

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

6 August 2004

Europe

Health workers strike in Greece in Olympic bonus dispute

On August 3, ambulance drivers, paramedics and other National First Aid staff in Greece joined a series of 24-hour strikes being held by health workers. The workers are demanding that they be paid bonuses for extra work carried out during the forthcoming Olympic Games in Athens. The government has already promised to pay police and other security services staff bonuses but no other workers.

The strike followed the breakdown in talks held between Health Ministry officials and trade union representatives of Attica workers. Local union leaders refused to accept the ministry's offer of a monthly "readiness" bonus of 40 euros to be paid instead of the Olympic stipend and payment for all overtime during the Games.

The national union had been satisfied with the ministry offer and was prepared to accept it.

Hotel workers in Athens stage pay strike

On August 4, hotel workers in Athens held strike action to demand increased pay. An estimated 70 percent of hotel staff participated in the action. Hotel workers unions representing 7,500 workers have threatened further action during the upcoming Olympic Games if the dispute is not resolved.

The workers, who include both Greeks and foreign staff, earn an average 500 euros (£330) per month—about the same as the day rate charged by some of Athens's most expensive hotels. They are demanding salaries be doubled to what they say is the minimum wage of 1,100 euros.

Bus drivers continue strike in South Yorkshire, England

Following a rejection of a pay offer by the First Bus company to striking drivers in South Yorkshire, England, the firm has threatened job losses and the employment of overseas workers to run services.

The strike began on July 20 in a protest over pay and conditions affecting some 100,000 to 150,000 passengers a day who use First Bus services. On August 2, bus drivers voted by 723 votes to 502 to reject the company's latest pay offer on the recommendation of the Transport and General Workers Union. The union claims that the offer includes a 30 pence an hour increase backdated to April 2004 but would be funded by changes to sick pay arrangements resulting in a cut in pay in real terms.

On August 4, First Bus management announced that once the strike is over job cuts will be considered. Brandon Jones, commercial manager at First Bus said, "We are extremely concerned at the long-term impact of the strike on passenger numbers. This could have a direct impact on driver vacancies and positions available. We are not in a position to say if we would be making staff redundant but it could have an impact on the staffing position. We will review this when we go back to work."

He also added that the company plans to employ bus drivers from Poland stating that, "We are one of the group's companies who are considering introducing Polish drivers. Poland has a huge labour market and has just become part of the European Union."

The company did not make clear whether it intended to recruit Polish drivers immediately as a strikebreaking force.

UK firefighters to ballot on industrial action

Firefighters in the UK are to be balloted next week on industrial action as part of a long-running pay dispute. The ballot comes following the breakdown in negotiations between the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and fire authorities last week.

The dispute revolves around the payment of the final two stages of the deal that ended the nationwide strikes of 2002 and 2003. Under the agreement firefighters were to have received a 3.5 percent pay rise outstanding since last November and a second 4.2 percent rise, based on changes in working practises to "modernise" the service.

The union claims that employers reneged on this agreement and that a joint meeting to approve the deal involving the FBU and Fire Authorities was swamped by London councillors—most of them from the governing Labour Party—to ensure it was vetoed.

FBU general secretary Mike Fordham, said of the events that, "Their own side use the term 'conspiracy' because that is what it was. They parachuted in councillors no one had ever seen before, none of whom had ever even sat on a fire authority." The chairman of the Local Government Association, Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart disputed this and claimed that the additional councillors were at the meeting to "ensure that the views of all fire authorities were properly represented".

Middle East

Israeli pension fund workers launch strike action

Workers at Mivtachim's new pension fund launched indefinite strike action July 29 to protest against the fund's imminent sale. As part of their action, the workers plan to disrupt presentations to potential buyers, which include the Harel insurance company.

Betty Avikamar, chairwoman of the new fund's workers, said that the staff are opposing the fund's sale before any agreement has been reached over workers' rights and conditions, especially job security.

Mivtachim management has asked the regional labour court to have an injunction placed on the workers to stop them from preventing those not covered by the strike from reaching their work place.

The Finance Ministry, which took over the veteran pension funds (those closed to members after 1995) last year, is selling the subsidiary new funds. The new funds do not suffer actuarial deficits, since they have to run on actuarial balanced policies.

A Mivtachim spokesman said last week: "The demand by the workers' committee to commit to not dismissing any staff for three years after the sale is unreasonable. Such a demand will scare off any potential buyer, and it is doubtful whether it's even acceptable to the Histadrut [Israel's trade union federation]."

Strike at Israeli magnesium plant disrupts production

The workers committee at Israel Chemical's magnesium plant at Sdom decided August 2 to escalate their industrial action and protest measures against company management. The escalation includes disrupting production, preventing export deliveries, and closing the factory gates.

It is reported that 3,000 employees attended the meeting, convened after negotiations with Israel Chemicals management deadlocked over

workers' financial demands.

