

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

6 June 2003

## East German workers strike in working hours dispute

On June 2 and 3 thousands of manufacturing workers in eastern Germany took strike action to demand shorter working hours. The strike began with about 120 nightworkers at the Volkswagen engine plant in Chemnitz, walking off the job.

The action is under the auspices of the IG Metall, which has 2.7 million members nationwide. The union is calling for a cut in the working week for 320,000 factory and steelworkers in the east from 38 hours to 35. Employers have opposed the demand on the basis that workers in the east are a third less productive than in the west of the country. Gesamtmetall, the employers organisation, has threatened that at least 20,000 jobs could be lost if the proposals are implemented.

Further ballots of workers in more parts of the east are to take place this week on stepping up the strikes.

## Further strike and protests against pension reform to be held in France

Following the mass protest and strikes throughout France on June 3 and 4 against government changes to pensions, four transport unions have set a new 24-hour strike for June 10.

The unions have also called for a further protest to be held on the same day, which is when parliament is due to discuss the planned reforms of the pension system including raising the retirement age.

## Emergency doctors in France end dispute following month-long strike

Striking emergency doctors in the Ile-de-France region ended their month long dispute on June 4 having signed an agreement. The dispute with the AP-HP (Assistance of public hospitals and regional agency of hospitalisation of Ile-de-France) is centred on providing more jobs and funds.

This followed a national strike on June 2 called by AMUHF, an association of hospital emergency doctors, and the national union of hospital paediatrics, SNPEH. Some 55 percent of emergency doctors participated—mainly in Normandy, Bretagne, Aquitaine, Centre and Limousin.

The ARH and AP-HP has agreed to the creation of 570 new posts, 170 of them in the emergency sector. A further 8.1 million euros for better working conditions at the emergency branches were also made available.

## Greek museum guards hold one-day strike

On June 1 museums and archaeological sites were closed in Greece due to a 24-hour strike by security staff. The 2,000 staff are in dispute with management at 370 sites and museums over the employment of more workers “for security reasons”, an increase in

special payments for working nights and public holidays.

The union of archaeological site caretakers reported that the security guards had not received their special payments at all this year. The union is to decide this week whether to hold a further strike next week.

## Nuclear reprocessing plant workers in Cumbria, England set to strike over pay

Some 2,500 workers at the Sellafield nuclear reprocessing plant in Cumbria are threatening industrial action over pay. The staff are demanding that their pay scale be brought into line with the company’s white-collar employees.

Sellafield is owned by British Nuclear Fuels Limited (BNFL) and trade unions at the plant claim that it has broken a promise to equalise pay rates between staff and managers. Negotiations are currently taking place and workers have already voted to strike if they fail. An equalisation of their pay would see the staff awarded a pay increase of around £2,000 a year.

A spokesman for the GMB general workers union said of the dispute, “The difference between the bottom end of the staff side and ourselves is something like £2,000 in shift allowance. My people believe that anyone working weekends and night shifts should get the same pay. A night shift to me is worth the same as a night shift to a team leader.”

## Israeli public sector employees walk out in protest at pension reform

Tens of thousands of public sector workers stopped work for two hours on June 1 to attend protest meetings organised by the Histadrut labour federation. The action disrupted services at government offices and local authorities. Dozens of flights from Ben-Gurion International Airport were delayed as part of the protests and baggage-handling staff held a go-slow. There was also significant disruption at Israel’s ports.

The meetings were called to detail developments in the negotiations with the Finance Ministry on the new economic plan, in particular the section dealing with pension funds that was passed into law by the Knesset/parliament last week. They also discussed protests against expected changes in pension benefits for Histadrut-run pension funds.

The Histadrut is expected to decide on an additional wave of public-sector strikes, accompanied by demonstrations. Shlomo Shani, chairman of Histadrut’s trade union division, said the disruption will continue into the foreseeable future in an attempt to cancel all aspects of the government’s plans that involve changes to pension rights.

Histadrut plan a series of “severe” work stoppages in alternating regions rather than on a national basis. It will decide each day where to hold the stoppages, which are to be accompanied by demonstrations at major intersections. Histadrut leaders say the protests are aimed at cancelling the cuts in pension privileges or at least compelling the treasury to negotiate with the Histadrut regarding “lessening the severity of the cuts”.

