

Strikes continue throughout Israel

Our correspondent
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A strike by municipal workers ended Wednesday in Israel's three major cities; Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa, but a wider strike by council workers is set to continue in the remaining local and regional authorities.

The strike began last Sunday, with workers defying police pressure tactics of blaming the strike for increasing the risk of terrorist attacks. Police claimed that mounds of uncollected garbage in the country's cities and towns could be used by terrorists to hide bombs.

The workers struck for a wage settlement agreed by the authorities after strike action in January. The settlement provided for a 3.6 percent pay rise and one-off payment of NIS 1,250 (US\$295) for each public sector employee. However, the finance ministry and the Union of Local Authorities in Israel (ULAI), were unable to agree on which body would fund the increase.

Municipal workers in the three major cities had said at the weekend that they would strike in solidarity with the council employees. Social welfare service employees and municipal inspectors are also on strike. No parking citations are being recorded and fire fighters are working on the curtailed schedule normally reserved for the Sabbath and major holidays. In all, at least 100,000 workers from 265 local councils were on strike Sunday—the second such strike in three months—after talks between Finance Minister Silvan Shalom and ULAI head Adi Eldar collapsed with no agreement.

Discussing the strike during the government's weekly cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon stood by the decision by Finance Minister Silvan Shalom and the Treasury to limit government involvement in the public sector salary increase to 50 percent, instead of the 66 percent demanded by the ULAI. Attempting to use the military offensive against the Palestinians to demand sacrifices, Sharon said the strike was “inappropriate”.

The end of the strike in the three major cities was the

result of the Municipal Workers Union endorsing a separate agreement between the Finance Ministry and the cities' mayors, Ehud Olmert (Jerusalem), Ron Huldai (Tel Aviv) and Amram Mitzna (Haifa). The three mayors accepted the treasury's proposal to fund half of the pay rise promised early this year to settle a previous strike of local workers. The terms of this settlement, concluded in January, provide for a 3.6 percent pay hike and one-time payment of NIS 1,250 (US\$295) for each public sector employee.

While the three largest cities agreed to pay for half of the salary increase, the Union of Local Authorities turned down the deal, arguing that the cash strapped local authorities cannot fund their part. In Rehovot, Bnei Brak, Be'er Sheva, Tiberias, Netanya, Rishon Lezion, Eilat, Bat Yam, Arad and the Gederot regional council, back-to-work orders were issued yesterday for some essential local employees. Other local authorities plan to issue similar orders if the strike doesn't come to an end shortly.

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