

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

30 March 2007

Europe

Airbus workers in North Wales strike

Around two thirds of the 7,000 workers employed at the Airbus factory in Broughton, North Wales, took unofficial strike action on March 23 and again on March 28.

Last month, Airbus announced plans to shed 10,000 jobs across Europe, with some 800 jobs to be cut on the Broughton site. According to reports, workers at the plant are also concerned about working patterns, the outsourcing of parts of the business and the restructuring of the firm that will accompany the cuts.

The BBC reported that the trade unions at the plant did not support the walkout and had urged their members to return to work.

Strike ballot threat by Tesco supermarket drivers

The Transport and General Workers Union (T&G) has threatened to call a strike ballot against efforts by the Tesco supermarket chain to impose new terms and conditions on 250 drivers at its Livingston site in Edinburgh, Scotland. The T&G states that Tesco is seeking to derecognise the union at the site following the depot's imminent relocation just 500 yards across the road.

The T&G has 5,500 members in Tesco distribution depots in Didcot, Doncaster, Chepstow and Ireland as well as in Livingston.

Ron Webb, T&G national secretary for transport, said attempts have been made to find a resolution through establishing a national agreement, but Tesco had rejected such a solution. He said a major sticking point was the insistence by Tesco of a "no-strike" agreement in any deal.

Hundreds of staff at major Scottish charity threaten strike action

Up to 600 staff at Quarriers, one of Scotland's largest charities, will decide this week whether to strike over a pay disagreement, with management offering 2.5 percent while workers want either 3.4 percent or £600—depending on which is greater.

Founded in 1871 by Glasgow shoemaker William Quarrier to offer help to thousands of destitute slum children, the charity has grown to provide community care services across Scotland, including residential care and schooling.

The public sector union Unison, which represents more than half the Quarriers workforce, claims the majority of staff are low paid and work in challenging settings. It also states that with inflation running at 4.6 percent, the flat 2.5 percent wage increase offer is unacceptable and unrealistic.

Bus drivers in UK city to strike

Almost 250 bus drivers across the city of Norwich are ready to strike from 4:30 a.m. on April 2, after a ballot showed 81 percent were in favour of taking industrial action.

Members of the Transport and General Workers Union (T&G) said they had resorted to the action because of a row over their pay increase for last year. One driver said, "It is all part of new legislation which will see drivers stop getting paid for their breaks. Although many workers don't know, this will cut once again into our earnings—it will knock me down by £40 or £50 every week."

Strike at UK independent school

In what is thought to be the first-ever case of industrial action at an independent school, around 50 staff at Newcastle-under-Lyme School in Staffordshire have walked out after the head of English was sacked, partly due to poor exam results.

According to a BBC report, about 1,100 pupils have been affected by the teachers going on strike. A meeting on March 23 between unions and school governors failed to reach an agreement to get Peter Cash reinstated.

Lecturers in Northern Ireland take further action

The 16 further education colleges across Northern Ireland faced "massive disruption" March 28 due to further strike action by lecturers. It is the seventh strike in a long-running pay dispute with the colleges over the past 10 months.

John D'Arcy, chief executive of the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges, said the industrial action is having "a significant impact on students, on service provision and on the longer-term financial viability of colleges."

The lecturers, members of the University and College Union (UCU), are seeking pay parity with school teachers who they argue earn on average £3,400 a year more for similar work. Their claim has been rejected by the government's Public Sector Pay Committee.

In April 2006, lecturers voted overwhelmingly for industrial action and since then there have been six strike days across the 16 colleges and severe disruption to college administration as a result of lecturers working to rule. On August 1 of this year, the colleges will merge into six new area-based colleges.

Hungarian electricity workers to strike over pay

Hungarian electricity workers are reportedly planning a two-hour warning strike on April 3, preceded by demonstrations in front of the German and French embassies, the privatisation agency ÁPV, and the German and French parent companies of Hungarian electricity distributors.

A wage agreement has not yet been reached. The collective employment contract states that agreement should have been reached by January 31. The union wants an 8 to 10 percent wage increase, while the association of electricity employers is only offering 5.5 percent.

Middle East

Iraqi street vendors in sit-in action

On March 22, scores of street vendors staged a sit-in and protest aimed at municipal and occupational authorities in the southern Iraqi city of Nasiriyah. The authorities have previously evicted the vendors under a "reconstruction plan of cities" dictum.

The recent action forced negotiations with street vendor leaders, the Union of Unemployed in Iraq UUI, and the authorities. A compromise gives street vendors "an alternative location to set up their kiosks/carts on which they depend to support their families," according to Almad Salem, UUI Nasiriyah branch president.

Ahmad abdel-Sattar, Nasiriyah branch head of the Federation of

Workers' Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI), said, "Authorities did not move towards solving the problem or planning in any way to rid the hundreds of thousands of the unemployed from this decades' old situation [of poverty]. Moreover, they have deepened the crisis by dividing work opportunities among sectarian and political party groups. These authorities further exposed their irresponsibility when they announced their plan of eviction of all street vendors."

