

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

27 April 2018

## Middle East

### Tunisian teachers' national strike over IMF-imposed austerity

All high schools and colleges remain closed in Tunisia as thousands of teachers began an indefinite national strike on April 17 to demand a pay rise and retirement at age 55 after 30 years of work.

The members of the General Federation of Secondary Education are also opposing attacks on education, driven by International Monetary Fund (IMF)-imposed measures to privatise the public sector.

The present campaign began with a strike and a protest outside the Ministry of Education in the capital, Tunis. The government refuses to negotiate.

None of the demands by the mass movement of workers, which led to the overthrow of ex-President Ben Ali in 2011, have been met. The strike takes place under conditions of mass public opposition to government austerity measures.

The teachers have received messages of support from workers all over the world.

### Week-long general strike in Kurdish region of Iran

A week-long general strike and demonstrations took place across the Kurdish area of Iran where it borders Azerbaijan. Affected cities included Marivan, Javanrood and Piranshahr.

The strike and protests were sparked when the Iranian government tightened border security. This prevented the local Kolbari people from carrying goods across the border—essential to earn a living because of lack of employment opportunities.

## Europe

### More UK rail action planned against Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains

Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members at Northern, Greater Anglia and South Western Railway plan to hold a 24-hour strike on May 9 against DOO trains. Workers at South Western are set to follow this up with four more 24-hour strikes on May 11, 14, 16 and 18.

The two-year anniversary since the beginning of the dispute with the Southern Rail company was marked by a protest on Wednesday outside

parliament.

The dispute is over the extension of DOO trains and the downgrading of the guard's role, compromising passenger safety. DOO threatens 6,000 jobs nationally and has led to 40 strikes.

In Scotland and Wales, the RMT agreed to a deal whereby drivers open the doors but guards close them, paving the way for the end of the guard's role.

The RMT has limited workers' protests to uncoordinated, short-term actions to dissipate militancy while not fundamentally impacting rail operations.

CCTV staff at Scotrail in Paisley and Dunfermline in the RMT will take 24-hour strike action on May 5 and June 11 to oppose plans to cut 17 posts.

The planned four-day strike by RMT members on the Docklands Light Railway network in London set to begin on April 19 was suspended by the union. Talks will begin at the government conciliation service Acas with Keolis Amey Docklands. The long-running dispute is over outsourcing and management bullying.

### Teachers in two London schools walk out against academisation

Scores of teachers, members of the National Education Union, at the Cumberland and Avenue primary schools in the London borough of Newham began a three-day strike on Tuesday. They are opposing plans to turn the schools into state-funded but privately run academies, the equivalent of charter schools in the US.

### College lecturers in northern UK protest job losses

Hundreds of college lecturers, belonging to the University and College Union (UCU) at colleges in Hull, Harrogate and Goole, have voted by a nearly 80 percent majority to strike on May 9 and May 17 and 18. They are opposing the Hull Colleges Group plans to cut over 230 posts out of 700.

The UCU has called for the resignation of the group's chief executive officer, Michelle Swithenbank, who has drawn up a five-year plan to cut spending and jobs.

### Further French rail and airways strikes

Thousands of Air France pilots, cabin crew and ground staff held a 48-hour strike on Monday, leading the company to cancel around a quarter of its scheduled flights. The ongoing dispute is for a 6 percent pay rise.

Rail staff held a two-day strike also beginning Monday, part of rolling action opposing the Macron government's plans to privatise the state-owned SNCF rail network, cut jobs and degrade conditions. The CGT trade union is restricting the strike action until the legislation goes to the Senate. The strike led to the cancellation of services.

#### **Strike threat by metro staff in Georgian capital**

Around 250 workers at the Tbilisi Metro system in Georgia are threatening to go on strike from April 30 if their demands for better pay and improved working conditions are not met. Their wages have not increased since 2013, compared to the average wage increase of 30 percent. Their union, Unity 2013, has given the employer a week to respond.

#### **Demonstration by former Georgian sugar workers**

For the last two months, former employees of the Agara Sugar Company in the Georgian town of Agara have been protesting outside the factory that had produced sugar products since the 1930s.

The factory closed last October with the loss of nearly 500 jobs, and the workers are demanding it be reopened. According to the eurasianet news web site on April 20, the site of the factory is being prepared to house a bitcoin production computer facility. Georgia has become a leading player in the cryptocurrency field.

