

Widespread industrial unrest in Kenya

Our correspondent
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Workers at the Kenyan Export Processing Zones Authority (EPZA), Nairobi, have taken strike action against companies that manufacture finished textile goods, mainly for export to the United States. At least 15,000 workers are involved in the dispute with 17 companies. Over the last week demonstrations by the striking workers have resulted in clashes with riot police using tear gas. At least one worker was killed and several injured as a consequence.

The strikers are protesting the appalling conditions in the free trade zone area. Employees have no medical scheme, no statutory deductions to the National Social Security Fund and the National Hospital Insurance Fund, no right to sick leave, no night-time transport, and no overtime payment. They also complain that many of them are subject to regular sexual exploitation and harassment.

Kenyan government ministers toured the area and pleaded with the strikers to return to work. Labour minister Ahmad Khalif has set up a committee made up of employers' representatives and trade union officials to attempt to settle the dispute.

The unrest is a serious problem for the newly elected National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) government. The coalition government is seeking to create more cheap labour factories under the United States African Growth and Opportunity Act 2000, which allows sub-Saharan African countries to export duty-free textiles into the US.

Directors from several of the companies involved said that the strike was illegal and criticised the Ministry of Labour for failing to educate workers in their "industrial rights." They claimed that exports from EPZ enabled the government to earn US\$170 million last year and they expected the government to stop "malicious activities that can ruin their businesses."

"We are always working on targets for our markets in the US and already we have lost substantial amount of

business. We have contracts and this problem may lead us to being sued," they claimed, suggesting they would move their business to other countries where their "services" would be appreciated.

Two other disputes are also reported in Kenya. About 150 workers at the Coca-Cola Bottlers in Kisumu, members of the Kenya Commercial Food and Allied Workers Union, went on strike. They are protesting non-payment of a 100 percent rise agreed April last year.

Some 900 workers are also on strike at the Shalimar Flower Farm in Naivasha in pursuit of a 90 percent pay rise. Police were called in to a meeting being held with the farm management. The workers accuse the farm of banning unions and of sacking female employees who seek maternity leave.



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