

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

17 March 2006

Europe

Greek public- and private-sector workers stage general strike

Greek workers staged a 24-hour strike in the private and public sectors on March 15. The industrial action was called by several trade unions, comprising 2.5 million members, to protest the economic policies of Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis's government. The government is seeking to cut the nation's budget deficit in order to bring it into line with European Union targets.

The strike had a major impact, shutting down most of the country's industry and the transport system, including the trains and subways. The stoppage affected government offices, banks, hospitals, ports, public utilities and schools. The state-owned Olympic Airlines was forced to cancel dozens of flights, leaving only one flight per destination.

A number of large rallies were held in several cities including Athens, where an estimated 30,000 people attended. Traffic jams built up around the capital as the public transport system ground to a halt.

According to reports, riot police attacked some of those protesting, leaving several people hospitalised. There were also reports of confrontations between riot police and Olympic Airlines employees during the main march in central Athens.

Public-sector workers in Germany continue strike

Public-sector workers in Germany continued their strike action last week in opposition to government and local authority plans to increase working hours from 38.5 hours a week to 40 or more and to cut Christmas and holiday bonuses. The public-sector trade union Verdi called the strike and has since been in talks with employers in an attempt to resolve the dispute.

On March 9, an estimated 41,000 workers participated in industrial action. The strike has been

organised on a regional basis and has now entered its sixth week. The strike by workers at the university hospital in Frankfurt in the state of Hesse represented the 12th state in which stoppages have occurred during the dispute.

Some 6,000 teachers organised in the GEW union also held a number of demonstrations outside kindergartens, schools and universities in Berlin as part of the day of protest. The previous day, an estimated 30,000 workers were involved in the strike.

Cyprus Airways pilots stage unofficial industrial action

Cyprus Airways pilots took unofficial strike action for 24 hours on March 12 to protest plans by the airline to cut wages as part of a restructuring plan. The strike led to thousands of passengers being stranded as the airline was forced to cancel a total of 17 flights.

The pilots walked off the job after they were unable to secure management agreement to discuss their concerns over the restructuring plan, which involves wage cuts of 25 percent.

The action is also in opposition to the trade unions at the airline who agreed in January to the plan that led to the company preparing 385 redundancy notices in an attempt to cut losses of 25 million Cyprus pounds (US\$54 million) a year. This agreement also involved cuts in salary for staff at the airline and enabled the company to ensure that the European Union approved a 60 million Cyprus pound (US\$130 million) government loan guarantee to keep the airline in business.

Middle East

Tehran bus drivers sacked as protests continue

Employees of the state-owned Sherkat e Vahed bus company were handed a list of 46 confirmed dismissals on March 13, as they protested outside various government offices and company headquarters over the laying off of hundreds of their colleagues for taking

part in a strike in January. The list includes five members of the union's executive who are still in prison for their participation in the strike.

The company said the orders came from the Iranian regime's intelligence authorities. Earlier, workers had been told that a "disciplinary committee" has been set up that is working its way through a long list of workers to be expelled for their involvement in the strike.

Around 1,000 detained bus workers, recently released following worldwide protests, have been locked out of their workplaces. They have been without pay for the past six weeks. However, six members of the bus workers' union executive (the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs United Bus Company) and two labour activists who had expressed support for the strike are still being held in the high-security Evin Prison without being formally charged and without access to legal representation.

Jordanian refinery workers strike over work conditions

On March 8, more than 3,500 workers at the Jordan Petroleum Refinery Company (JPRC) began a strike during which they demanded the resignation of the board of directors and the implementation of a pact agreed between the company and the workforce for improvements in working conditions.

The agreement entails increasing workers' salaries and improving their health insurance coverage and housing loans. Hatem Orabi, president of the Gas and Fuel Distributors Association, said most gas stations would run out of fuel derivatives unless the strike was resolved, as current fuel reserves are only sufficient for five more days.

Africa

Ugandan tobacco workers strike over pay

Workers at the British American Tobacco's (BATU's) green leaf threshing plant in Uganda stopped work on March 11 to protest against a drastic cut in their hours and pay.

The seasonal workers, employed in leaf processing, had previously worked Monday to Saturday on two alternating shifts of 12 hours each, including 4 hours overtime. Since February, working hours have been cut by two thirds, with a corresponding cut in pay. Take-home pay for the casual workers has been most affected.

The changes in production practices have resulted from a national crisis in electricity generation due to a lack of capacity and a prolonged draught that has restricted the generation of hydro-electricity. The authorities have adopted a policy of "load shedding," meaning that it is no longer possible to run the BATU machines continuously.

National strike of Transnet workers

A national strike of Transnet employees disrupted South Africa's major port and rail services on March 13. The action was part of a series of rolling strikes to protest the lack of consultation regarding Transnet's restructuring plans, which according to the unions could result in the loss of at least 30,000 jobs out of a total labour force of 85,000.

Demonstrations were held in many of the urban centres, including Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, Pretoria, East London and Port Elizabeth. The strike had a severe impact on the Coal Link rail line from the Mpumalanga coalfields, which export coal supplies to European power stations.

Transnet announced last week that it will be going ahead with plans to dispose of its non-core assets to become a purely rail, port and pipeline business. The four unions involved—the South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union (Satawu), the United Transport and Allied Trade Union, the United Association of South Africa, and the South African Railways and Harbours Union—have said they are not opposed to the planned sell-offs in principle, but that existing jobs and pensions must be protected.



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