The FWCUI has issued a call to all the people of Nasiriyah to support the street vendors' demands.

Africa

Striking South African bus drivers report torture by police

The South African Municipal Workers' Union (Samwu) has accused the police of wrongfully arresting and torturing two of its members. The two striking Metrobus drivers were arrested at their homes in Johannesburg at 2 a.m. on March 23. The union claims that the two men were taken to a police station in Germiston, where they were assaulted and tortured. After being held in Germiston for several days, they were returned to Johannesburg where they were brought before a magistrates' court and released.

In a statement, Dumisani Langa, Samwu chairperson for the Johannesburg branch, accused the police of using torture in an attempt to extract confessions and names concerning the shooting of three bus drivers who were breaking the strike. The two arrested men, who have not yet been named, told the union that whilst the assaults were taking place, the police were calling out the names of other strikers in an attempt to force them to implicate other drivers.

Two other drivers have also been arrested, and their location is currently unknown.

Provincial police spokesperson Thembi Nkwashu claimed he knew nothing about the arrests and the torture allegations. However, a senior Metrobus official told the *Star* newspaper that arrests had been made and that police were making "a great deal of progress" in their investigations.

The union is demanding that the provincial police commissioner with the police who were involved. They said, "We have the names of some of the police officers who are implicated in these assaults and the torture of our members."

Kenyan power workers' strike called off after court ruling

A two-day national strike by employees of the Kenya Power and Lighting Company (KPLC) has been called off on the orders of the Keynan Industrial Court. The strike was in support of a demand for higher wages and better working conditions. The action was also in opposition to a new salary evaluation document prepared by a firm contracted by the company, which claims that KPLC employees' salaries are above average.

The workers have been demanding salary increases since last year, when KPLC's profits were reported to have risen by 40 percent. At that time, a "human resource review" recommended that the company reduce its labour force by 2,500 employees to maintain its market position. So far, 500 employees have been axed.

On March 26, Ernest Nadome, secretary-general of the Kenya Trade Allied Workers Union (KETAWU), was arrested by riot police as the strikers were preparing to march to Electricity House. He was arraigned in court on charges of incitement to violence before being released on police bond. Addressing the workers after his release, Nadome vowed that the strike would go ahead until the government agreed to collective bargaining.

Management at KPLC claimed that the strike had had little impact, but it was reported that across the country, virtually no field officer was seen attending to electrical faults.

When calling off the strike, the court had ordered that no action should be taken against employees. But the North Rift Region KPLC area manager, Hezekiah Mwalwala, told reporters that any worker found

participating in the strike would be dealt with according to the company's disciplinary regulations. "Any worker who attempts to go on strike to paralyse company activities that include supply of power would be dealt with accordingly without any mercy," he warned.

Senegalese airline workers ground planes over conditions of service

Employees of Air Senegal International took two-day strike action on March 26 to 27 demanding improved conditions of service including benefits. Flights to numerous destinations in West Africa were grounded by the action.

Around 500 people are employed by the airline. It is jointly owned by the Senegalese government and Royal Air Maroc, the latter owning 51 percent of the shares.

An earlier strike from February 9 to 13 caused South African Airways (SAA) to switch its Dakar route to the island of Sal, Cape Verde.

Ghanaian airport workers sacked for striking

Around 60 workers at the Kotoka International Airport in Accra, Ghana, have been dismissed from their jobs by Airways Catering Limited (ACL) for taking what the management claims is illegal strike action. The strikers were demanding the release of four colleagues who were being held by the Bureau of National Investigations (BNI).

The strikers, who belong to the General Transport, Petroleum and Chemical Workers Union (GTP&CWU), were employed to perform laundry and catering duties at the airport.

When the BNI arrested the four employees of the hygiene sector of the company, the striking workers accused management of being behind the arrests. Two of those arrested are union officials: Solomon Bababila is the local union chairman, and Patrick Adjei Danquah is the local union trustee. The two others arrested are also union members.

The Ghanaian Chronicle reported that several members of staff from ACL were invited to attend BNI for interrogation about a question of "unauthorised withdrawals of money." Some workers were released, and the four officers from the hygiene sector were later arrested. Their fellow workers took strike action in the belief that they had been victimised. In a statement, management said that all workers who engaged in the strike were to be dismissed and would have to re-apply for their jobs.

Namibian workers down tools against Chinese employer

Sixty-one labourers at the Chan Close Corporation, a construction company, downed tools on March 26, claiming unfair labour practices and demanding a 50 percent wage increase and a contract of employment.

In addition, the strikers are demanding that their Chinese foreman refrain from using abusive language. They allege that they have been called "yinguru," which means "pigs" in a local language.

They have given the company five days to respond to their grievances or face unspecified action.

According to the *Namibian* (Windhoek), labour relations officer John Mutelo described the labourers' wages as "deplorable." He said the company was contravening the Labour Act regarding wage levels.

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