

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

18 November 2005

Europe

Thousands of Greek workers demonstrate to oppose government policies

On November 12, ten of thousands demonstrated in the centre of Athens, Greece to protest the government's economic and social policies. Those protesting demanded better working conditions, a 35-hour week, the right to retire five years earlier and an end to the government's privatisation program.

Estimates of the size of the demonstration ranged from 20,000 to 50,000. The rally was called by a number of trade unions, including the Front for Trade Union Struggle.

Many of the participants carried banners calling for the introduction of a 35-hour working week, a 1,300 euro (\$1,500) minimum wage, the retirement age to be cut by five years and a pension of at least 1,050 euros a month. Some of the banners read, "No to Austerity" and "Dump the budget."

A delegation handed in a statement of protest at the parliament building at the conclusion of the rally.

The demonstration followed a day of action held by civil servants on November 10. The civil servants are calling for a pay increase. The strike resulted in the shutdown of many public services, including schools. Many hospitals were operating with a bare minimum of staff. The two largest airlines, Olympic Airlines and Aegean Airlines, were forced to halt all their flights as air traffic controllers joined the strike.

Unions have scheduled a general strike to be held on December 14. The strike has been organised to coincide with the draft budget being presented before parliament. The budget is based on forecasted economic growth of 3.8 percent and a further 2.6 percent cut in public spending, in line with European Union rules.

Government spokesman Theodore Rousopoulos said of the protests, "We understand that there are demands which we respect but our policy cannot divert from the recovery program that we have drafted."

Port workers at St. Petersburg in Russia strike to demand pay increase

Workers employed at the seaport of St. Petersburg in Russia began strike action on November 10 in a dispute over pay levels. The crews are employed at the port manning tugs and other service ships. The port is Russia's main export outlet in the northwest of the country.

The action had a widespread impact, with cargo ships unable to move inside or outside the port and fuel tankers unable to service cargo ships.

The port workers are demanding their employers increase their pay in line with that of workers in other countries. The action was held in opposition to a ruling by the city court of St. Petersburg on November 7 stating that an indefinite work stoppage at the port would be illegal. The court claimed that the port workers trade union had not adhered to

the necessary legal procedures required to call a strike.

Lecturers in southwest England take industrial action

On November 15 lecturers at three colleges in the South West of England took strike action in a dispute over pay. Hundreds of lecturers struck at Exeter College, Cornwall College and North Devon College. They are members of the NATFHE trade union.

Members of the union recently voted to demand a 7 percent pay rise for next year. This demand was rejected by the Association of Colleges.

Firefighters in West Midlands, England strike over pay and conditions

Following a breakdown in negotiations between the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and the West Midlands' chief fire officer, firefighters began a three-hour strike in the West Midlands, England on November 14. At the centre of the dispute are changes to shift patterns and payments.

A further strike is due to take place on November 17 and another is to be held next week. The action is the first held by fire crews independently of other areas. The fire authority was prepared for the strike as 380 members of the armed forces, equipped with 26 fire engines, were drafted in to provide cover during the action.

On November 13 West Midlands FBU members rejected a revised offer from the fire service. The deal sought by the fire authority and rejected by the workforce is based on offering workers extra payments and additional travel costs in return for working anti-social hours and a new shift system.

An FBU representative said that they did not want to take industrial action but "this issue has been outstanding since March and June, way back earlier this year. We've done everything within our power to reach an agreement. We're asking them to put forward a reasonable and fair offer that addresses those three points (of dispute), when they do that we'll get a professional service back on the streets."

Middle East

Iranian teachers join protests

On November 10, teachers who were laid off in the southern Iranian province of Fars joined protests by hundreds of workers from the western province of Qazvin against their dismissal and poor working conditions.

The protesters had gathered in front of the parliament in downtown Tehran demanding to meet Majlis Speaker Gholamali Haddad-Adel. The protesting workers were demanding eight months of unpaid salaries and the teachers were protesting their expulsion.

Last month, more than 100 teachers from Fars and Kermanshah provinces gathered in front of the parliament to protest their dismissal. The teachers said they were prevented from teaching in the current academic year under new employment regulations.

Qazvini workers had also gathered in front of the parliament last month to object to poor working conditions. Some 400 workers said they have not been paid for over two years.

Iraqi textile workers strike

Textile workers at the Kadhimya cotton industries factory in Baghdad have launched a strike demanding back pay and an increase in danger compensation. The workers have held a series of negotiations with management without reaching agreement.

