

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

## Bank of England staff strike, Israeli workers protest chemical plant closing

4 August 2017

### Spanish rail workers strike

Rail workers employed by the state-owned Spanish rail operator RENFE and infrastructure company Adif, which is responsible for tracks and stations, carried out a one-day strike July 28. The workers, who are members of the Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) and Confederacion General del Trabajo (CGT), are opposing government restructuring plans, which would result in outsourcing and jobs cuts. The walkout led to the cancellation of around 270 trains on one of the busiest days of the year for travel, with many people beginning their summer holidays.

Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's right-wing Popular Party government has implemented a program of austerity, privatization and labour "reforms" since taking power in 2012. While his government and the media hail Spain's supposed economic recovery, the jobless rate remains about 18 percent and is near 39 percent for younger workers, while low wages and job insecurity are rampant. The unions, which are largely aligned the Socialist Party (PSOE)—which also imposed brutal austerity measures when in office—have restricted strikes to largely ceremonial actions while colluding with subsequent governments.

### Strike threat by Portuguese medics

Portuguese doctors have announced they will carry out further strikes as part of their campaign to reduce compulsory overtime, lower the number of patients allocated to family doctors and reduce the time doctors must work in emergency and accident departments. The doctors, who struck May 10-11, announced they would strike at the end of August or beginning of September unless the government resolves the issues.

### Bank of England staff strike

For the first time in over 50 years, Bank of England (BoE) staff went on strike this week. The workers supplying maintenance and security services, together with those servicing the parlours (offices), began a three-day strike Tuesday. The bank workers, who are members of the Unite union, are opposing a second year of below-inflation pay increases.

The strike started after talks conducted by the government mediation

service Acas broke down. On Tuesday, pickets wearing BoE Governor Mark Carney masks were outside the bank's premises in central London. The Unite union is trying to bolster illusions in the Labour Party and invited Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, one of Jeremy Corbyn's closest allies, to speak to striking workers and posture as a defender of the working class.

### Partial strike by Birmingham refuse collectors continues

Refuse collectors in Birmingham, Britain's second city, are continuing their partial strike action, which began June 30. Initially they were striking one hour a day. This was increased to two, and now three hours a day. Members of the Unite union are opposed to Birmingham City Council's plans to restructure the refuse collection service, which would lead to pay cuts for around 120 staff of up to £5,000 a year. The refuse collectors say they will continue with their current action until September.

### Hospital domestic staff in London continue their struggle

Cleaners and other domestic staff employed at four hospitals in the Barts Health Trust in east London are continuing job actions against low pay. The workers are employed by the outsourcing company Serco that provides domestic services to the four hospitals.

The workers, who are Unite members, have been demanding a 30p-an-hour pay increase and a reduction in their workload. They have already taken days of strike action and are currently taking part in a 14-day strike, which began July 25. Last week they held a protest outside JPMorgan, where Serco announced its latest profit results. Further strike action is planned later this month and in September.

### Strike by drug company drivers in Scotland

Drivers working for the Alliance Healthcare base at the Coatbridge distribution centre in Scotland held a one-day strike Wednesday. Members of the Unite union were protesting cuts to their pension scheme employer

contributions, which have been imposed on the staff after Alliance Healthcare took over the Coatbridge distribution centre from DHL Boots. According to Unite, the changes could mean a loss of around £35,000 in pension over the lifetime of a retiree. A £200 one-off payment to settle the dispute was rejected by the workforce.

### **UK rail workers announce strike**

Staff working for Arriva TrainCare will hold a 24-hour strike on August 18. In the week leading up to the strike, they will refuse to work rest days or do overtime. Members of the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) are protesting the low pay offer made by the company. Arriva TrainCare is responsible for the maintenance of trains and rolling stock and has a central base at Crewe with branches in Bristol, Cambridge, Eastleigh and Gateshead.

Meanwhile, staff working for bus operator Stagecoach in southwest England are to be balloted for possible strike action by the RMT. Around 750 staff, including drivers, cleaners and mechanics, will be balloted. They are angry at a below-inflation pay increase offer.

Since April 2016, the RMT, along with the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF), have carried out a series of limited, and largely impotent, strikes at Arriva Trains Northern, Merseyrail and Southern GTR. Rail workers are opposing the imposition of Driver Only Operated trains (DOO), which threatens 6,000 conductors' jobs and threatens passenger safety.

While workers are determined to fight, the unions are encouraging workers to place their faith in the Labour Party. Under Tony Blair, Labour escalated the Tories' rail privatization programme and called off strikes during the election to prevent embarrassing Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn.

