Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

Final two days of strike action by French rail workers

29 June 2018

Europe

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Wednesday and Thursday marked the final two days of rolling strike action called by the four main rail unions in France that began in April.

The strikes were in opposition to French President Emmanuel Macron's plans to end rail workers' work and pension conditions and open up the state rail company, SNCF, to privatization. The proposals were passed into law earlier this month.

The staggered, drawn out nature of the dispute led to dwindling support for the action by rail workers. Wednesday's action saw four out of five TGV high-speed trains running and three out of five regional services operating.

The Stalinist aligned CGT union has called further strikes with July 6 and 7 proposed—the beginning of the traditional French summer holiday season. The Sud-Rail union has agreed to join the July action. However, another union, UNSA, said it will not call any further strikes over the issue. The CGT-Cheminots union will not strike over the summer period and will reconsider future action in September.

Strike by French air traffic control staff

A strike by around 20 air traffic controllers in Marseille in southern France on Saturday and Sunday led to hundreds of flight cancellations. The strike was the latest in a series of strikes since April as the workers push for a wage increase.

Hospital workers in northwest England set to strike against outsourcing

Hospital staff working for the Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh (WWL) NHS foundation in northwest England were due to begin a five-day strike on Thursday over plans by the trust to outsource some job roles to a wholly owned subsidiary, WWL Solutions Ltd. The trust wants to transfer 900 cleaning staff, porters and catering staff to the subsidiary.

The members of the Unite and Unison unions fear the move will lead to a two-tier workforce and pave the way for privatisations. They have already held two 48-hour strikes.

In a similar dispute, hospital staff, cleaners, maintenance workers, catering workers and IT staff, who are members of the Unison union at the Mid Yorkshire Hospitals Trust, are set to strike on Monday. The trust, comprising three hospitals, Pinderfields in Wakefield, Pontefract and Dewsbury, wants to transfer to a separate company and no longer be classed as NHS employees.

Refuse collectors in Kirklees, England to strike

Refuse collectors employed by Kirklees council in West Yorkshire are due to begin a weeklong strike on Monday. The members of the Unison union accuse the council of bullying and harassment and want a resolution to the long-standing issue of leave. Because of staff shortages refuse collectors have been declined permission to take leave entitlement, creating a backlog of leave owed, with some staff owed 30 weeks worth of accrued leave.

A previous strike date of May 16 was cancelled after the intervention of government conciliation service, ACAS, but the talks failed to bring a resolution.

Scottish fuel delivery drivers may strike

Around 200 fuel delivery drivers employed by Hoyer, which supplies fuel across Scotland, including major airports, have lodged a formal dispute.

The drivers who transport fuel from the Ineos refinery at Grangemouth are protesting plans by Hoyer to cut their annual pay from £40,000 to £28,000. The company has two weeks to hold talks with the drivers' union, Unite, over the issue before the union conducts a strike ballot.

Scottish local authority staff may strike

Around 30,000 Scottish local authority staff including home care staff, teaching assistants, refuse collectors and maintenance staff could strike over pay.

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In a ballot of GMB members, 92 percent rejected a 3 percent pay offer from the Scottish local authorities body, COSLA. GMB said it would now draw up plans for strike action.

Ryanair staff in Germany to vote on strike proposal

Around 400 pilots working for the Irish-based budget airline, Ryanair, at their operation in Germany, are to vote on a proposal for a long-term strike.

The action, if it proceeds, will take place during the summer. The pilots are members of the Vereinigung Cockpit (VC) union.

After more than 30 years since its inception, Ryanair last year reversed its policy of non-recognition of unions. The proposed strike by VC is in response to the failure of negotiations between the union and Ryanair management to reach a Collective Labour Agreement.

A VC newsletter sent to its members accused Ryanair of not having any commitment to work with the union, despite management's vow of union recognition.

Protest by Greek hospital staff

Around 15 Greek hospital workers blockaded the entrance to the Finance ministry in Athens on Monday.

The PEODIN health workers union members protested ongoing austerity measures and demanded temporary staff be made permanent as well as the restoration of pay cuts.

They held aloft a banner emblazoned with neckties. This was in reference to Syriza Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras who last week wore a tie to sign a Eurogroup debt deal. Tsipras, who does not normally wear ties, vowed to wear one when Greece exited its Third Memorandum loans for austerity programme with the European Union.

Postponed Netherlands transit strike goes ahead

A strike by regional public transit workers in the Netherlands, which was meant to begin Monday, went ahead Wednesday. The workers are seeking a 3.5 percent pay rise, a toilet break and other measures to ease their workload.

Tens of thousands of transit workers represented by the CNV and FNV unions came out on strike. Between them the two unions represent around 80 percent of transit workers. The CNV has declared a 72-hour strike while the FNV's strike is indefinite.

The unions delayed the start date to allow further negotiations, but these failed to resolve the issue. The strike hit regional and city bus services run by companies including Connexxion, Arriva and Hermes as well as some regional rail services.

A nationwide strike of transport workers took place on April 30 and May 1, followed by regional strikes.

Norwegian airport strike threat

A strike by aircraft mechanics at Norwegian airports was averted after mediated talks between unions and employers reached an agreement over pay and pensions.

However, a strike by air traffic control staff and other airport employees over pay and conditions is still in the cards. Talks were due on Thursday, but the result is not yet known.

