

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

5 June 2004

Greek short-term workers demand permanent contracts

On June 3, thousands of Greek workers employed on short-term contracts in the public and private sectors struck in protest at their precarious employment status. The 24-hour strike resulted in nine Olympic Airlines flight cancellations and hit tourist attractions such as the Athens Acropolis. Workers protested in central Athens, with a number of other demonstrations blocking main roads until the afternoon.

Prison workers in England and Wales strike

The first strike in 25 years by farm labourers and industrial workers employed by prisons in England and Wales began on May 28. The workers, who held a 24-hour stoppage, are employed to maintain prisons. They are members of several unions including the service union Amicus, the building workers union UCATT, and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). They are protesting against the imposition of a 1 percent pay rise for 2003 by the prison service. The prison service imposed the 2003 pay offer in February of this year in spite of its being rejected by 99 percent of prison workers in a previous ballot.

Amicus represents 1,500 of the prison workers. The union's general secretary, John Allot, said of the strike, "All our members are asking for its fairness and a decent living wage."

Nursery nurses in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Fife in Scotland end industrial action

Nursery nurses in Glasgow ended their longstanding strike on June 3 after accepting a pay offer from the city council. The previous week, the strikers, members of the public sector trade union Unison, had voted to reject the same deal. The workers accepted the deal in a vote by a majority of 542 to 98. The previous vote saw the deal rejected by a majority of 445 votes to 287.

The agreement stipulates an increase in pay for the nurses of between 6.8 percent and 23.1 percent with an additional lump sum of £2,500. On the same day, nursery workers in Fife also voted to accept a pay offer following a ballot of the 470 staff. On May 28, nursery nurses in Edinburgh voted to end their strike and accepted the offer from the Edinburgh city council.

Nursery nurses at two other councils, Borders and Orkney, are alone amongst Scotland's 32 council areas in not yet reaching an agreement.

UK airline workers vote to hold summer strike action

Airline workers at a number of airlines have voted to take strike action in a pay dispute with the services group Aviance UK. Industrial action is scheduled to be held this summer following a ballot by 1,000 members of the GMB trade union. The GMB members voted more than 80 percent in favour of striking and rejected a 2.5 percent pay increase offer. The union described the offer as effectively a pay freeze.

The strike vote follows a breakdown in talks between Aviance and the GMB, TGWU and Amicus trade unions. The other two unions are currently balloting their members regarding industrial action.

Strike action by the workers, located at airports in many of the UK's largest cities such as Birmingham, Glasgow, London, Liverpool and Manchester, would hit 17 airlines including British Midlands, Iberia, Air

India, Easyjet, Japan Airlines and Air Seychelles.

Workers are generally low-paid in the industry, with basic pay from around £12,000 a year for check-in staff to £16,000 for baggage handlers.

Underground workers set to strike on day of European, local and London Assembly elections

The Rail, Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) announced this week that its members employed on the London Underground are to hold the first in a series of stoppages on June 10, the day of elections to the European Parliament, many local councils and the London Assembly.

The union is campaigning for an increase in pay and a cut in the working week to 32 hours. RMT members have previously rejected a 3 percent pay offer from London Underground management. Signallers, maintenance staff, station employees and some drivers supported holding strike action by a majority of 2,614 to 643 in a ballot result announced this week.

RMT General Secretary Bob Crow called for London Underground management to return to negotiations as the basis for avoiding strike action. Crow said, "This pay round should have been settled by April, but here we are, two months later, with an unresolved dispute. If the employers are sincere in wanting to avoid strike action, the answer remains in their hands—they must stop messing around and negotiate seriously."

The Underground is used by some 3 million people each day and the strike is expected to cause widespread disruption.

Israeli pilots and air traffic controllers threaten strike

Leaders of the Air Traffic Controllers Union and the Israel Pilots Union are threatening to suspend air traffic to and from Israel in protest against the continued disturbances caused by pirate radio stations and the authorities' "neglect" of the matter.

In a letter sent to the ministers of communication, transportation, justice and public security, the chair of the Air Traffic Controllers Union, Ophir Palter, and the chair of the Israel Pilots Union, Captain Doron Karni, warned that the pirate radio broadcasts are disrupting communications between aircraft and the control tower at Ben-Gurion International Airport and could lead to an air disaster.

The letter read, "In light of the extent to which broadcast stations are appearing in our 'electronic skies,' an air crash is only a matter of time."

Bank of Israel misses exchange rates reading due to strike

The Bank of Israel did not publish representative exchange rates for the dollar, euro and other currencies on May 28, due to industrial action.

Bank employees are to stage a protest strike against Bank of Israel Governor David Klein and the Bank's board of directors. Employees will prevent the publication of representative rates for foreign currencies, as well as the implementation of the monetary tender for banks, resulting in disruptions of financial operations in the market.

No cash shortages are expected in the market because of the strike.

