By Nizar Hassan
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Former EDL workers contracted by the service provider KVA shut down the company’s headquarters Tuesday after receiving only half of August’s wages.

“We were paid only part of our salaries 20 days ago and we were promised the remainder in a matter of days,” Ali al-Hajj Yousef, one of the contract workers, told The Daily Star, adding that they would shut down the company’s premises again Wednesday if salaries were not distributed by the end of the day.

The executives and staff of KVA, one of three service providers that manage Lebanon’s electricity sector, were unable to reach their Dora offices due to the protest.

The firm released a statement apologizing for the halt in services Tuesday, including its 24-hour call center.

“We did not pay half their salaries because they were on strike,” Jamal Hatoum, human resources manager at the company, told The Daily Star.

“And we also don’t have enough funding to pay their wages,” Hatoum added.

Hatoum said KVA suffers financial pressures because payments from the state-owned Electricite du Liban have also been delayed, as well as the recent workers’ strike.

“We stopped working seven weeks ago due to the strike and before that, EDL had not paid us for eight months,” Hatoum explained.

Contract workers Monday also shut down the building of another service provider, NEU Company, for not paying the entirety of their August salaries.

In parallel to the development at KVA’s facility in the Dora area, NEU’s Jezzine offices were closed by the company’s head executive Tuesday, after its employees were attacked and forced out of the building.

“I will not open Jezzine’s office and risk the lives of my employees while they receive daily threats,” said NEU’s CEO Carla Aoun.

“The Jezzine office was not attacked by contract workers,” she explained. “And whoever reads today’s newspaper can easily guess who was behind the assault.”

The An-Nahar daily reported Tuesday that south Lebanon MP Ziad Aswad said he was behind the closing of NEU offices Monday, citing his disagreement with the company’s practices.

Aswad said many reasons contributed to his decision, among them the tension between NEU and its contract employees.

In the report, he said the sacking of two employees from Jezzine played a role in his controversial decision. Aoun claimed the employee had attacked a company executive and threatened to use a weapon.

Aswad was not available for comment Tuesday.

While KVA and NEU both had to deal with angry contract workers and wage issues, each firm gave its own justification for the delay in paying.

Aoun had promised to pay the wages after a meeting with the workers’ representative and said the payment delays were related to a pledge that the workers had refused to sign.

The pledge would legally bind workers to not engage in “unlawful” activities. After most workers refused to sign, the company said it would only pay half their salaries, but later went back on the decision.

The contract workers have been striking outside EDL’s main headquarters for more than 40 days.

After years of no social security, paid vacations or other employment benefits at EDL, the workers are demanding full-time employment with the company, if not immediately then by the time their contract with the service providers expires in 2016.

But EDL decided to hire 897 out of the protesting 2,000 workers, lengthening the ongoing strike.