Strike threat by Norwegian oil platform workers

While around 4,000 oil platform workers represented by the Industri Energi union have accepted a pay offer from employers, members of the smaller Safe union, who voted on the deal, rejected it with an 80 percent margin.

Under Norwegian law further talks between the employers' representatives and the union must take place before any proposed strike action.

Irish local authority staff strike

Around 100 staff working for Roscommon County Council in the Irish Republic took strike action on Tuesday. The members of the Forsa trade union are in dispute over access to flexi–leave and accuse the council of reneging on family friendly measures.

They began their stoppage last Thursday, with action due every Tuesday and Thursday.

On Saturday, around 300 Forsa members and supporters took part in a march in Roscommon over the issue. The march was supported by other unions.

Protest by Irish fire fighters

Around 60 off-duty fire fighters protested outside a meeting of Cork council on Monday night, protesting the failure to receive around €500 each owed in back pay.

Fire fighters in the rest of the country have received the money. They are to be balloted next month as to whether to take strike action over the issue.

Irish pharmacy strike

Around 200 staff working for Lloyds pharmacy chain in Ireland at 34 outlets held a two-hour strike June 22. This follows a one-hour strike by 200 staff at 29 branches on June 13. Other actions are planned.

The members of the Mandate union are seeking a pay increase, an improved sick pay scheme and an end to zero hour contracts. Lloyds currently refuses to recognise the union and will not negotiate.

Planned protests in Russia against pension reforms

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The Russian Confederation of Labour announced plans this week to hold demonstrations in 30 cities across the country on Sunday to protest planned pension reforms.

The government is proposing to raise the retirement age by five years for men and eight years for women. Currently men can retire at 60 and women 55. Male life expectancy is less than 65 years and 76 for women.

Swiss construction workers protest

Around 18,000 construction workers held a demonstration in Zurich on Saturday protesting plans to scrap the industry's current retirement age of 60. The protest was called by the Unia and Syna trade unions.

Employers claim there are insufficient funds to allow retirement at 60 and are calling for the age to be raised to 62 or for pensioners to take a 30 percent cut in their pension allowance.

Protest by Ukrainian miners

Ukrainian miners held protests outside the parliament building on June 19 and 20. They were protesting the dire conditions faced by many miners, including non-payment of wages. Some of those protesting had not been paid since 2015.

Middle East

Israeli defence ministry seeks injunction against industrial action

The Israeli Ministry of Defence (MoD) has called for an injunction to stop industrial action by MoD staff. The employees have been taking industrial action over the last eight months to protest the privatisation of some of the ministry's functions, which were transferred to an external company, Shavit.

According to a June 22 Ynet news article, the action by the workers was "to stop performing periodic and critical tasks that are relevant to the IDF [Israel Defence Forces] and the ministry's security apparatus."

The union said the injunction was unnecessary because they had already stopped the industrial action prior to MoD seeking the injunction.

Africa

South African Marikana protesters fired on by private security guards

Private security guards confronted protesters demanding jobs for local people at the Marikana Glencore Merafe Chrome Venture in South Africa. The guards shot at the protesters and used stun grenades against them.

On August 16, 2012, police massacred 34 striking Lonmin platinum miners and wounded dozens more at Marikana. The massacre was carried out with the collusion of now African National Congress President, Cyril Rhamaphosa.

South African university staff wage demand deadlocked

Staff at the Walter Sisulu University, in Eastern Cape, South Africa are continuing their month-old strike.

The strikers are members of the South African Federation of Trade Unions and are demanding a pay increase of 8 percent. They accuse management of refusing to negotiate sincerely.

Students have been unable to restart their courses and are unlikely to be able to complete their education.

Nigerian college staff strike for five demands

Staff at Ilorin, Oro and Lafiagi colleges in Kwara State in Nigeria are on indefinite strike.

The workers, under the umbrella of the Committee of Unions of Tertiary Institutions (CUTI), have put forward a five-point list of demands.

These include a 30 percent wage increase, payment of unpaid wages in 2017, financing of accredited courses, and agreed promotion and pay for those promotions going back to 2013.

Staff have taken industrial action in most of the years since 2013 to get agreements implemented and warn that if courses go unaccredited they will not be accepted. This will leave students with worthless qualifications.

Academic staff at Nigerian technology company strike over re-appointment

Workers at Nigeria's National Board of Technology Incubation began a three-day warning strike on Tuesday.

The members of the Academic Staff Union of Research Institutes are striking against the re-appointment of the board's director general, citing his previous four years of poor performance.

Ugandan unions sell out public service workers

A planned strike by Ugandan civil servants set for June 24, following the expiration of a 90-day notice, has been called off.

It was planned in response to public sector workers being discriminated against by being left out of a wage deal. A new deal has been agreed with increases spread out over five years.

The agreement was signed by seven unions, under the umbrella of the National Organisation of Trade Unions. They accepted the government claim that the five-year spread was necessary because there is no money.

A first phase, for year 2018-19, will cover a large section of state forces including prosecutors, police, prisons and armed forces, along with leaders of local government.

Other claims will stretch out until 2022, with a promise that most workers will be paid not less than Sh1 million (US $257) a month.

Lower paid workers at present get on average around Sh377.000 (US $97). According to the union, other claims, such as allowances, will be addressed in separate negotiations.

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