

Strike wave continues in Kenya

Our correspondent
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A wave of wildcat strikes that has swept across Kenya over the past two weeks is set to continue as thousands more workers begun strike action on February 3. Workers employed in the Export Processing Zones (EPZ) and in a number of local industries have taken action over a whole range of grievances, including wages, working conditions, overtime pay, sick pay and against sexual exploitation and harassment.

In Nairobi hundreds of workers within the capital's EPZ were sacked following recent strikes and demonstrations. More than 300 EPZ casual workers at Ruaraka were locked out of the compound when they tried to return to work after a strike last week. A notice pinned at the entrance said the firms were recruiting workers afresh and those interested should re-apply. Later, the workers marched to the Labour Ministry headquarters where assistant minister Peter Odoyo told them to stop causing chaos. He promised to talk to the management to see if their grievances could be addressed.

The capital was also hit by a strike involving Coca Cola distributors at the Nairobi Bottlers Limited plant and the Basco Paints factory. Joseph Kibuchi Kimani, Country Corporate Affairs Manager warned the 100 striking distributors not to join the current wave of industrial strikes, saying theirs was a trade dispute, not a labour-related problem. He told them that the firm would not allow itself to be intimidated by a group that had rejected dialogue. The firm told the distributors to "look for business elsewhere."

Strikes have taken place this week in many other areas, including 320 workers at the Sunripe Vegetable and Horticultural Packaging Factory at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, 3,000 workers at the Spin Knit Limited and Sunny Auto Spares in Nakuru and 1,300 workers at Umoja Rubber Company in Kilifi. On Monday, February 3, 1,300 striking workers at the

Umoja Rubber Company were involved in running battles with the police for hours following a strike at the Kikambala factory.

On the same day, over 300 striking workers, who had gone on go-slow for better wages since January 25 were sacked by Kentex and Sahara Stitch EPZ—two companies also in the Ruaraka EPZ. At Keroka Town Council in Nyamira District, some employees have been suspended after taking strike action last week in protest over non-payment of their salary arrears.

Workers in at least five companies in Thika District have been on strike since last week over poor terms of service. At Bidco 2,000 workers paralysed operations for hours as they staged a sit-in demanding better terms of service. Later they marched to the District Commissioner's office to demand government intervention. The workers claimed that some of them had worked as casual labourers for up to 10 years, contrary to labour laws and had no medical cover. They complained that they worked for up to 13 hours a day without overtime, many of them working for as little as Ksh150 (\$US1.90) a day or Ksh4, 000 (\$50) a month.

Since widespread popular opposition to hated President Daniel Arap Moi secured the victory of the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) in January's general election workers have become impatient for change. The new government, which is anxious to attract more cheap labour factories into its special economic zones, is concerned that the widespread industrial action will frighten off potential investors. It has already been announced that up to five companies in the EPZ are considering pulling out their joint investment, estimated at Sh2.8 billion if the unrest persists.

The trade union leadership shares the government's concern. The Central Organisation of Trade Unions (Cotu) has appealed for calm, insisting that the government must be given time to address pressing

issues. Cotu Secretary-General Francis Atwoli has urged union officials to convince their members to avoid strikes and to call off any pending action.

Like the 15,000 textile workers in the EPZ, Nairobi, who went on strike two weeks ago, many of the workers involved in this week's strikes do not belong to any union.

Atwoli told union officials, "What we have in our hands is a work force that took part in bringing the new Government into power and they expect, in that euphoric mood, that their problems can be solved overnight."

He blamed Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) for interfering with labour relations, which, he said, was against the law. "It is our responsibility to educate workers on their rights and provisions of the rules to follow," he said.

Tom Owuor, executive officer of the Federation of Kenya Employers (FKE), also accused some NGOs of inciting workers and asked them to keep off labour issues. He announced that EPZ firms have said their workers could join the Tailors and Textiles Workers Union.

"I have been in touch with the management of 36 EPZ enterprises and they are agreed that the workers could join the union and then negotiations can begin," he explained.

Cotu has organised a meeting for all union general secretaries in Nairobi on February 19 to discuss the crisis. It has convened a meeting for the following day to be attended by senior officials of the FKE, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the Ministry of Labour.



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