

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

26 July 2002

Health workers strike in Latvia

On July 18, thousands of health workers in Latvia held a one-day strike to demand an increase in pay and to protest the low level of state spending on health service.

In the capital of Riga, hundreds of strikers held a rally and demonstration outside the main government building. Some of the demonstrators switched on ambulance sirens and waved banners with slogans such as, "We and our patients want to live!"

The strike was the second since June and trade union bodies representing health workers said that more are planned in the future if their demands are not met. The government has rejected the demands of the strikers and has said that it will increase health workers pay in October.

Latvia spends about 3.4 percent of its GDP on health care, compared to about 7 percent in a number of western European countries.

Coal miners in Ukraine protest to demand payment of wages

On July 18 hundreds of coal miners demonstrated in the streets of Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, to demand the payment of \$230 million in back wages. An estimated 600 miners demonstrated at the government buildings in Khreshchatyk Street, the residences of President Leonid Kuchma and Prime Minister Anatoliy Kinakh. The miners held up banners with slogans such as, "Kuchma, you guarantee our pain and hunger!"

Later that day Kinakh held a meeting with Viktor Turmanov, the leader of the Union of Coal Industry Workers. A further 26 regional union representatives were also present. At the meeting Kinakh said that \$25 million in back wages would be paid to miners by the end of the year.

Miners in the Ukraine have held numerous protests and strikes over this issue, including a three-week hunger strike by dozens of miners in Kiev's main square.

Greek construction workers walk off job after four are killed

Building workers at the site of the Olympic village in Athens, Greece, walked off the job on July 20 to protest at lax safety standards. The 2,000 workers began a 48-hour strike following the deaths of four co-workers at the site. The latest to be killed died last week.

The site is being built for the 2004 Olympic Games and will house 10,000 Olympic athletes. The leader of the construction workers union, Giorgos Filioussis, said the workers were not even being given access to fresh drinking water despite working in average temperatures of more than 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit).

Strike at Manchester Airport in England continues

Workers at Manchester Airport in the northwest of England are to continue their dispute with the airport over plans to cut back on security workers jobs. On July 19, the Transport and General Workers' Union said that a further three separate two-hour stoppages would take place, the first of which took place the following day.

Iranian police attack demonstration against welfare cuts and anti-labour laws

Riot police in Tehran attacked a crowd of protesters July 16 outside the Welfare Organisation and Ministry of Labour. Around 15,000 workers had gathered to protest against poor working conditions and low pay and to demand the repeal of a new labour law that makes sackings easier. Some workers had chanted, "Capitalists—leave the labour law alone." Some burned pictures of the head of the social security department, shouting, "We are former soldiers, now we are the hungry."

Eyewitnesses stated that the police started to attack the demonstrators with wooden sticks and some workers and police were wounded. Police later fired tear-gas and pistols to disperse the crowd.

A week before, thousands of protesters clashed with the police in Tehran and Isfahan, defying a ban against a rally on the third anniversary of the 1999 students' protests.

Unemployment stands at 16 percent in Iran, or 3.2 million people. Unemployed and unpaid workers have been taking to the streets frequently. The government would have to create around 700,000 new jobs a year for young Iranians entering the work force just to keep the unemployment rate stable.

Israeli union federation calls general strike

The Histadrut Labour federation approved a proposal on July 16 to call a general strike, aimed primarily at the public sector. The strike call follows failed talks the day before on a demand for a sweeping cost-of-living increase to all employees' salaries.

A call was made by Histadrut representatives for the mechanism for automatically calculating the cost-of-living increase to be reactivated, in order to prevent erosion of employees' salaries. The mechanism was curtailed three years ago when inflation was significantly lower than current levels. However Histadrut has stated it would be willing to postpone the cost-of-living increase until late 2002, or even early next year. A spokesman said, "Because of the current security situation, the Histadrut has been very restrained and has avoided declaring strike action. The Finance Ministry has disingenuously taken advantage of this."

South African municipal workers strike ended

A national strike of local government workers has been called off, after the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) and the SA Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) reached a compromise agreement on July 19. The bitter three-week dispute was called in support of a demand for a 10 percent increase across the board and a minimum wage of R2,200. The union has accepted a R2,100 minimum, a nine percent increase for workers earning between R2,100 and R3,200 and eight percent for those earning more than R3,200. They also accepted a deal for 2003 and 2004 at just above the official inflation rate, which the union had previously rejected out of hand. A deal on medical aid is also said to be included in the agreement, but details will not be finalised until some time in August.

