

General strike by Israeli public sector workers

A correspondent
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Four hundred thousand public sector workers, members of the Israeli Trades Union Federation (Histadrut), commenced a general strike on Wednesday. The action was started after negotiations with the treasury had failed. It was preceded by a civil servants strike and work to rule by schoolteachers a few days before. The Histadrut is demanding 14 percent compensation for inflation both in 1998 and 1999. The Treasury, headed by the newly appointed minister Me'ir Shitritt, has refused to pay the workers more than a 3.1 percent increase, claiming the value of their real wages has kept up, despite the 8.6 percent inflation in 1998.

Government representatives suffered a defeat when a Labour Court judge refused to grant them an injunction forcing "indispensable workers" back to work. The government claims that the strike is "politically motivated", and that workers are "putting a gun" to the public on the eve of elections, in order to "extort money from the public coffers". Finance Minister Shitritt added, "The country cannot be run by the Histadrut."

After a two-day halt at the weekend, the strike is to expand on Sunday, with bank workers joining in. Histadrut leaders have warned that more branches of the economy are set to join the strike.

Sunday saw an independent strike of some 2,000 administrative workers from Tel-Aviv University. In addition to a wage disagreement with the management, the conflict is also over the demand that workers applying internally for an available job in the university should go through "fitness tests" held by external institutes. Workers claim that the test procedures adopted by the university expose unnecessary private information concerning the candidates.

In spite of accepting the university's position, the Labour Court refused to issue injunctions compelling the workers to temporarily return to work. The court

claimed that under the current conditions of a public sector general strike, there was no reason to issue the injunction. However, the court emphasised that Tel-Aviv University may appeal for the injunctions to be applied when conditions change.



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