The workers claim that the magnesium plant became profitable in the past year, and they should therefore share in those profits, particularly in view of their efforts to improve production and efficiency and increase output.

As part of the protest, the workers have halted deliveries of chlorine to Dead Sea Works, shutting down aluminium chloride production. The workers also shut down the plant's computer system and decided to disrupt all production procedures.

The magnesium plant workers committee chairman Avi Ben-Shushan said at the start of this week that, "gates will be closed indefinitely until management realises that it must sit down and negotiate with us to reach an agreement that will respect the workers, after four years without a pay raise."

Israel Chemicals management said in response that it was holding talks with the workers representatives and that it did not conduct negotiations through the media.

Possible strike to halt burial services across Israel

As of going to press workers at the religious councils are planning to strike, shutting down burial services all over Israel. Services will be paralysed in most communities, except where the Burial Society is not part of the religious council.

Religious council employees are considering strike action because they have not been paid for several months. Burial services were shut down intermittently in certain communities last week, and the workers have now decided to escalate their protest.

Africa

Kenyan civil servants demonstrate against low pay

More than 600 civil servants demonstrated in the West Pokot District in western Kenya to demand an increase in their salaries. The demonstrators, members of the Union of Kenya Civil Servants (UKCS), complained that they were suffering because of the poverty-level salaries they were being paid and threatened to paralyse services unless the government implements their demands. In addition to a salary increase, they want the government to bring back the hardship allowance it withdrew four months ago.

Services at the district headquarters were brought to a standstill as the civil servants left their work to join the demonstration. They reported back to their offices later that afternoon.

Throughout Kenya the UKCS has sent a 21-day notice to the government of its intention to hold a strike over their pay claim. The government recently announced a pay rise for civil servants it called "historic", increasing salaries by between 14 and 148 percent. UKCS denounced the proposed rise as "an insult" and is continuing to press for a 600 percent claim.

Under the government offer lowest paid workers would get a 50 percent increase and the majority of the middle ranks of the 120,000 civil servants between 14 and 50 per cent. Gardeners, cooks and artisans will see their Sh3,310 (\$US41) monthly pay increased by a mere Sh1,000 (\$US12). At the top end, however, provincial commissioners, undersecretaries, deputy secretaries and senior deputy secretaries will now earn a minimum of Sh55,692 (\$US694), up from Sh18,776 (\$US234).

Announcing the government offer, Mr William ole Ntimama, minister at the Directorate of Personnel Management, said it was a "substantial increase" that will make civil servants "comfortable". The pay rise would come from the government's funds and would not exceed the limits demanded by western donors, he explained. Voluntary retirement would continue as the government regards the civil service as "bloated".

Nigerian civil servants strike

Civil servants in Adamawa State, Nigeria have begun indefinite strike action over the non-payment of last month's salary. The Adamawa State government said the directive of the public sector unions was illegal and

urged workers to return to work. Bello Tukur, State Deputy Governor, explained that the government was presently carrying out a screening exercise of the state workforce with a view to rooting out "ghost" workers in most ministries and parastatals. He claimed that there were "rampant cases of missing files, incomplete records and documentation", implying that the unions' demand for payment was tied up with corruption.

Botswana miners support suspended union leaders

Three thousand miners in the Phikwe branch of the Botswana Mining Workers Union (BMWU) have threatened to take indefinite action in defence of their leaders. They are demanding that the management of Bamangwato Concession Limited (BCL), which mines copper and nickel, lift the suspension of the men.

"The reason for our suspension is that during the annual salary negotiations, we were in possession of some information deemed by the BCL mine management to be confidential and sensitive," said suspended branch secretary, Kabelo Oitsile. Management claimed that to press its pay claim the union had obtained wage bill information for all levels within the company, including senior management and other employees who do not form part of the union's bargaining unit.

A strike by 5,000 BMWU members at Botswana's four diamond mines was temporarily called off last week after an intervention by Botswana President Festus Mogae. A dispute over wages at Debswana, a 50/50 partnership between De Beers and the Botswana government, threatened to stop production. Botswana diamonds make up a major part of world production and earn 85 percent of Botswana's export earnings.

One day strike in South Africa

Over 28,000 workers held on a one-day strike last week in South Africa over pay claims and sackings. Two groups of workers were involved in separate protest actions. Members of the National Union of Metalworkers of SA (Numsa) and the Solidarity and the United Association of SA (Uasa) held marches in Cape Town and Johannesburg demanding a 12 percent pay rise in the steel and engineering industry. Their employers have offered 7.1 percent.

In the second protest action, hundreds of workers at Telkom, South Africa's main telephone company, marched to Telkom's headquarters in Pretoria to protest against retrenchments. Their union, Solidarity, is taking the one day strike action to protest against the sacking of 4,181 employees over the next three years. Telkom has reduced its staff from 61,237 in 1999 to 31,624 today.



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