The municipal workers' dispute coincided with the meeting to launch the African Union (AU) in Durban. President Thabo Mbeki denounced the strikers in an article in the ANC's weekly bulletin, *ANC Today*. He wrote, "there were some ... who decided to undermine this magnificent, united national effort". The strikers had "decided that they would welcome the rest of Africa by fouling the streets of Durban with refuse." He accused them of seeking to "misuse and degrade the songs, slogans and communication methods of our movement for national liberation, and thus dishonour and betray our movement at a critical moment in Africa's continuing liberation struggle."

The return to work has seen a number of victimisations. In the Free State, there were sackings of 44 SAMWU members in the Phumelela Municipality. In the Nala Municipality, workers have been summarily transferred to different sections without any prior warning. In other areas, disciplinary hearings are expected to take place because of alleged "bad behaviour" during the strike.

Representatives of Cape Town Municipality have said they will send the bill for damage to council depots and other municipal property to SAMWU, giving a "ballpark figure" of R400,000.

Transport strike in Cote d'Ivoire over police shooting

Abidjan, the economic capital of Cote d'Ivoire (the Ivory Coast), was brought to a standstill by a public transport strike to protest the killing of a taxi driver by a policeman. The five-day strike began on July 19 and has been supported in the country's other major towns.

The victim of police shooting, 20-year-old Keita Kalilou, was driving in the suburb of Yopougon when the incident occurred. Eyewitness quoted by local daily newspapers, including the state-owned *Fraternite Matin*, said the security officer shot Keita at close range after ordering him to stop.

Economic activities in Abidjan have been severely disrupted by the strike. Over the weekend, the action spread to other major towns, including Bouake in the centre of the country and Abengourou in the east. Public transport between the port city of Abidjan and the rest of the country has all but stopped.

Negotiations between authorities and transport unions have proved inconclusive. The union is asking the government to take measures to prevent further deaths. The drivers' unions' claims that in the last 11 years, 21 public transport drivers were killed by state security officers—including five killed since December 2001.

A local daily quoted Ouattara Siaka, secretary-general of the

Federation of Professional Drivers, as saying, "We want to meet the president ... we've already met with the ministers but nothing has changed.... Each time they tell us, 'It won't happen again ... We'll pay for the funeral'. That's not important to us. What we want is that they stop killing us."

The state-owned Radio-Television Ivoirienne has reported the arrest of the guilty officer and that he will be charged with voluntary homicide.

The Mouvement Ivoirien des droits de l'homme (MIDH), a local human rights NGO, said that the incident had confirmed the call it had made to the authorities some time ago for traffic control officers not to be armed.

Thousands strike against privatisation in Burkina Faso

Thousands of workers went on strike July 19 and marched through the main streets of Burkina Faso's capital Ouagadougou. The action was called by the trade unions to protest against the government's privatisation programme and to press demands for salary increases. There was also a mass demonstration in the country's second largest town, Bobo Dioulasso, 360 km west of Ouagadougou. The strike action affected both the private and public sectors. All banks were closed.

The workers, who also went on strike in April and May, want a 25 percent increase in salaries and retirement pensions, and a reduction of income tax, which amounts to 10 percent of monthly salaries. Despite the fact that the cost of basic services have increased in recent years—water by 114 percent and petrol by 50 percent—wages have hardly increased since 1994, three years after Burkina Faso started to implement programmes prescribed by the International Monetary Fund. The minimum monthly wage is approximately \$US38. More than 45 percent of the country's 11 million people live under the poverty line.

The unions claim that so far privatisations have cost about 5,200 jobs—affecting 42,000 people when dependants are included. The government says it earned US \$16.6 million from the sale of 16 state companies since it began the privatisations a decade ago. Another 13 companies are due to be sold off, including water and telecommunication utilities.

Zimbabwe: Sit-in at Herald House

Workers at the *Herald*, the pro-government Zimbabwean newspaper, staged a sit-in on July 10, in support of a 90 percent cost of living adjustment. The strikers returned to work following threats of dismissal by board chairman, Enock Kamushinda, but have asked their workers' committee to give 14 days' notice of their intention to stage a full-fledged strike.

The company said it had no money and was not offering its workers any adjustment.



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