#### **Israel’s port workers take wildcat strike action**

Around 2,500 port workers in Haifa, Ashdod and Eilat took unofficial strike action on June 1 in protest at the government’s pension reforms. The port workers held up the loading and unloading services at Israel’s three state-owned port facilities.

The action was not coordinated with the Histadrut union body. Histadrut chair Amir Peretz pleaded with the workers to return to work. After three hours, the workers at Haifa and Eilat acquiesced to Peretz’s appeal. Ashdod port workers returned after six hours of protest.

The port disruptions were condemned by Oded Tyrah, head of the Manufacturers Association, who called the action irresponsible and described Histadrut as losing its sense of leadership. For his part Peretz stated that “There is a bubbling of resentment that is difficult to stop.”

#### **Police remove Haifa Chemicals protesters**

In the early hours of June 2, large numbers of police swooped on a group of workers from Haifa Chemical’s southern plant in the Arava Desert who had been blocking the entrance to the factory for the past two weeks. The workers prevented trucks from entering or leaving the plant.

The protest was staged following a company decision not to allow employees of the plant the right to establish a workers’ committee.

A police spokesman said that the “evacuation” went without incident. Workers were then barred from returning to the site. The Histadrut made a short statement criticising the police action, saying that it was a unilateral move carried out at the behest of Haifa Chemicals.

#### **Histadrut to fire 145 workers amid financial crisis**

The Histadrut workers committee has signed an agreement to lay off employees and cut the salaries of remaining workers. The two-year agreement is effective immediately.

Under the agreement the Histadrut will fire 145 employees. It will submit the list of laid-off workers to the workers committee that can negotiate over the list’s make-up. The agreement is based on cutting Histadrut’s workforce by 220 employees with 60 workers being voluntarily retired. In recent months 15 other staff over the age of 65 were fired.

The salaries of the remaining employees will be cut with the size of the cut depending on the pay grade. The maximum salary cut will be 7.1 percent to those earning more than NIS 20,000 (\$US4,500) a month. The cuts will take effect on the June salaries, paid in July.

The Histadrut management agreed in exchange to reduce the workweek from 42.5 to 39 hours.

The cutbacks are based on the Swary report on the Histadrut’s dire economic situation. The organisation’s accumulated deficit is NIS 1.5 billion, it has a current accounts deficit, and is in debt to

the banks, suppliers, and authorities.

#### **General Strike in Zimbabwe**

Major towns and cities throughout Zimbabwe have been brought to a halt since June 2 in a five-day general strike called by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

The government of President Robert Mugabe made last minute attempts to prevent the action. A High Court order last weekend declared the strike illegal and government helicopters dropped leaflets over the major conurbation’s calling on Zimbabweans to ignore the strike call and promising protection to anyone breaking ranks. But millions of workers throughout the country stayed away from work to express their opposition to the governing Zanu-PF party.

On the first day of the strike workers took to the streets in antigovernment demonstrations in all the major towns and cities. They were met with police and army personnel using rifle butts, water cannon, and tear gas and firing live ammunition to disperse the crowds.

*The Guardian* of June 3 reported that a demonstration of 5,000 was marching from the western Harare township of Warren Park towards the city centre when it was attacked by police gunfire, seriously wounding at least three people. A Reuters photographer witnessed 50 people, including women, being forced to lie down in the road where they were whipped and beaten by the police. A demonstration of thousands of students from the University of Zimbabwe was attacked and prevented from marching into the city centre. Tear gas canisters were fired into some halls of residence. Hundreds of MDC members have been arrested and in the townships police and Zanu-PF militias are carrying out house-to-house searches for MDC supporters.

Having initially called on workers to “rise up in your millions” in street demonstrations, the response of Morgan Tsvangirai and the MDC leadership to the state attacks has been to call on their supporters to “stay at home and regroup”.

Millions of workers are on strike to protest against an annual inflation rate of 269 percent, 70 percent unemployment and eight million people depending on food aid to survive. But the MDC has a very different agenda. It is using the strike in an attempt to pressure Mugabe to resign and to bring Zanu-PF to the negotiating table. In common with the western governments from whom they draw support, the MDC is in favour of establishing an interim coalition government including both the MDC and Zanu-PF to rule the country until elections are held sometime in the future. This is why the general strike was organised at a time when the G8 meeting was taking place in Evian, France, in the hopes of putting the situation in Zimbabwe on the agenda of the western powers.



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