Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East & Africa

31 October 2003

Riot police break refuse workers' strike in Greece

On October 25, riot police used teargas and drove through picket lines at waste facilities in order to break the weeklong garbage workers' strike in Greece. The workers were demanding increased pay and that private companies be prohibited from collecting refuse.

The strike has centred on Athens. During the industrial action, rotting garbage dumps have been a common feature in affected towns and cities. It is estimated that some 40,000 tons of rotting garbage had accumulated during the strike. In Athens, 8,500 tons of garbage had piled up.

The riot police were authorised to smash the strike by the Interior Ministry. Interior Minister Costas Skandalidis said, "They [the strikers] are playing with fire and with demands that are not consistent with such action."

Police used tear gas and attacked striking workers at the Tagarades dump in Thessaloniki, and used violence against pickets at the Ano Liosia site outside Athens. The police then protected garbage trucks as they drove into the Ano Liosia and Thessaloniki sites. At Ano Liosia, police formed a cordon around Athens deputy mayor Nikos Apergis as striking workers confronted him.

The previous day, an Athens court ruled that the strike was illegal and abusive. It threatened to impose a fine for each day the court's decision is violated. Despite this threat, the workers, members of the Union of Local Government Employee Federations, voted to extend their strike for another 24 hours.

Royal Mint workers in Wales hold second strike

On October 26, production employees at the Royal Mint in Llantrisant, south Wales, held a second one-day strike in a dispute over pay. The workers are members of the Amicus trade union. This week, the union announced that 24-hour stoppages would be held on each subsequent Wednesday pending resolution of the dispute.

The Royal Mint is a government agency that employs 800 staff, and the strike affected the production of coins. It followed the Royal Mint's offer of a 3 percent pay rise in the first year with a one-off payment of £400 and a 2.5 percent rise plus £400 in year two. The offer was rejected by more than 90 percent of Amicus members at the plant. The union is calling for an increase in pay of 9 percent.

White-collar workers organised by the Prospect and PCS trade unions voted to accept the Royal Mint pay deal this week and did not participate in the strike.

Students in Cambridge, England, begin rent strike

On October 24, students at King's College in Cambridge voted to hold a rent strike to protest increasing living costs. At a special meeting, a delegation of 75 students agreed to withhold their rent, with 11 votes against the plan and 5 abstentions.

The strike will involve the students paying their rent cheques into a specially set-up bank account instead of to the college. The action was organised by the student union following a ballot vote by undergraduates to take "direct action" against the increased room fees. The union claims that room fees have gone up by almost 30 percent in the last four years.

For students, Cambridge is one of the top five most expensive places to live in the UK.

Lebanese workers strike to protest seven-year pay freeze

Workers in Lebanon took strike action on October 23 to protest against a seven-year pay freeze. The stoppage involved workers in many sectors. Its impact was widespread and included flights out of Beirut airport being suspended for seven hours, public transport reductions, and the closure of many companies and government office.

The stoppage was held as the government of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was debating the 2004 budget. A delegation of striking workers demonstrated outside the cabinet offices, carrying banners such as "Workers, farmers and teachers say no to hunger."

It is expected that the government will cut public spending again in the budget and increase value-added tax for the second time in three years.

In a statement, the General Labour Confederation (CGTL) said that the government owes 270 billion Lebanese pounds (US$180 million) to the welfare system and that maternity and sickness benefit would have to stop at the end of the year unless the deficit was paid.

Ugandan government intervenes in Agoa dispute

The US Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) is intended to boost investment by US and foreign multinationals in Africa, giving them duty- and quota-free access to the US market. Some indication of its impact has emerged in Uganda in a dispute between female employees (known locally as "Agoa girls") and the Sri Lankan-owned textile company Tri-Star Apparel whose factory is at Bugolobi, a suburb of Kampala.

Several hundred out of over 1,000 girls working at the factory went on strike last week over low pay and poor working conditions. Four months ago, conditions at the factory were raised in the Ugandan parliament, with reports of mistreatment and of workers being barred from using the toilet during working hours.

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Many of the workers are from other parts of Uganda and live in dormitories with free board and lodging but earning as little as 20 cents an hour.

