

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East & Africa

26 September 2003

Greek veterinarians and agriculturalists strike continues

Greek civil service veterinarians and agriculturalists continued their strike this week that began on September 16. They are demanding that their employers answer their financial and contractual requests.

In the course of the strike, all imports and exports of fresh fruit, vegetables, meat and other animal products have ceased. Long queues of trucks formed at Greece's customs points and agricultural and other products held up are in danger of going off.

There are also no civil sector vets available to examine the animals at slaughterhouses. The Association of Exporters of Northern Greece has requested that the Ministry of Agriculture and the Interior intervene in the dispute.

Greek lecturers strike over pay

Greek university lectures continued their strike this week in pursuit of a 20 percent pay increase. Panhellenic Federation of Associations of University Teaching Staffs (DEP) members will meet with the Ministers of Finance and Education—Nikos Christodoulakis and Petros Efthymiou—this week regarding the dispute.

The union claims that the increase of 20 percent had already been agreed in April to be paid in two instalments.

The government has refused to accede to the pay claim and has said it will not pay more than the seven percent it has already offered.

In a separate dispute, Aristotle University Registrar's Office employees struck this week to demand permanent employment status. Further industrial action is planned in Greece next month in primary and middle education and in hospitals.

Bulgarian workers begin campaign against government policies

On September 21, the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (CITUB) began a series of nationwide protests against the government's economic and social policies. The campaign "Solidarity for Rights and Justice" is planned to continue until October 17.

Members of the union held protest rallies in the city of

Stara Zagora. CITUB branches in the other 17 regions of the country are reported to be ready to join the demonstrations.

One of the prime reasons for the protest is that the state sector has not paid wages totalling some BGN120 million (\$US70.6 million) according to the CITUB national strike committee. The confederation wants a 10 percent wage increase in 2003. Bulgarian ministers have already rejected this demand.

English gold bullion workers begin 24-hour strikes

Employees at the gold bullion and precious metals firm Johnson Matthey began the first in a series of 24-hour strikes on September 23. The staff are members of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation and work at the company's plant in Royston, Hertfordshire.

Workers have rejected a two percent pay rise offer from the company and are demanding four percent increase. The union has pointed out that executives at the firm have received pay increases of up to 22 percent. Staff at Johnson Matthey's site in Enfield, north London, will strike on October 29.

Slovakian trade unions to strike

Members of the Confederation of Trade Unions (KOZ) in Slovakia are to hold a one-hour strike from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. on September 26 in pursuit of an increase in the minimum wage and in protest at pension reform.

The strike action will involve workers from a number of industries and include rail workers, teachers, and health care employees. Workers at auto manufacturer Volkswagen and the Košice ironworks are also expected to support the nationwide action.

Iraqis protest over unpaid wages

Unemployed Iraqis took to the streets of Baghdad last week, to protest continuing wage arrears. A 60-member group who gathered outside the US civil administration headquarters demanded full payment of outstanding wages.

Demonstrators carried a banner condemning the failure to pay them and other banners bearing anti-US slogans. Ibrahim Zobai, an agriculture employee who worked in the Republic Palace before the war, said, "In the Saddam-era nearly 12,000 employees were working in Republic Palace

but now all of them are unemployed."

Strikes threatened in Israeli public sector over welfare cuts

As a response to the government's September 16 announcement of an additional five percent cut in welfare payments, the Histadrut labour federation declared a work dispute in Israel's public sector last week. A Histadrut official said the strike at government offices could begin as early as next week (after the statutory cooling off period).

The government's 2004 budget plan also calls for the dismissal of some 2,000 additional state workers.

In a separate dispute last week, some 3,600 workers from Israel Military Industries (IMI) threatened to bring traffic to halt on the Geha highway around the IMI facility in Ramat Hasharon. They also planned to hold a protest rally outside IMI management offices.

The public sector dispute applies to employees in government ministries, regional councils, religious councils, government companies (including Bezeq), state-run health facilities, Ben-Gurion International Airport, and Israel's post offices.

Staff at Israeli hospital end dispute

Employees at Wolfson Medical Centre (Holon hospital) ended their strike this week after reaching an agreement with management. The workers had refused to see any patients, other than in emergencies.

The impetus for the strike was a dispute with hospital director Dr. Moshe Mashiah. Hospital workers committee chairperson Batya Levy said on September 23 that Mashiah had refused to pay outstanding benefits due to a hospital employee since January 2003. Levy noted that the Health Ministry asked her to postpone the strike until after the Rosh Hashanah holiday, but she refused.

Zambian miners blocked by police

Five hundred miners were prevented from demonstrating in Luanshya, Zambia, when armed police sealed off the town centre. Police stopped the miners protesting outside Roan Antelope Mining Corporation of Zambia (RAMCZ) offices over non-payment of six months salaries and terminal benefits.

Luanshya district administrator Joseph Chilambwe addressed the miners and claimed he had contacted the Zambian Ministry for Mines which claimed that the payments were being processed. A Mineworkers Union of Zambia (MUZ) spokesman said union members were angry because the government had pledged to make the payments. The MUZ building in Luanshya was set on fire last December to intimidate miners from taking strike action over the salary arrears.

Copper and cobalt mining operations—accounting for 80 percent of Zambia's export earnings despite the drastic

decline in copper prices—have been privatised by the Zambian government over the last few years under IMF directives. As a result thousands of miners have lost their jobs. The Indian company Binani Industries now owns 85 percent of the Luanshya mines.

Nurses' strike in Angola continues

Angolan nurses are continuing strike action they began on August 28. The Angolan Nurses Trade Unions (SINDEA) was formed in 1996 and has 14,000 members, 9,000 of which are based in the capital Luanda. The nurses, who are providing emergency cover only, are demanding improved working conditions and wages, overtime pay backdated to September 2002 and medical assistance for nurses who became HIV positive while on duty. They are also demanding hospital authorities recognise 3,000 nurses who have been working for the past three years in several hospitals without pay because the management claim they are illegal workers. The average current pay for nurses in Angola is \$US50 a month.

Nigerian cement workers on indefinite strike

Workers at West African Portland Cement at Ewekoro and Shagamu in Ogun State, Nigeria, have taken indefinite strike action since September 19. They have sealed off the plants and blocked management access. Police have arrested two union officials.

Their main demand is for a pay rise covering transport, a Christmas bonus, and education and health hazard allowances. They also want management to convert nearly 1,000 casual and contract staff to permanent status. Some of these workers have been employed as casuals for up to 19 years.

National Union of Chemical, Footwear, Rubber Leather and Non-Metallic Products Employees President Moses Gbadebo explained how badly the company treated its workforce: "As against labour law of six months probationary period, theirs is two years. They have different names for casuals. Some are called casuals, some contract staff and some personalised staff. The worst of it all is that, most of them that sustained injuries are not properly taken care of."



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