### **Israeli chemical workers protest plant closure**

Hundreds of workers blocked roads, lit tyres on fire and staged protests inside and outside the plant Wednesday after Haifa Chemicals announced it was closing its ammonia plant in northern Israel, wiping out 800 jobs. Haifa Chemicals, which is owned by a US holding company, would rather close the plant than pay the costs to relocate a huge storage tank in the Port of Haifa, which has been ordered shut because of health and environmental dangers in the heavily populated area.

The workers, most of whom are on temporary contracts, assembled outside the plant and demanded the resignations of the company's CEO Nadav Shachar and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Aviram Elmakias, 28, from Dimona told ynet.com, "I am young but to have to go out and look for work when my wife may give birth any minute is hard. We are in a state of total uncertainty. It isn't nice to bring a child into the world this way."

### **South Africa miners to march against job destruction**

The South African National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) held a march to Anglo Gold's Ashanti offices on Thursday to protest job cuts. Anglo Gold has announced 8,500 jobs are to go. The redundancies are

part of an estimated 20,000 jobs being slashed this year, on top of the estimated 80,000 mining jobs destroyed over the previous five years.

Many of the unemployed miners have taken up artisanal or subsistence mining and some 300 miners have lost their lives in these small-scale operations since 2012. This form of unregulated work has been outlawed and regular mineworkers are accused and often punished on the suspicion of feeding "illegal" miners who hide underground for up to a month without surfacing. Sibanye Gold is strip-searching female workers on suspicion of hiding food for these miners. Those who refuse are treated as criminals and suspended.

### **Striking South African pathologists return to work**

A day after striking pathologists marched on the National Health Laboratory Services (NHLS) offices in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa they were sent back to work by the National Education and Health Allied Workers Union after NEHAWU said it struck an unspecified deal Tuesday. The union made an initial wage claim of 13 percent, but then lowered this to 7.3 percent.

### **Non-teaching staff strike over pay distribution in Ugandan universities**

The non-teaching staff union at Uganda's 11 public universities have called off their strike, after a promise from the employer to resolve the issue. Staff at the universities came out on July 26 over continuing unresolved salary distribution. The university employees demanded a pay award of over 20 billion Uganda shillings (US\$33.2 million) be distributed equally. Although an appeal by the government to be given more time to find extra funds was rejected by the National Union of Institutions (NUI), the union agreed to allow the matter to be resolved as part of the 2018-2019 budget settlement.

### **Senior staff strike threat over Nigerian oil operators "out of control employers"**

Oil workers are threatening to strike in Nigeria's oilfields. The Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) has given a list of internationally renowned oil companies, including Exxon-Mobil, Petrobras and Hughes-General Electric, 21 days to resolve issues such as casual employment, poor work conditions and redundancies.

The union addressed its strike threat to "stakeholders," without saying it includes the government, which is the arbiter on the conditions oil workers' labour. PENGASSAN has previously threatened to strike while demanding the government act against the "out of control" employers, but it has refused to do so.

NUPENG, the Nigeria Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers union, a sister union to PENGASSAN, are also threatening to strike over an unpaid redundancy settlement. NUPENG accuses Asset Management Corporation of Nigeria (AMCON) of withholding redundancy payments to 300 laid-off oil workers. AMCON, which was set up by the Nigerian government to bail out banks in response to the 2008 global financial

collapse, is responsible for settling the debts of Seawolf Oilfield Services whose Nigerian operation collapsed.

### **Nurses at Kenya's largest hospital join national strike**

Nurses at the Kenyatta National Hospital—Kenya's largest—have joined the strike by over 26,000 nurses across the country. Nurses joined the strike after being forced to take on extra workloads due to the shutdown of other strikebound hospitals. Kenyatta's baby unit, for example, would normally be expected to treat a maximum of 40 newborns, but it is looking after 165 infants.

### **Kenyan retail workers take unsanctioned action to win back wages**

Some of the retail workers at Nakumatt stores in Nairobi have gone on strike throughout the county, demanding that their constantly postponed wages be paid. The retailer employs 5,700 workers and has had an ongoing crisis since 2015.

Although the employees were promised they would be paid in roughly weekly instalments, they have not been paid anything for two months. The shop workers were opposed to the agreement between the union and management for weekly payments as it would mean three or four bank charges a month. The shop workers have been charged with unlawful striking, as the union, the company and the government have an agreement to keep them working while a resolution is found to the retailer's financial crisis.

### **Job action by Kenyan airline pilots**

Kenyan airline pilots took industrial action over last weekend and into Monday, causing Kenyan Airways to cancel several flights. The Kenyan Air Line Pilots Association went on a go-slow and withdrew goodwill, (goodwill meaning the pilots are available in their off-duty times).

One of the airline's Boeing 737s was grounded last week after an accident when a tow truck ran into the aircraft, extensively damaging an engine and fuselage. The indebted airline is operating at a loss and is undergoing a management reshuffle to bring it into profitability.



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