

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

31 March 2006

## Europe

### Greek bank workers strike

Many private and state-run banks across Greece closed March 28 due to a 24-hour strike called by workers to protest changes in the pension rights of Emporiki Bank employees. The strike is the latest in a round of disputes between the unions and Greece's conservative government, which has vowed to scale back legal job protection and "reform" the pension system.

### German public sector strike continues

A public sector strike in southwest Germany has entered its seventh week, following the failure of the trade unions and the authorities to find agreement in arbitration.

The dispute in the state of Baden-Württemberg centres on plans to raise the working week from 38.5 to 40 hours, together with a cut in bonuses. Trash collectors, hospital staff and teachers have all joined the walkouts. Service union Verdi said it would continue with the strikes, but would also look at introducing "other strategies."

The strikes in Baden-Württemberg have been mirrored by similar walkouts by Verdi members in other parts of Germany in the country's biggest public sector stoppage for 14 years. Municipal workers in the city of Hamburg and the state of Lower Saxony recently reached an agreement with management.

### Doctors across Germany step up strike action

Doctors at state-run hospitals in Germany are continuing a strike they began last week. About 20,000 doctors have been holding staggered strikes at various locations across the country, calling for improved working conditions and a 30 percent rise in basic pay. They say cuts over the last 10 years have made their position unbearable.

The German authorities have said they cannot meet the conditions and have branded the strikes "irresponsible."

Doctors have warned that many practices are kept afloat by the higher fees that can be charged to private patients. The lower fees paid by public health insurance patients are mainly set by the state.

### BMW workers strike in eastern Germany

Workers at a BMW car plant in eastern Germany staged a

short strike on March 28, escalating a dispute over wages for industrial workers across Germany. More than 1,000 staff at the BMW factory in Leipzig stopped work for one hour, the IG Metall labour union said.

IG Metall has announced a wave of warning strikes this week after a third round of wage talks ended March 27 without result. Firms to be hit with short stoppages include Ford Motor Co. and Siemens AG. The talks are to resume next week.

The striking workers are demanding a 5 percent pay increase and better training for some 3.4 million manufacturing workers across Germany. But employers argue that wages can be raised by only 1.2 percent, so as not to damage Germany's competitiveness.

Workers at automaker DaimlerChrysler AG and other firms already staged brief warning walkouts earlier in March.

### Italian broadcast journalists strike

Radio and television journalists across Italy went on strike March 25 to push for improvements in a new collective contract with employers.

The strike follows a walkout by their colleagues from the print media last week. The national collective agreement for journalists expired nearly a year ago, and its renewal has been the subject of bitter negotiations between the FNSI union and the Italian Federation of Newspaper and Periodical Publishers.

The union wants publishers to apply "only sparingly" a 2002 law on labour flexibility, and has demanded action on low salaries and the overuse of short-term contracts. It is also campaigning for "true legal recognition" for freelance journalists.

Around half of Italy's 30,000 journalists do not have a permanent contract, according to the FNSI.

## Middle East

### Israeli port workers strike over wages

Workers at Israel's Mediterranean port of Ashdod went on strike March 28 against management's refusal to triple their regular daily wage for working on election day.

Israel designated March 28 as a national holiday, except

for emergency services and those related to the elections, so as to allow voters to cast ballots in parliamentary elections.

The trade union representing the Ashdod Port workers rejected a management plea to work as usual, given the large number of ships awaiting loading and unloading. The Ashdod port workers have never previously worked on election day.

### **One-day strike halts output at Turkish oil refineries**

Workers at the Turkish oil refinery at Tupras staged a one-day strike on March 28 in protest against the recent sale of a controlling 51 percent stake in the company to a consortium of Turkey's Koc group and Shell, as well as the failure of ongoing legal action to reverse the sale. The strike halted production at Tupras refineries in Izmit, Izmir, Kirikkale and Batman. Production has also been halted at the company's Korfez petrochemical plant adjacent to the Izmit refinery.

In early February, the court issued a preliminary ruling in the union's favour. The ruling called for the sale to be halted. Koc Group took control of Tupras on January 27 for \$4.14 billion.

### **Riot and work stoppage by immigrant workers halt construction of Dubai skyscraper**

Construction of what is expected to be the world's tallest building was halted March 22 after 2,500 workers in Dubai rioted over pay and conditions, causing damage estimated at around £500,000.

The labourers were angered when buses due to take them to their residential camp at the end of their shift were delayed, witnesses said. Workers from the Burj Dubai tower site and surrounding housing developments chased and assaulted security officers and destroyed cars and machinery before halting work.

Construction workers building a new terminal at Dubai international airport downed tools in sympathy, airport officials said.

In recent years, Dubai has been the scene of an extraordinary construction boom, relying mainly on workers from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

Last September, about 7,000 labourers staged an unprecedented three-hour demonstration. Workers' grievances often centre on poor living conditions and non-payment of wages.

According to the United Arab Emirates Labour Ministry there were 5,486 complaints about non-payment of wages last year. Some companies have been accused of retaining and "losing" migrant workers' passports to stop them returning home.

## **Africa**

### **Cameroon tea estate workers strike over arrears**

Workers in Buea, Cameroon at the Tole Tea Plantation, owned by Cameroon Tea Estates (CTE), have been on strike

for more than three weeks. They are demanding payment of three years of unpaid benefits, such as holiday pay.

Management claimed that the affected workers had resigned from their jobs last year and were now employed on a temporary basis only. This was denied by the workers.

### **South African Goodyear workers to strike**

About 1,700 workers at Goodyear tyres in Port Elizabeth, South Africa are to take indefinite strike action over management's refusal to permanently employ 300 temporary workers for the last five years.

The union involved, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), claim the agency employing the temporary workers had denied them benefits, including medical aid. Some of the workers suffered chronic illnesses and had been unable to get medical attention because of the high costs involved.

### **South African telecom workers strike**

Some 13,000 telecommunication workers employed by Telkom in South Africa went on a two-day national strike this week to demand improvements in their pay and benefits.

The unions involved, Solidarity and the Communication Workers Union, are demanding bonuses of R50,000 (US\$7,980) a year from the company's profits, and a salary increase of 7.5 to 8.5 percent. These unions cover the majority of the workers, but a smaller union, the South African Communications Union (SACU), accepted the company's offer.

Telkom have threatened to implement their latest offer for SACU and nonunionised workers only in an attempt to split the workforce and gain the upper hand. The other unions have denounced this tactic as illegal and threatened legal action if it is implemented.

Meanwhile, a strike by South African security guards for a pay increase of 11 percent is continuing.



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