

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

6 October 2017

The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Overwhelming vote by UK Royal Mail staff for rolling strikes

UK postal workers employed by Royal Mail voted to strike by 89 percent out of 110,000 balloted, in a turnout of 73 percent.

Their grievances concern the ending of their final salary pension scheme to new entrants, the terms of its replacement, disputes over pay and the closure of delivery offices.

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) said it would decide whether to act on the vote at their next strategy meeting.

If the strike goes ahead, it would be the first in four years since Royal Mail was privatised. While the CWU complains management cost cutting and asset stripping since privatisation have provoked the dispute, it was its abject capitulation that enabled this to take place.

CWU Deputy General Secretary Terry Pullinger bemoaned, “Any sense of vocational spirit and working together with management has been lost in a climate of fear and insecurity.

“This massive failure in trust has created a breakdown in relationships and a toxic environment where working together to solve difficult problems has become almost impossible.”

UK rail guards continue strikes

This week, conductors at Southern Rail, Merseyrail, Arriva Rail North and Greater Anglia struck on Tuesday and Thursday against plans to introduce Driver Only Operated trains (DOO)—a measure that will result in 6,000 redundancies and compromise passenger safety.

Private rail firms nationally, with the backing of the government, are determined to impose DOO, which already operates on a third of trains.

The workers are members of the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT), which has just signed a deal with the Welsh Labour-led Assembly. This opposes DOO in words, but accepts the downgrading of the conductor’s job—similar to the sell-out arrangement that the union organised at ScotRail.

This week, conductors employed on the South Western franchise, run by First MTR since August, voted in a ballot organised by the RMT to join strikes against DOO.

Portuguese doctors to take industrial action

Beginning October 11, doctors in Portugal will begin regional strike

action followed by a nationwide walkout November 8. The doctors, organised in the National Federation of Doctors (FNAM), have a list of 25 grievances including excessive overtime hours.

Nurses, who voted to strike last month, continue to threaten industrial action this month in pursuit of a €400 pay hike.

Aslef union suspends London tube strike

UK train drivers’ union Aslef called off a 24-hour strike, due Thursday, on the London Underground. This followed talks with the government’s arbitration service Acas. The dispute was over rosters and work-life balance.

Aslef’s London Underground organiser, Finn Brennan, said, “We have always been prepared to keep talking to resolve this dispute. ... Our ballot remains live.”

Striking London cinema workers threatened with the sack

Cinema workers in London entering the second year of their dispute have been notified by lawyers for Picturehouse that they face instant dismissal if they strike.

Workers plan to take nine days’ action between October 4 and 15 in their struggle to be paid the London living wage of £9.75.

The workers are employed at the Ritzy in Brixton, the Hackney Picturehouse, Crouchend Picturehouse, East Dulwich Picturehouse and Picturehouse Central.

The strike coincides with the start of the British Film Institute’s London Film Festival.

Bus strike begins in Manchester, England

Bus drivers employed by First Manchester in northwest England began strike action on October 2 as part of a series of one-day stoppages on the 9th, 16th, 23rd and 30th of the month.

Six-hundred and seventy-nine members of the Unite trade union, operating buses on 43 routes, are protesting over pay and conditions. The union has confined the strike to workers at depots in Bolton and Rusholme.

The workers at the Rusholme depot are on lower wages than other depots. Rusholme was taken over from the Finglands company in 2014.

University of Manchester staff vote yes to strike

Faced with the threat of 140 redundancies, academic staff at the University of Manchester in northwest England voted by 93 percent, on an 87 percent turnout, to strike.

Management is proposing to shed 35 posts in the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, 65 in the Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health, and 40 in the Alliance Manchester Business School.

The 140 jobs lost will be replaced with 100 new early career academic appointments, at lower salaries.

The University and College Union pointed out that the University was in surplus last financial year and also sits on £1.5 billion of reserves.

Belfast baggage handlers strike vote

Baggage handlers at Belfast City Airport, employees of Swissport, have voted to strike in support of a sacked Unite union representative. Sixty out of 100 employees voted to strike.

Polish doctors' hunger strike

Resident doctors in Warsaw hospitals began a hunger strike last Monday over low salaries that make it impossible to make ends meet.

They are also protesting inadequate health care funding and staff shortages, both of which have led to staff being overworked.

Polish Health Minister Konstanty Radziwi?? said the doctors' pay expectations were "unrealistic."

Greek retirees protest pension cuts

Fifteen-hundred Greek pensioners took to the streets of Athens Monday to demand the Syriza government rescind cuts to their already meagre pensions.

Syriza, which came to power in 2015 on a wave of mass protests and promising an end to austerity, immediately began implementing the cuts demanded by the European Union and banks in return for loans to pay off the country's debt mountain of more than €300 billion.

According to Eurostat, 22.2 percent of the Greek population are "severely materially deprived."

With high unemployment—43.3 percent in June amongst the youth—families are dependent on pensioners to survive.

Protester Athanasios Christou, an octogenarian, told Reuters, "I'm supporting two families on my pension. I don't know what I will do if it's reduced further. I have cut back on everything, coffee at my local, newspapers. I go to the doctor only for something serious, and even then it's on borrowed money."

Rail strike looms in Ireland

Next month, staff at Irish Rail are to ballot for industrial action over a proposed pay rise of 4 percent. The ballot follows a breakdown in talks between the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) and management at the Workplace Relations Commission.

According to *Business Irish*, a secret company memo claims pension fund problems will be used to say the company is facing insolvency in order to fend off the pay claim.

