

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

24 February 2006

Europe

Greek government attempts to break seamen's strike

The Greek government has ordered striking seamen to be drafted into the military in order to break their week-long strike and force them to return to work.

The strike, which began on February 16 over unemployment benefits and pension rights, has led to widespread shortages and has disrupted regional trade, with hundreds of lorries held up at Italian ports. But the government has refused to meet the strikers' demands, stating that it will not meet demands on benefits and pension claims due to budgetary restrictions.

The government's pronouncement on February 22 that strikers should be drafted into the military has major ramifications and legal experts have queried how the Greek authorities will be able to enforce the order.

Postal workers in Belfast end unofficial strike

On February 16, postal workers in Belfast, Northern Ireland returned to work following more than two weeks of unofficial strike action.

The industrial action has led to a backlog of 7 million items and it is expected that it will take up to four weeks to clear the backlog. During the dispute, deliveries of post in north, south and west Belfast, as well as all mail destined for Britain, was halted.

The action began on January 31 when staff at the Tomb Street depot in Belfast began an unofficial strike after staff alleged harassment by managers. Although acknowledging a "long history of poor industrial and employee relations within Royal Mail" in Belfast, a spokesman for the Communication Workers Union (CWU) made clear the union had been brought in by management to break the strike.

"At the request of Royal Mail, the union became involved in discussions to help resolve the dispute and is pleased that Royal Mail has now given a written statement to the union, via the Labour Relations Agency, which has enabled the dispute to be brought to an end and facilitated a return to work," the spokesman said.

As part of the deal to end the strike, the CWU agreed to

Royal Mail's demand to impose a 12-month ban on industrial action.

Academic staff vote to strike in the UK

On February 16, thousands of lecturers and other academics in higher education in the UK voted in favour of strike action in a dispute over pay. The staff are members of the Association of University Teachers and Natfhe trade unions. The unions argue that academic pay has fallen by 40 percent over the past 20 years.

A total of 64 percent of AUT members and 70 percent of Natfhe members who took part in the poll voted in favour of action. The turnout was 51 percent for the AUT and 47 percent for Natfhe.

Middle East

Oil workers strike in Basra

A one-day strike took place on the February 21 at the Oil Transportation Company in the Iraqi city of Basra, according to a statement issued by the General Union of Oil Employees in Basra.

Among the demands of the striking oil workers are payment of withheld wages and a general improvement of their living conditions.

The union statement read: "We are on strike today to send the message to the government that there are employees whose rights are being violated." In a statement to the press, the union president, Hassan Juma'A Awad, demanded that the oil ministry ensure that structural changes be made within the company as "we (the union) believe there are some executives that haven't served the company right."

Dispute declared at Israeli Postal Authority

The Histadrut Labour Federation declared a labour dispute at the Postal Authority on February 18, claiming that the government is "preventing fair competition in the postal market."

Industrial action was demanded by the union representing the authority's 5,000 employees. Following a mandatory 14-day "cooling-off period" the postal workers will be permitted to begin strike action.

Reuven Karazi, the chairman of the Postal Authority union, said that the public commission established to set the

authority's prices selected rates that were high, inflexible and "lacking any economic logic" for bulk mail. "These rates are obligatory for the Postal Authority, but not for other organizations that are entering the market, which is now being opened up to competition," he said. This would make it impossible for the Postal Authority to win tenders issued by the 70 largest companies in the country and effectively make it economically unviable.

In December, an agreement was signed between the treasury and the Communications Ministry on one side and the Histadrut and Postal Authority's union on the other, according to which the authority would become a company as of March 2006.

The bulk mail market was opened up to competition two weeks ago. The two-year-old public commission headed by Eli Sagi set up to determine mail rates submitted its recommendations earlier this week.

Africa

South Africa: more strikes at Transnet

The series of regional strikes in the dispute with South Africa's transport utility Transnet affected transport in Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Limpopo and North West Province for three days starting February 20.

More than 600,000 commuters in Gauteng were either stranded or suffered delays.

A Metrorail spokeswoman confirmed that the strike had disrupted train operations in the Greater Johannesburg and Vaal areas, saying that operations there were down to 6 percent, and in Tshwane 40 percent of trains were running.

According to *Business Day*, the strikers were from many different parts of Transnet, including Metrorail, Petronet, South African Port Operations, the National Port Authority, Transwerk, Autopax and Freightdynamics. The *Sowetan* quoted an official of the South African Chamber of Commerce (Sacob) who estimated that the strike has so far cost business R70 million (US\$11.6 million).

Business Day reported that the unions were asking for Public Enterprises Minister Alec Erwin to provide "political leadership" to end Transnet management's "bad faith" negotiations. Erwin's response, however, was to attack the strikes as "misguided" and lacking a "clear objective," while praising the policies of Transnet management.

The main demand of the strikers has been for guarantees of job security, collective bargaining rights, as well as maintenance of pensions and other benefits during the restructuring and partial privatisation of the industry.

South African miners on strike underground

Around 400 miners at Crocodile River Platinum Mine (near Brits in the North West Province) have gone on strike and are refusing to come up to the surface until management have met their demands. The workers say they that last year

they were promised permanent jobs once they had served a probationary period of three months.

The South African Broadcasting Corporation reported that the underground strike started on February 15. The mine management succeeded in getting a court order declaring the strike to be illegal and authorising them to remove the miners from the premises. The union is meeting with the management to try and negotiate a settlement.

Other platinum miners at the Impala Platinum mine in Rustenburg have also gone on strike, demanding an end to bad treatment, which has included being forced to work underground and being beaten up by their supervisors.

Tensions came to the boiling point when management suspended a leading shop steward, Albert Khoza. They have refused to specify what charges are being brought against him. The strikers accuse management of firing those who try to defend their rights.

Management's response has been to threaten all the striking workers with dismissal, and to label the strike as illegal because it contravenes an agreement they made with the National Union of Mineworkers.

Firestone strikers return to work

According to the Monrovia-based newspaper the *Inquirer*, the two-week strike at the Firestone rubber plantation in Liberia has been ended after the new government, headed by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, promised to intercede with Firestone management.

Workers at the plantation are reported stating: "The government must do something to make the management of Firestone live up to our demands. We are being dehumanized, exploited and overlooked at this plantation." They have been demanding a decent wage and working conditions as well as better housing, education and health provision.



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