The factory has seen several strikes and protests recently, some against management corruption, while other protests have demanded bonuses.

In the recent dispute, a rumor has been circulating amongst the workforce that the minister of industry will request the intervention of American troops to settle the problem by the use of force.

An anonymous source quoted on nosweat.org.uk, said, "Textile workers at the Khadimiya factory in Baghdad have gone on strike demanding pay and other benefits. The workers have refused to submit in the face of threats and intimidation from managers. The bosses have attempted to label the workers as insurgents so as to provoke a repressive response out of occupation forces."

Industrial unrest in Israel's banking sector

There was an all-out strike at Bank Leumi on November 13 and stoppages at Israel Discount Bank. Workers at First International Bank of Israel are continuing ongoing industrial actions. Bank Leumi employees shut down all operations at the bank's branches to protest the fact that their rights have not been anchored in a tender for the sale of the state's holding in the bank.

Bank Leumi's national workers committee, headed by Louis Roth, convened this week to decide on further union measures. The workers committee called the strike after no progress had been made in negotiations with management last week. Roth said the workers committee called the strike because the Ministry of Finance and bank management had abandoned the employees and left them no choice.

The Discount Bank workers committee is considering stepping up industrial action. The main branches in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa were closed on November 13.

According to the workers committee, the strike was called due to the "hasty sale" of Discount Bank's mutual and provident funds, which manage NIS 32 billion in assets, to Cal Insurance Enterprises Holdings Ltd for NIS 1.31 billion. Discount Bank is expected to post a pre-tax capital gain of NIS 950 million on the sale.

Strike by Israeli communications workers

Four hundred fifty workers at Tadiran Communications' Holon factory have entered their seventh day of strike action. Since November 11, the employees have prevented the delivery of goods.

A demonstration has been mooted by the workers, to be held outside the home of CEO Hezi Hermoni.

The strike broke out after negotiations with management for anchoring employees' rights in a sale of the company became deadlocked.

Africa

Strike at South African supermarket suppliers

Around 500 workers employed by Woolworth's supermarket supplier, Universal Product Networks (UPN), went on strike November 15 at five Woolworth distribution centres. The strikers are demanding an increase of 10.7 percent in the minimum wage, which currently stands at R3,268 (US\$483).

The action has hit UPN at bases in various parts of the country, including Johannesburg, Durban and the Western Cape. A

spokesperson for Woolworth said that the strikers had rejected their offer of a 7.3 percent across-the-board increase.

Strikes in Guinea call for wages to increase after fuel price hike

A two-day national strike in Guinea, called by the union federation, National Confederation of Guinean Workers (CNTG), began on November 15. It brought schools, offices and hospitals to a standstill all over the country. The action was backed by another of the country's three union federations, the Guinean Workers Trade Union (USTG).

Spiralling inflation over the past two years, including a 55 percent increase in fuel prices six months ago, has had a devastating impact on living costs. Rice, the staple food of Guineans, has almost doubled in price between January 2004 and November 2005. The free market price of a 50 kg bag of rice is now about 85,000 francs (US\$21), half the average monthly pay of a civil servant.

The strikers' main demands are for a quadrupling of wages and pensions, a minimum wage, a labour disputes tribunal and better public transport services.

A worker at the Social Services Ministry told *IRIN*, "This is now our last resort. We have been taken for granted for too long by the [President Lansana] Conte regime."

According to *IRIN*, there were clashes between demonstrating students in the capital city of Conakry, and several arrests were made.

Zambian sugar cane workers protest against high taxes

Over 400 seasonal workers employed by Zambia Sugar Company downed tools and marched to the company administration block in Mazabuka, southern Zambia, on November 11. The cane cutters were protesting management's decision to deduct 30 percent Pay As You Earn taxes from bonus payments. The demonstrators were demanding to be addressed by Managing Director Paul de Robillard and vowed not to cut cane until their grievance was addressed.

The workers complained that the deductions were unfair. They said that the bonus, payable at the end of their contracts, was needed to provide for their families. After deductions the highest paid would get between K500,000 [US\$125] and K600,000 [US\$150], which would only be enough to pay for transport back to their villages in Western Province.

The Zambia Sugar Company corporate affairs manager, Lovemore Sievu, stated that the company had an obligation to remit tax to the government.



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