Food industry workers strike factory in Kerry, Ireland

Two-hundred and ninety workers at food factory Kerry Ingredients took the first in four 24-hour strikes last Tuesday in a dispute over pay and the introduction of new computer system to control production at the plant.

The workers at the firm's plant in Listowel supported a strike ballot by a 90 percent majority.

The SIPTU members say the new systems will place greater demands on them.

Pilots form ad hoc committee to battle Ryanair

Pilots working for Dublin-based Ryanair have formed an unofficial committee to negotiate with the airline, which refuses to recognise the pilots' union BALPA or the Irish IALPA.

Ryanair has only negotiated locally with airport-based employee representative committees (ERCs), which pilots say has resulted in a "race to the bottom" in terms of their pay and conditions.

Ryanair recently cancelled 18,000 flights on 34 routes over the next six months, due to staff shortages, causing much distress to passengers.

South African shop workers strike for a wage and minimum pay increase

More than 5,000 South African shop workers went out on national strike September 22 demanding better wages.

The strike involves workers at 20 Makro wholesale stores nationwide.

On top of the wage increase, workers are looking for an increase in the minimum wage of around 20 percent from R5,000 (US\$365) a month to R6,000 (US\$441).

Negotiations have been ongoing with the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Trade Union and the wholesaler since April, with the company offering 7.5 percent.

During the strike, workers in Pietermaritzburg were confronted with police military-style armoured Casspir vehicles in the wholesalers' car park.

South African smelter workers oppose buy-off pay and allowance increases

Six-hundred members of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) struck on September 30 at the Richards Bay aluminium

smelter in Kwazulu-Natal.

Management is offering R100,000 (US\$7,350) to buy off three years of wage increases and R10,000 (US\$735) to defer any claims on allowances over the same period.

The union has described as bribes management's other alternatives to the pay offer—mainly offering cash sums as alternatives to increases on the hourly pay.

The unions are demanding a 7.5 percent pay increase and 8.2 percent for the lowest paid. They also want medical aid paid for, a R5,000 (US\$365) housing allowance, and a 20 percent bonus as well as equal pay for equal work.

NUMSA says there is a discrepancy of up to R200,000 (US\$14,750) in some cases between workers doing the same work. The union is also claiming that the settlement covers workers belonging to other unions at the plant.

South African college staff strike over pay progression

Staff at South Africa's Central Johannesburg Technical and Vocational Education and Training college (TVET) are on strike.

They are demanding the implementation of a 2015 pay progression agreement. The agreement was established when higher education came under the control of the Department of Higher Education and Training, from the provinces.

Workers expect to progress in pay as they were promoted, but pay rates have remained the same.

The *Times Live* web site cited a representative for striking staff at seven of the college's branches who warned, "Graduations on Friday will not happen if we are not paid what is due to us. Same thing will happen with the exams, we will keep all TVET colleges closed."

South African aircraft engineers threaten strike over wage disagreement

Aircraft maintenance workers have threatened to strike at South African Airways (SAA). The threat is based on a disagreement in wage negotiations between "a union," and SAATEchnical, a subsidiary of SAA.

Like some other airlines across the world SAA is in bankruptcy, but is going through a process of bailout.

The airline is to be given R4.2 billion as working capital and debt repayment funds from the country's National Revenue Fund. SAA owes R6.8 billion to Citibank, and R1.8 billion of this is up for payment at the end of September.

Workers originally feared the bailout was to be drawn from their pension fund.

Medical care unions send striking workers back to work in Nigeria

On September 29, while medical care workers in Rivers State Nigeria were joining the Joint Health Service Unions (JOHESU) strike, the union was in the process of calling it off. This it did the day after.

Workers had struck over unpaid wages, pensions and allowances.

JOHESU incorporates 95 percent of union employees in the health care

industry in six unions.

The 12-day strike was "suspended in principle" after the union's nine-hour meeting with the federal government, with workers then sent back to work on Wednesday this week.

Although no reason was given as to why the strike was called off, at a meeting last Tuesday the federal government negotiator claimed the strike was illegal because 14 days of notice was not given.

Workers in Benue State, Nigeria, strike

The Nigerian Labour Congress and the Trade Union Congress have called a strike in Benue State over unpaid wages, pensions and allowances.

Almost a year's wages are owed to the state's workers and payments to pensioners are outstanding for 13 months. The strike proceeded on Tuesday following a seven-day warning strike.

The State Executive Council responsible for calling the strike said they "regretted the government's inability to meet their demands" and "that all avenues for arbitration on the matter yielded no results."

The strike is being conducted over the same issues affecting Rivers State medical employees, with similar issues facing doctors in the Medical Doctors Association.

Nigerian doctors call seven-day warning strike

The Medical Doctors Association declared a seven-day warning strike in Benue State on Tuesday, after a previous 21-day ultimatum to pay wage arrears ran out. It said it was excluding private hospitals from the dispute "for now."

Private hospitals are going through a boom period, while the unions collaborate in the destruction of the meagre health system workers rely on.

Kenyan government accused of lying in its attempts to break nurses' strike

Kenyan nurses have accused county governors of lying when they claim they are returning to work. The governors claim that out of 44,500 nurses employed, 22,000 are back at work. Governors also claim that in West Pokot County nurses are in negotiations with them, although no nurses or health workers at all are at work there.

As part of the brutal destruction of the health care system, nurses are being confronted with the sack. Nurses have been striking for 121 days, even longer than the 100-day doctor's strike.

It is reported that central government is holding meetings of the Salary Remunerations Committee and the Council of Governors that concern the nurses' dispute, but nurses' representatives are not invited.



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