#### **Italian fighter plane workers demand permanent contracts**

Around 600 workers at the Leonardo Aerospace facility at the Cameri Air Base in the Piedmont region of Italy held a one-day strike on Tuesday. The facility produces F35 fighter planes for the Italian air force.

The members of the UILM union are demanding temporary agency contract workers, who make up most of the workforce, be offered permanent posts. An overtime ban is in place.

#### **Second pension strike by Irish insurance staff**

Around 800 workers at the insurance and financial company Irish Life held a 24-hour strike on Tuesday to oppose the ending of their defined benefit pension. The members of Unite mounted picket lines at company offices in Dublin and Dundalk.

The pension scheme currently has a €240 million surplus with assets of over €1 billion. Workers transferred to an inferior scheme would lose around a third of their pension. Great West Lifeco, Irish Life's parent company, recently announced a 6 percent increase in share dividend income.

#### **Africa**

#### **Nigerian health workers defy back-to-work order**

The Nigerian government has threatened its health service workers on national strike with a no-work-no-pay diktat.

The members of the umbrella JOHESU began striking on April 17 for promised salary increases, back pay on promotions and improved working conditions. A wage structure agreed in 2009 only benefitted doctors.

Last September, JOHESU called off strike action on a government promise that the agreement would be honoured. Non-qualified people brought into the hospitals and medical centres are endangering patients' lives.

#### **South African workers protest anti-union laws**

Workers in the South Africa Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU) went on one-day general strike and march last Wednesday, in opposition to labour law changes.

The government is amending the Labour Relations Act, the Basic Conditions of Employment and the new National Minimum Wage Bill.

The latter will set the basic wage at R20 (US\$1.61) per hour or R3,200 a month, compared to the existing R3,500.

The police have threatened to arrest those who "disguise" themselves as protesters.

Negotiations broke down over civil service pay and conditions between the government and the Confederation of South African Trade Unions, though they have not called their members out to join SAFTU members.

The collective bargaining agreement negotiated in October has not been implemented.

#### **South African bus workers' pay strike continues**

The South African bus strike at 50 companies, begun last Wednesday, continues after workers rejected their employers' new offer of 8 and 8.5 percent for each of two years.

The employers originally offered 7.25 percent for each of three years.

The unions revised their wage claim from 12 percent over one year to 9 and 9.5 percent over two years.

New negotiations on Tuesday including the government arbitration body, CCMA, failed to end the strike.

The bosses also refused to negotiate payments to reserve drivers, changes in night shift hours and full-time jobs for contractors.

#### **Unions sell out South African Municipal workers' dispute**

The South Africa Municipal Workers' Union Municipal (SAMWU) ordered municipal workers at Port St. Johns, Eastern Cape, South Africa, striking on and off over seven months, to end their strike without a deal.

Workers are demanding the implementation of a wage agreement and

the removal of their manager. SAMWU said the municipality will “investigate” their grievances.

### **South Africa health workers continue their two-month strike**

Workers at South Africa’s North West health department in Mafikeng are continuing their more than two-month long strike.

The members of the National Education Health and Allied Union went on strike February 19 for improved working conditions and allowances, and an end to contracting out and corruption.

The health authority is refusing to negotiate and deployed the South African National Defence Force last Saturday to man the hospitals and health care centres.

### **Kenyan county government sacks scab nurses**

Kenyan nurses employed on one-year contracts, brought in to undermine last year’s nurses’ strike, have been sacked by the Tharaka-Nithi county government as official staff returned.

The nurses’ union called for the continued employment of the 96 strikebreakers because of a nursing shortage.

### **Zimbabwe nurses’ union calls off action**

Last Sunday, the Zimbabwe nurses’ union, the Zimbabwe Nurses Association (ZNA), called off strike action in which up to 16,000 nurses were sacked. The union said it would take “some of” their cases to court.

The strike ended with none of the demands for improved working conditions, salaries and allowances fulfilled. Unemployed and retired nurses manned the hospitals during the strike.

Health Minister Dr. David Parirenyatwa said the strikers may reapply for their jobs if employers agree.

### **Ugandan student nurses in Masaka strike over excessive fees**

Student nurses went on strike last Thursday at the Masaka School of Comprehensive Nursing, Uganda, over excessive registration fees and inedible food.

Students say the costly maize-based posho food is of poor quality, and the beans they are expected to eat are infested with weevils.

Other complaints are over Internet connections, tutors not turning up and early payments for exam papers—ignored by the Resident District Commissioner and the Masaka Hospital director.



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