

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

19 August 2005

Greek police attack bank workers' demonstration

On August 17, bank workers in Greece held strike action in an ongoing dispute over government changes to the pension system. Banking trade unions claim that new regulations will have a detrimental impact on many of their members by raising the pensionable age and lowering supplementary pensions.

Members of the OTOE trade union demonstrated outside the entrance of Emporiki Bank on Sophocleous Street in downtown Athens. According to OTOE president Dimitris Tsoukalas, police Special Forces (MAT) violently attacked the demonstrators. He said the bank governor had called in the MAT.

Prior to the measures being approved in parliament, the union called for a single supplementary pension system for the sector and opposed alignment of pensions with the main state fund. The dispute began in January and led to a series of strikes during that month and in February. Staff also struck for 23 days in June.

Amsterdam garbage collectors and road sweepers strike over pay

Garbage collectors and road sweepers in Amsterdam began a one-week strike on August 15 in a dispute over pay. The strike coincides with the festival Sail Amsterdam 2005, the busiest period in the Dutch holiday season. The six-day event brings more than 300,000 people to the city.

The workers are calling for a pay increase of 1.25 percent, backdated to January 1. Local authorities have offered a pay deal of 0.6 percent, backdated to June 1. According to the FNV union, which represents about 60,000 state employees, garbage disposal workers earn between 1,400 euros (\$US1,734) and 1,900 euros a month, depending on seniority.

The action coincides with industrial action by firefighters, who said they would respond only to emergencies this week.

Autoworkers at Daimler Chrysler in England strike in pay dispute

Autoworkers at Daimler Chrysler in Milton Keynes, England began 24-hour industrial action on August 15 in

a dispute over pay. The stoppage, involving more than 170 staff, began following a breakdown in negotiations between unions and management.

Since July 1, workers at the plant have been working to rule and have refused to work overtime. A union spokesman said the stoppage had would hit the supply of parts from the warehouse.

Bristol postal staff oppose overtime cut

Postal staff at a delivery office in Bristol, England walked out on a 24-hour strike on August 15 in a dispute over overtime. Staff at the Royal Mail depot in the Easton area of the city voted to take industrial action two weeks ago, following Royal Mail's decision to cut their contractual overtime.

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) members abandoned all deliveries on Monday. Royal Mail attempted to weaken the stoppage by drafting in managers from other areas to cover the affected shifts. The CWU has announced that it may authorise further strike action pending the resolution of the dispute.

Coventry newspaper staff demonstrate over pay and conditions

On August 12, reporters and photographers employed by the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* in England held a rally in the Corporation Street area of the city centre as part of a strike by 40 staff over pay and conditions.

Workers began industrial action last month for a longstanding demand for a banding scheme, which takes into account employees' experience and achievement. Trade unions involved in the dispute claim that the scheme should have been agreed in April. Management rejects this and said a pay offer had been improved "several times".

South African miners return to work

More than 100,000 South African gold miners, who had been on strike since August 8, returned to work after four days when employers increased their pay rise offer of between 4.5 and 5 percent to between 6 and 7 percent, with the highest increase for the lowest job category. The pay rise next year has been set at 1 percent above

inflation. The action involved unions representing both black and white workers, who had been calling for increases of 8 to 10 percent.

According to CBC News, the gold mining companies have also agreed to “provide family accommodations” for miners and their families, who have since the days of apartheid been forced to live separately, with the miners living in hostels and their families living in townships long distances away.

The companies claim that the strike caused losses of more than \$US20 million a day. According to *Business Report*, the companies claim that “at least nine of South Africa’s biggest gold mines, producing 30 percent of the country’s output, are at risk of closing after companies agreed to raise pay levels” to end the strike.

South African local government workers end strike without agreement

On August 14, the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) announced the suspension of a strike by 30,000 local government workers, shop workers and airline employees, despite rejecting the employers’ pay offer of 6 percent (with a further 1.5 percent for the lower paid workers from February next year). The union claimed that although the offer fell far short of their demands, it was a move in the right direction.

Samwu spokesman Dale Forbes told *Business Day* the decision to reject the offer meant the union would not be bound by the three-year wage deal the South African Local Government Association attempted to implement. He said, “In terms of the bargaining council constitution, by not concluding an agreement the union is free to negotiate wage increases next year.”

The strike was ended on the same day that the City of Cape Town was granted an interdict against striking Samwu members after clashes with the police two days earlier. Strikers were barred by the Cape Town Labour Court from demonstrating within 50 metres of any municipal property. According to *Business Day*, hundreds of protesters were arrested during the strike.

Samwu deputy general secretary Andile Sihlahla gave one reason for the strike ending as “increasing biased police intervention in the strike and the negative impact of existing essential services legislation”.

Egyptian textile workers demand higher pay

Around 1,000 Egyptian workers at the Misr al-Menoufiya Spinning and Weaving Company went on strike on August 7, to demand payment of a 20 percent annual social bonus. Present average pay is about 200 Egyptian Pounds (\$US35) per month, and a third of the

workforce get no more than 130 Egyptian Pounds (\$US22.6) per month. They have received no pay rises since 1979. Their wages are not sufficient to cover living costs for one individual, much less for a family.

Labour News Network reported that the National Compensation Council had announced that the social bonus allocated for government and stated administration employees would apply to private sector workers as well. But the bonus has not been paid.

The Centre for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS) has declared solidarity with the strikers and demanded that the National Compensation Council decision be carried out.

On July 30, Interior Ministry security forces assaulted CTUWS official Kamal Abbas. His ribs were broken and he was left with bruises on his head and back. The CTUWS is demanding an official investigation into the assault and for the perpetrators to be held accountable.

Zimbabwean hotel workers organise “sleep-in”

About 320 hotel workers at the Meikles Hotel in Harare have carried out a “sleep-in” in the staff canteen, to show their anger at the lack of pay and transport allowance increases.

In addition to a pay rise of 133 percent, backdated to July 1, to compensate for Zimbabwe’s hyperinflation, the workers are demanding transport allowance increases from \$220,000 (\$US12.50) to \$900,000 (\$US51.40) per month. Their current salaries are set at \$1.5 million (\$US85.70). The company promised to pay transport allowances equal to the actual cost of their bus fares, but has so far failed to do so.

A workers’ committee representative, who spoke to the *Herald* in Harare on condition of anonymity, said the employees had resorted to the sleep-in because their transport allowance had run out long before the end of the month. “Workers have no choice but to sleep in the staff canteen as they say that their monthly transport allowance has been exhausted.”



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