

# Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East & Africa

17 June 2005

## Europe

### Netherlands public sector staff in 24-hour strike

Public sector staff in a number of towns and cities in the Netherlands took strike action on June 9 in a 24-hour stoppage over pay, conditions and pension rights. Members of the Abvakabo and Publieke Zaak public sector trade unions are involved in a dispute to demand regulations forcing workers in physically tough jobs, such as firefighters, to take an early pension between the ages of 55 and 60. Trade unions are also calling for a 1.25 percent wage increase for 190,000 council staff. They recently rejected a 0.6 percent offer from local authority management.

The cities and towns most affected by the action were Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Zoetermeer and Utrecht. The stoppage led to the closure of most tram, bus and metros services, as well as sanitation and garbage collection. Sanitation and garbage collection workers in Amsterdam and Zoetermeer struck during the day. Public transport workers took strike action in the city of Rotterdam between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m.

Unions said that public service desks at town halls across the country were expected to be either closed or understaffed during the strike. A demonstration was held later in the day at the Museumplein in Amsterdam, with up to 10,000 public sector staff attending.

### Greek workers strike over government pay and pension policies

On June 16, workers throughout Greece took three-hour strike action to protest the pay and pension policies of the government of Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis. The stoppage involved employees in transport, port shipments and the postal service. Many banks were also closed due to an ongoing strike by staff.

The strike hit all transport sectors in Greece except the tram. The suburban train service to Athens International Airport was also hit. Dock workers also struck against the government's plan to cut their overtime pay.

The strike was called by Greece's largest union, the General Confederation of Workers (GSEE), with 650,000 members, and the Union of Civil Servants (ADEDY), which has 200,000 members.

On June 16, bank workers in Greece completed eight consecutive days of strike action. The dispute centred on

demands by Economy and Finance Minister Giorgos Alogoskoufis for banks and unions to approve its proposals for the creation of a single auxiliary pension fund for bank employees and changes to their social insurance fund.

The government has threatened to impose the proposals if the banks and their employees are not able to reach an agreement. The Federation of Banking Staff Unions (OTOE) said that its members may take further strike action and that the government may face constitutional and legislative conflicts if it tried to impose the plans.

The OTOE stated this week that the strike will be extended to June 21.

### Trade unions in Northern Ireland call off education industrial action

On June 15, the UNISON and NIPSA trade unions called off strike action by education staff in Northern Ireland. The workers are striking over cuts in the education budget. Following negotiations with Education Minister Angela Smith, the trade union called off a strike planned for June 17.

NIPSA said that it understood the minister would announce an increase in funding for education shortly, and that they had had "some success" in persuading her of the "justice of the case" for extra funding.

In a separate dispute, classroom assistants at primary and special schools took industrial action on June 15 to protest delays in reassessing pay structure. Exams went ahead as normal despite the action.

NIPSA members employed by the education and library boards participated in the strike. The union said that the stoppage was called as a result of staff being "underpaid for years."

### Domestic, catering and laundry staff at Merseyside hospital in England strike

Domestic, catering and laundry staff at the University Hospital Aintree in Fazakerley, Merseyside, took strike action on June 13 in a dispute over pay and conditions. The stoppage was the first of three proposed strikes.

The employees, who are contracted to private company Initial Hospital Services, are demanding parity with staff employed directly by the NHS. The strikers are members of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) and the GMB. The action went ahead after the unions rejected a revised pay

package. According to them, the pay deal would have amounted to less than what the minimum wage will be in October.

### **Air traffic controllers in Russia end hunger strike**

A hunger strike by air traffic controllers in Rostov-on-Don in Russia ended on June 13. The workers held the hunger strike in pursuit of an increased pay claim.

The Federation of Air Traffic Controllers Trade Unions said that it had reached an agreement with management. The employers said that they would consider a higher level of pay for the workers. Negotiations were set to begin on June 16. Sergei Kovalyov of the Federation of Air Traffic Controllers Trade Unions said that the employers had also decided to dismiss the director of the Aeronavigatsiya Yuga branch, Valery Gorbenko.

### **Middle East**

#### **Israeli airport workers threaten to strike**

Engineers and technicians at the Israeli Airports Authority are expected to take protest action by the end of this week, which could disrupt all flights in and out of Israel. Airport workers have also threatened to impose a partial or complete shutdown of Ben Gurion Airport.

The airport staff are protesting “bureaucratic foot-dragging” in formalising the contracts of hundreds of workers, Army Radio reported. Workers have also accused the management of inserting new clauses into the collective agreements, to the detriment of working conditions.

A strike was called off at the last minute two weeks ago, after the airport authority agreed to discuss work conditions with representatives of the workers and the Histadrut Labour Federation. No agreement was reached.

This follows the breakdown of talks between the head of the Airports Authority and the deputy chairman of the Histadrut labor federation, Shlomo Shani, who was representing the committee of airport engineers and technicians. There are around 250 technicians and engineers working at the Airports Authority, who operate in almost every field of airport activities, so any industrial action would effectively ground all flights.

The Airports Authority management fiercely criticized the workers’ stand, and called on the Histadrut to return to talks.

### **Africa**

#### **Cotton workers on strike in Mozambique**

Workers at a cotton processing plant in the northern Mozambican province of Nampula have walked out on strike to demand the five months’ pay they are owed by their employers. The strike against the Namialo Cotton Company (SODAN) is reported in the June 15 issue of the Maputo daily *Noticias*.

The workers rejected a company offer to pay the money in kind over a period, through the sale of meat to them at subsidised prices. The workers said this was a management trick that would force them into debt, while doing nothing to

solve their difficult problems.

The Portuguese-based company Joao Ferreira dos Santos is the majority shareholder in SODAN, with 51 percent of the shares. The Mozambican government owns the other 49 percent.

#### **Kenyan bus workers strike over pay arrears**

Striking Kenyan bus workers were dispersed by police on June 11 after entering the company offices to demand payment of salary arrears. The managing director of the Kenya Bus Service locked himself in his office to escape the angry workers. The majority of the company’s 272 buses and 58 minibuses were kept parked on the premises all day.

“We want our February, March and April salaries from the company before the creditors take everything,” one of the drivers told the Nairobi-based *East African Standard*. The company is close to bankruptcy with large debts outstanding.

#### **South African toll operators strike for pay increase**

Toll operators in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, went on strike June 13 to demand a pay rise of 12 percent and in opposition to the tollgate companies’ offer of 6 percent. In some areas, traffic jams resulted due to inexperienced new recruits taking over the jobs of those on strike. A commercial manager for one of the tolls told the *Daily News* that they had hired replacement staff before the strike began, ready to take over the duties of the employees.

Eighteen strikers were arrested at the Mtunzini Tollgate on the KwaZulu-Natal north coast, accused of public violence and malicious damage to property. The charges are based on allegations that they opened the boom gates at the toll and let waiting vehicles pass through without paying.

The KwaZulu-Natal traffic department are posting officers to several areas to prevent the strike from being effective.

The toll operators are members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU). They earn as little as R900 (US\$131) per month, making the company offer worth less than US\$2 per week.

Also in South Africa, railway staff are on strike throughout the country as a result of a dispute over their wage increase. In the Western Cape, little more than half of the train services were running during the week ending June 10.



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