

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

Strikes threatened at UK auto plants, while UK nurses, rail staff take strike votes

14 April 2017

British auto workers set to strike

Workers at BMW, Mini and Rolls-Royce Motor Cars are to hold a series of 24-hour strikes at four plants across the UK to oppose attacks on pensions.

BMW, which owns the Mini and Rolls-Royce brands, is to close its final-salary pension schemes by the end of May. The Unite trade union estimates that this could cost some workers up to £160,000 in retirement benefits.

The Unite union has called eight strikes to be held at four of the companies' plants between April 19 and May 24. The strikes will hit production of the Mini at a factory in Cowley, Oxfordshire. Other plants to be hit will be BMW's engine plant at Hams Hall in Warwickshire, a Rolls-Royce's factory in Goodwood, Sussex and a pressings plant in Swindon.

While BMW employs about 8,000 people in the UK, Unite says the action will only involve up to 3,500.

Speaking following the strike announcement, Len McCluskey, the union's general secretary said, "I urge BMW to step back from its May deadline for the pension scheme's closure and negotiate seriously to find a settlement which is good for the business and good for the workforce."

Strike by civilian staff at Scottish nuclear base called off by Unite union

Unite union general secretary Len McCluskey announced Wednesday that the series of rolling strikes by civilian staff at UK nuclear bases on the Clyde in Scotland was over. Unite called off the action after talks with management.

Unite members at the bases had voted by more than 90 percent for action against their employer, Babcock Marine. They accused the company of not following agreed procedures and bypassing union reps. Unite accused the Ministry of Defence of undermining their action by using military personnel to carry out the workers' duties.

Members will now vote on the proposals, which have been backed by the shop stewards, on April 18.

UK rail maintenance staff to hold strike vote

Staff working for train maintenance company Arriva Traincare are being balloted for possible strike action or action short of a strike due to a low pay offer. The ballot by the members of the Rail Maritime and Transport union members is due to close on May 2.

UK nurses to be polled for possible strike

In an unprecedented move, the Royal College of Nurses (RCN) will conduct an online poll of its 270,000 members. They will be asked if they are prepared to take strike action or action short of a strike. Previously the RCN had always refused to consider strike action.

The poll is in response to the recent 1 percent pay increase offer from the government. The RCN says that pay freezes and low increases since 2010 mean nurses have suffered a 14 percent pay cut in real terms.

The result of the poll will be announced at the RCN conference in May. If the poll indicates a desire to strike, a formal ballot will be held.

Further strikes by UK Fujitsu staff

UK staff at Japanese technology company Fujitsu held a further 24-hour strike on Thursday. Sites affected were London, Manchester, Basingstoke, Belfast, Birmingham, Bracknell, Crewe, Edinburgh, Stevenage, Wakefield and Warrington.

They have already held four days of strike over the company's plans to downgrade their pension scheme, carry through nearly 2,000 job cuts and are fighting for a pay increase.

Strike by Irish bus staff ends

The strike by the 1,900 staff working for Bus Eireann was called off by the unions after 21 days following a recommendation by the Labour Court on redundancies, pay structures and other issues.

According to an article in the Irish *Independent*, the unions are agreeable to €18 million of savings by a voluntary redundancy process and other efficiencies. An obstacle was the company's proposals to abolish any

enhanced pay rates and instead impose a flat basic rate.

The two main unions involved are the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) and the National Bus and Railworkers Union.

Irish lead and zinc miners end sit-in

Miners at the Tara lead and zinc mine in County Meath ended a six-day sit-in last Saturday. The members of SIPTU were protesting changes to the underground ambulance system. The miners ended their protest following discussions between management, workers' safety committee and a senior Health and Safety Authority inspector.

Walkout by French luxury goods workers

Workers employed by luxury fashion producer, Louis Vuitton, employed in their French leather goods manufacturing sites, walked out for an hour on April 5 and held protests outside their workplaces. It was the first walkout by Louis Vuitton staff in 15 years. The walkout hit four of the 12 leather goods manufacturing sites in France.

The workers are represented by the Force Ouvrière and Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail unions. They are seeking a €55 rise a month, with Louis Vuitton offering €30 a month. Last year the company posted record sales of €37 billion. The company has entered negotiations with staff representatives.

Greek shop workers oppose Sunday opening

The union representing private sector workers, OIYE, has called on its members to strike at stores and shops that open on Sundays. The previous government brought in legislation allowing shops to open every last Sunday in the month, and prior to weekend holidays such as Easter. Some workers have already been involved in picketing of stores that open Sundays.

Czech social worker staff take up struggle against low pay

The union representing Czech social work staff, OSZSP, is calling for a pay increase in line with other public sector staff such as nurses. Currently, even with overtime and unsocial hour enhancements the average wage for social workers is around 18,000 crowns (\$720) a month, whereas the national average monthly pay is 29,320 crowns (\$1,170).

Postal workers march through Polish capital

Several hundred postal workers marched through the Polish capital of Warsaw last Saturday to protest low pay and bad working conditions.

They marched to the Polish prime minister's office demanding a 1,000 zloty (\$250) a month pay rise and for more postal staff to be employed to ease the workload of current staff.

Last month postal staff marched through Warsaw and several other cities to press their demands. So far, the Polish government has failed to respond.

Planned protest by Romanian museum staff

Around 1,500 Romanian museum staff plan to hold a protest on May 20 in conjunction with an event that has been organised by museums to promote their work, known as the Night of Museums.

Museum staff will not boycott the museum event but will organise additional exhibitions outside museums.

