They rejected an appeal by the university vice chancellor to keep working after previous complaints by the unions were ignored. An earlier warning of an indefinite strike on March 8 was ignored by university management.

The unions involved are the National Association of Staff Unions (NASU), National Association of Academic Technologists (NAAT) and the Senior Staff Association Nigerian Universities (SSANU) and their complaints were expected to be addressed at a governing council meeting due to have taken place Wednesday.

Nigerian health workers to go on indefinite strike

A seven-day warning strike by Nigerian National Health Service workers at the National Orthopaedic hospital at Igbobi, Lagos, ended on Tuesday, paving the way for an indefinite strike.

Several unions under the Joint Action Committee (JAC) issued the strike warning over alleged corruption in the health service. The JAC claims wages have gone unpaid and funds paid through wage deductions had also gone unaccounted for. Payments for training and monies for promotion and call duty allowances could not be accounted for. The JAC claims numerous agreements with the Federal Health Minister and the hospital management to finance these increments have been made but not implemented.

South African bus workers given all clear for national walkout

Mediation in the South African bus workers dispute collapsed last week creating the possibility of a national strike. The bus workers' union, the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU), received a certificate allowing them to strike. The union said it would now discuss with its members over the next month and plan a way forward.

South African social security workers protest working conditions

Some 6,000 Social Security Agency workers (SASSA) began a national strike Monday over working conditions. They are members of the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union and are backed by the trade union federation COSATU.

Outstanding claims over their conditions remain unresolved going back to 2015 and negotiations had become deadlocked. Members working at state-owned SASSA have responsibility to administer social payments to 17 million South Africans. Distribution of welfare payments is also shared with Cash Paymaster Services (CPS), a private South African company, covering 9 million beneficiaries.

A constitutional conflict has come to a head over the continued involvement of CPS in administering the service. It was intended that its role would be relinquished in April 2017 following a previous agreement.

Concerns were raised earlier when the minister responsible for SASSA said it did not have the capacity to manage the service independently, but did not make that clear to the constitutional court.



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