

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

19 May 2006

Europe

Workers stage nationwide paper production strike in Finland

Finnish paper workers began a nationwide strike on May 15 to protest large-scale job losses in the industry. The two-day industrial action involved more than 20,000 workers and was called by the Paperworkers' Union and shut down nearly all paper factories in the country.

On May 12 it was confirmed that 2,557 jobs will be cut in Finland over the next three years as part of a restructuring programme aimed at cutting costs and production capacity in the industry. As the strike ended at 6 a.m., about 6,000 office workers in the forest industry started a 24-hour walkout of their own.

Ferry workers in Norway strike in pay dispute

Members of the Naval Officers' Union in Norway began strike action on May 13 in a dispute over pay. The union turned down a proposal for a new wage agreement put forward by the National Arbitrator earlier that day. The nationwide stoppage affected around 30 of Norway's key ferry points on the first day of the strike.

The Naval Officers' Union has said the strike could spread if the dispute is not resolved satisfactorily. Three of the popular cruise-ferries on Norway's coastal route from Bergen to Kirkenes are likely targets.

Middle East

Strike closes Israel's First International Bank branches

The main branches of the First International Bank in Tel Aviv and Haifa closed last week due to industrial action. The strike was called over disagreements between the bank's workers and management over the distribution of profits from 2004.

Lebanese demonstrate against government economic reform plan

A demonstration of tens of thousands took place in the Lebanese capital of Beirut on May 10 in protest at a series of governmental draft laws, including a new employment contract, which the demonstrators believe are unfair.

The demonstration was called by the Union Coordination

Committee and supported by Hezbollah, the Amal Movement, the Free Patriotic Movement, the Communist Party, the Social Syrian Nationalist Party, the National Unity Forum-Third Power, the People's Party and the Nasserit Party.

The Free Patriotic Movement said it held the government directly responsible for the demonstration because it did not engage in talks with the concerned parties before the employment contract draft law and other blueprints were put forth.

UAE workers protest against unpaid salaries

Around 100 workers of the Al Difah Company for Services and Nutrition—the firm that supplies the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) with meals—staged a protest in front of the university in Al Ain last week against delays in their salaries.

According to the workers, the company which hired them has not paid any salaries since December 2005. They said that for months they have been living in very bad conditions and they could not bear any more suffering. Some 200 workers have not been paid. One said that his daughter was ill and he was unable to pay for medicines to treat her.

Africa

Coca-Cola workers on strike in South Africa

Coca-Cola workers at the canning plant in Wadeville, South Africa have been out on strike since May 10, in opposition to company restructuring that left seven workers out of a job and having to apply for new positions. The strikers were mainly members of the Food and Allied Workers' Union (Fawu).

Two days after the action began, the strikers handed a memorandum to management demanding that all restructuring at the plant be stopped immediately. The union is threatening Coca-Cola with court action if unilateral changes continue to be made.

Nigerian telecom workers stage two-day strike over pay arrears

Workers at the Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (NITEL) began a two-day strike on May 15 to demand payment of their outstanding salaries and benefits. The strike

decision was made at a mass meeting held in the capital, Abuja, after the government failed to respond to an 11-day ultimatum.

The workers are owed salaries from January to April 2006 and benefits dating back to December 2005. Another of the strikers' demands is for the return of four employees who were transferred out of the capital because of their union activities.

Muhammad Abatcha, a spokesman for the strikers, said that staff would be reporting for duty as normal, but they would not do any work. However, he made clear that NITEL's network would not be shut down, and other telecommunications companies would not be affected by the strike.

Nigeria local government workers on indefinite strike

On May 14, members of the Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) in Plateau State, Nigeria, began an indefinite strike to demand payment of 17 months unpaid salary and a promised pay rise of 12.5 percent. The action has shut down the "third tier of government" in the state.

On May 1, the state governor, Chief Joshua Dariye, tried to forestall the action when he confirmed that the 12.5 percent salary rise would be paid, but only from July 1. NULGE's response was to point out that "it had exhausted all avenues available to it to enable its members to collect the monies due to them in an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity" and was therefore left with no alternative than to embark on strike action.

South African lecturers strike at Walter Sisulu University

Lecturers at Walter Sisulu University, South Africa, began an all-out strike on May 16 in support of a 12 percent across-the-board pay increase. The National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union, the National Tertiary Education Staff Union and the National Union of Tertiary Employees of South Africa issued a joint statement which read, "Management's insulting zero percent [salary increase] offer... is totally insane." The striking lecturers have vowed to continue the action until their demands are met.

Wage negotiations began last October, four months after the merger of Border Technikon, Eastern Cape Technikon and the university to form the Walter Sisulu University (WSU), making it one of the biggest tertiary institutions in South Africa. The unions have now declared a deadlock, claiming that management was negotiating "in bad faith."

Management is refusing to give an across-the-board increase, claiming it "would only exacerbate the imbalances in salaries of employees of the three institutions that formed WSU."

The university mid-year examinations are due to begin in a few weeks time.

One-day strike in South Africa

Hundreds of thousands of South African workers downed tools on May 18 in response to the call by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) for a one-day strike against the country's high levels of unemployment and poverty.

According to the *Mail & Guardian*, the biggest response was in the mining and car manufacturing industries. A spokesperson for the Chamber of Mines said that some gold mines were experiencing 100 percent absence. Most workers at Harmony Gold's "big operators"—the Sepong, Bambanani and Masimong mines in Free State—had supported the action.

The car industry was also widely affected, with very limited production at the Volkswagen plant in Uitenhage. Many bus and rail services and retail stores were affected and many schools had to close because their teachers were out on strike.

Big demonstrations were held in all the major cities. In Johannesburg, thousands of strikers crowded into Beyers Naude Square where a protest meeting was held. In Durban, the strikers marched to the City Hall, where they planned to hand over a memorandum of grievances about jobs and poverty to the KwaZulu-Natal Chamber of Commerce. In a separate demonstration in Pietermaritzburg, teachers marched to the provincial education department in protest against a lack of stationary and safety at schools and corrupt practices within the department.

Cosatu has issued a statement calling on the government and employers to treat unemployment and poverty as a national emergency. "We want to see far more of the country's growing wealth being ploughed into job-creation projects, training programmes and the provision of basis services."

Essential services, like hospitals and electricity, were not called out.



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