Their protest is to highlight wage disparities among museum staff and to demand protection of museum services and exhibits. They will also hold a march in Bucharest that will end at the Ministry of Culture.

Protest by Israeli broadcasting staff

Israeli Broadcasting Authority (IBA) staff held a protest outside the home of the head of the Histadrut labour union, Avi Hissenkorn, on Monday over his inaction in their dispute. They are protesting the loss of hundreds of jobs that will result from the reorganization of the broadcasting service in Israel.

An official dispute has been declared over the planned job losses, but workers are impatient at the pace of response from Histadrut.

Protest by Palestinian Authority workers over pay cuts

Thousands of workers employed by the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the Gaza strip held a protest last Saturday over a 30 percent pay cut imposed by the PA. The demonstration took place in al-Saraya Square in Gaza city.

The protesters also called on the PA prime minister, Rami Hamdallah and the finance minister Shukri Bishara to resign. The PA government says it was forced to impose the pay cut as a result of cuts in foreign aid and the Israeli blockade.

Moroccan local government staff strike

Local government workers in Morocco, members of the Morocco Labour Union, were due to hold a 24-hour strike on Thursday. The action was to push for a pay increase and protest proposed changes in their pension provision.

Textile workers in Ghana deprived of wages once again

Ghana textile workers began an unofficial strike April 6 at Volta Star Textile Company. The wildcat action was in response to management's refusal to negotiate a wage deal and to pay outstanding wages.

Strikers returned to work after the intervention of the Commercial Workers Union (CWU) in discussions with management.

The company, which had been closed down for a year, owing workers' wages and insurance contributions to the tune of GH 3.6 million (US\$710,000), has just recently reopened.

The reopening was financed by the Export Development and Agricultural Investment Fund, an international funding agency.

Workers have once again gone without wages for 3 months, and social security and union dues have not been remitted. The CWU said the company had agreed to pay one month's wages before Easter, and other outstanding grievances would be dealt with at a later date.

The deputy general secretary of the CWU advised management to establish good relations with their workers, saying that otherwise productivity would be hit.

Kenyan doctors' strike continues

The return to work by Kenyan doctors is threatened by the refusal of some state governors to pay the medics for their time on strike. Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta has instructed the federal state not to victimise them and pay the doctors for wages and increments lost during their 100-day strike.

But some state governors claim that monies normally paid as wages to medical staff during the strike have been spent on "other projects." The Council of Governors, responsible for the state medics pay, say they would need a further N 3 billion (US\$9.8 million) from central government.

Kidero's state governor, along with others, refuses to pay the striking doctors, members of the Kenya Medical Practitioners Pharmacists and Dentists Union, on the basis of no-work no-pay, and they also assert a right to take disciplinary action.

Kenyan electrical supply workers threaten strike over reneged agreement

Kenyan power workers are threatening to go on strike if the Kenyan Power Company does not follow through on the implementation of a collective bargaining agreement (CBA).

The electricity supply company is attempting to annul the CBA, recently signed with the Kenya Electrical Trades and Allied Workers Union.

Kenyan Power went to the courts behind the back of the union to disavow the agreement, claiming, among other things, it would cause industrial disruption.

The private supplier claiming concern for the public purse had tried to elicit the intervention of the Salaries and Remunerations Commission (SRC) to arbitrate. However, the SRC does not adjudicate over wages in the private sector.

A presiding judge declined the company's appeal but the case is to be heard May 10.

Strikes at Nigeria's Ibadan University

Last week non-academic staff at Nigeria's University of Ibadan returned to work after a strike lasting three weeks was suspended, only for academic staff to walk out the next day.

Some of the issues confronting non-academic staff are the same as those causing the academic staff to strike—only part payment of wages since 2014 and monies drawn from wages that cannot be accounted for.

The academic workers' union, the Academic Staffs Union of Universities, called their seven-day warning strike on April 5. They are demanding the resolution of a whole string of issues, on top of the ones affecting non-academic staff.

These include illegal pension deductions, outstanding promotion arrears, and supervision allowances not paid. The unions are also calling for an audit of employees at the university.

The non-academic staff suspended their strike after management agreed to pay the deficit in January and February's wages and pay the whole of March's salary.

It was agreed the wages settlement would go to non-academic as well as academic staff. Part of the reason for the academic staff going on strike was the renegeing on this agreement. The agreement was seen as a ploy to get staff back to work.

South African bus workers cleared for national strike

South African bus workers were set to strike Wednesday over wages and conditions of work. A national bus strike is pending involving 16 bus companies and five unions.

Issues involved in the strike include a demand for a 12 percent pay increase, alterations in shift patterns and the inclusion of a paid second driver on trips over long periods/distances.

The 12 percent claim is for a deal over 12 months while the bus companies are offering a 7.5 percent wage increase over three years. Negotiations have been ongoing since February, with the deadlock resulting in the breakdown of arbitration and a certificate, allowing industrial action being issued.

The strike is expected to affect thousands of commuters over the Easter holidays.

South African Rail workers get strike certificate

Alongside the bus strike, the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA) is also facing industrial action. The rail operator claims it is in debt to the tune of R1.8 billion (\$134m) and refuses to up its wage offer from 6 percent.

The rail workers' union, the United National Transport Union, is demanding a 20 percent wage increase.

Negotiations have also been underway since February, and along with an insufficient wage offer, PRASA refuses to contemplate any increases in allowances.

The Arbitration service has issued a non-resolution certificate giving the union the right to call a strike within two days.



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