The bank workers' committee strongly opposes the decision of the governor and board to waive 8.8 percent to 15 percent of bank employees' salaries, and the demands that employees sign a salary and

promotion contract. In a letter to the governor, the committee wrote: “The feeling is that the Board has lost control over events in the bank and that the bank is being managed in a way that endangers its status, existence and employees.”

The board is trying to intimidate its workers by issuing an announcement that striking employees will not receive salaries for strike days.

Schoolteachers and Israel’s Education Ministry in dispute

A dispute between the Education and Culture Ministry and the Association of Secondary School Teachers erupted again last month. May 31 was the last day on which dismissal notices can be mailed to teachers whom the ministry does not intend to employ for the next school year.

The cutbacks decided upon by the ministry for the coming school year will mean the firing of some 2,000 teachers. (According to one version, the real figure is closer to 2,300, since some teachers work part-time.)

The teachers’ organisation has declared a work dispute, not only due to the planned layoffs but also on other grounds, including the damage to their pension rights.

Last week, the National Labour Court heard a petition by the Education Ministry for an injunction barring the teachers from striking. The court permitted the teachers to hold a one-day strike (as long as it did not affect matriculation exams, other planned exams or the submission of grades to the ministry) and ordered the sides to continue negotiating.

After the negotiations broke down, teachers threatened to renew the strike, but the court has forbidden further strike action other than a one-day protest strike sometime before the end of the month.

Israeli aircraft workers block sale of plant to resolve pension deal

Israel Aircraft Industries (IAI) workers are blocking the completion of the sale of the aircraft plant at Tirat Hacarmel before an arrangement is reached about the future of their pension rights.

The plant, which manufactures parts for planes and employs 130 workers, is due to be sold to Cyclone Aviation, a subsidiary of Elbit.

The plant was scheduled to be sold at the end of March, but the agreement had not been implemented because the committee had received nothing in writing about the workers’ rights. The workers’ committee was also demanding that the IAI management or the Defence Ministry provide guarantees (in the form of property or financial assets) to ensure that any future sales by the IAI would not harm the pensions of any of the workers.

IAI is planning to sell its Magen subsidiary in Ramat Hasharon. In response to the standoff, the spokesman for IAI said, “The pension rights of the workers in the plants due to be sold are being discussed between IAI’s management and the Finance Ministry and Mivtahim pension fund, so that the arrangements for selling the plants can go through.”

Zimbabwean telecom workers stand firm against poverty wages

Employees of Zimbabwean telecommunications company TelOne are refusing to accept management’s claims that it does not have enough money to pay the minimum wage, and are staying out on strike. In the last week of May, the Labour Court issued a “no settlement certificate,” delaying a final ruling and showing the court’s unwillingness to enforce the minimum wage.

The Zimbabwe Posts and Telecommunications Workers’ Union has called for the lowest-paid workers to have their pay increased to \$861,000 per month, which is the legal minimum.

“The management made it clear that although we were legally entitled to the \$861,000, it could not afford to pay us that much,” said Gift Chimanihire, the secretary-general of the union.

On May 24, more than 85 percent of TelOne employees went out on strike, and since then the strike has spread throughout the country.

Chimanihire said it was “sad” that the company had removed the names of striking employees from its books, but added that since the employers were acting outside the law, the dispute could be solved at the courts

within a week.

South African frozen food workers stay out for 8 percent

Workers at Rainbow Chicken are refusing to accept management’s latest pay offer, despite a legal challenge to their dispute in the labour court. They have now been on strike for more than three weeks. Management has made a court application claiming that the strikers were violating picketing rules.

The company’s latest offer is an increase of 7.75 percent, but this would be spread over three years, and therefore equivalent to only a third of this each year. Unions representing the workers are demanding a yearly increase of 8 percent. The workers’ salaries currently range between R2,300 (\$336) and R3,500 (\$511) per month.

Liberian civil servants told their strike is illegal

Liberian civil servants agreed to call off their strike action over unpaid salary arrears after being told their action was “illegal and will not be tolerated.” The transitional government appealed to Section 4506 of the Labour Laws of Liberia, dating back to the oppressive regime of Samuel Doe prior to the 14-year civil war. It claimed that a special committee was dealing with the problem of salary arrears.

Liberia is presently under United Nations rule after a ceasefire last summer between the government forces of Charles Taylor and rebels occupying most of the country. The transitional government was set up under the auspices of the UN’s chief representative in Liberia, retired US air force general and appointee of the Bush administration Jacques Paul Klein.

Ugandan hospital workers strike

Staff at Nyakibale Hospital, Rukungiri, in southwest Uganda began indefinite strike action on May 26. They are protesting mismanagement of the hospital. In a letter to the hospital board chairman, they said they would refuse to work unless management stopped deducting double the required taxation from their salaries. Management claimed it was abiding by tax regulations and warned the leaders of the strike that they would lose their jobs.



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