After taking strike action, the girls then barricaded themselves in their dormitories. They were forced to call off their dispute the next day when anti-riot police led by the inspector general of Ugandan Police, Major General Katumba Wamala, broke into the dormitories. They used a water cannon truck and deployed plainclothes police. Three journalists from the newspaper *New Vision* attempting to cover the dispute were beaten up and arrested by the police and their digital camera destroyed.

Tri-Star management then sacked up to 265 members of the workforce, and the factory resumed production. Tri-Star boss Vellupillai Kananathan said the operation was “a clean-up of saboteurs.”

More than 200 of the workers then marched to the Ugandan parliament and spent the night in parliament buildings, demanding the government intervene. The Uganda Textile, Garments, Leather & Allied Workers Union representing the workers obtained a court order restraining the company from sacking them without paying all their dues, benefits and repatriation costs. Police prevented local MP Bruno Pajobo from delivering the injunction to management.

The case has caused some panic in government circles, as it is official Ugandan policy to encourage AGOA investment. After investigation by local newspapers, it emerged that Tri-Star receives US$200,000 a week from its textile exports to the US but was not taxed on any of this income, having also been granted tax exemptions on the purchase of machinery and equipment when it started operations.

The workers were employed under a three-year contact. After a two-day-long meeting between government ministers and the workers’ MPs, the Ugandan cabinet is now asking the company to respect the terms of the Ugandan Employment Act. This means that if it will not reinstate them, it should pay three months’ salary severance pay and the costs of their travel home.

South Africa: Shoprite strike continues

Workers at the South African chain store Shoprite-Checkers have now been on nationwide strike for more than a week to demand an increased hourly rate and a guaranteed minimum of 27 working hours for part-time workers. The 30,000 workers, members of the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU), are also demanding a 40-hour week for full-time workers and an end to compulsory HIV testing.

On October 24, the workers organised marches to branches of Shoprite throughout South Africa, handing in a list of their demands to management.

The company claims the hourly rate is R7, while the union say it can be as low as R4.50 (US$1 = R6.89). SACCAWU said that though its members were “exploited and receiving slave wages,” the company’s CFO, Whitey Basson, had been given an annual salary of R5.2 million plus a bonus of R3 million.

Following a letter from the company, the union has now agreed to talks to resolve the dispute. Shoprite has taken legal action against the strikers and the union, alleging that workers at some of its stores had refused to comply with strike rules brokered by the Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration.

South African airport workers strike

Members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) began strike action this week against the Airports Company of South Africa (ACSA) for a 10 percent across-the-board pay rise against the company offer of 7.5 percent. SATAWU is also demanding a R3,300 monthly salary for new employees, while ACSA is offering R3,225.

More than 1,000 workers are involved, including clerks, drivers, security officers, trolley pushers and building maintenance staff. SATAWU is hoping to disrupt the visit to South Africa of the Fifa 2010 Soccer World Cup delegation later this week.

On October 29, police arrested 36 SATAWU pickets at Cape Town International Airport, claiming they were breaking the law relating to airport security.

Zimbabwe doctors and nurses walk out

Doctors throughout Zimbabwe went on indefinite strike last week demanding an 8,000 percent pay rise, bringing their monthly salaries to 30 million Zimbabwe dollars. Official inflation in Zimbabwe is now running at 455.6 per cent, but in reality is much higher.

Doctors say they cannot live on their current salaries valued at $60,000 to $75,000 a year on the official exchange rate, but worth about $1,000 a year at the black market rates. The doctors were joined by nurses this week whose current minimum monthly pay is only 138,000 Zimbabwean dollars. Nurses are demanding a 7,000 percent rise.

The Zimbabwean government has responded by attempting to keep hospitals open for emergencies by using military doctors and nurses. They are also relying on the hire of consultants from Cuba and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Large numbers of health sector workers, as well as professionals in teaching and other areas, have left Zimbabwe for jobs in Europe, the US and South Africa. Zimbabwe’s economy is in a state of collapse, as sanctions by the Western powers have combined with the failure of President Mugabe’s policy of land seizures and national economic autarky. Unemployment is now over 70 percent, and a lack of foreign currency has resulted in acute shortages of food, petrol and medicine.

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