

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

26 May 2006

Norway's public sector union in pay dispute

On May 24, members of the Federation of Norwegian Professional Associations trade union federation staged strike action in a dispute over pay. The federation is calling for average annual raises for its members of around NOK 25,000 (around US\$4,000), while the state is offering half that. The industrial action proceeded following the breakdown of all-night negotiations between the union and Norway's national mediator, Svein Longva.

The union federation has 13 member organisations, representing some 126,000 members, including lawyers, engineers, psychologists, researchers, doctors, veterinary surgeons, clergy, dentists and social scientists.

The first stage of the strike included public prosecutors, food safety workers and police lawyers. The stoppage resulted in court proceedings and preparations in criminal cases being halted. The meat producer Gilde announced that it would close a plant near Ålesund, because no inspectors were available to monitor it. Other food safety inspections in the Ålesund area were cancelled or reduced due to the strike.

Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra musicians in Norway strike over salaries

Musicians at the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra took strike action on May 24 following the breakdown in negotiations over their salaries. The nearly 100 musicians are in dispute with the employers' organization, NAVO.

The strike began as the Festspillene I Bergen, the city's annual music festival, was due to begin. The Philharmonic was due to open the concert and was also scheduled to take part in a "Mozart Marathon," a 12-hour program with several concerts, and two concerts in Bergen's cathedral next week.

Heinz HP workers protest plant closure in Birmingham, England

Workers employed at the HP Sauce factory in Birmingham, England held a demonstration outside the headquarters of Heinz, the company which owns the brand and produces the sauce.

Heinz announced last week that it plans to move production of the sauce to Holland and end more than 100 years of sauce manufacture in the region. The closure of the plant is expected to lead to the loss of 125 jobs.

The demonstration was called by the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) and was held outside Heinz's head office in Hayes, Middlesex. The union has announced that it intends to hold a protest in Birmingham later this month.

During the protest outside the building, TGWU union officials met with Heinz management to discuss the plans to close the plant.

Firefighters in Hertfordshire, England strike to protest job cuts

Firefighters in Hertfordshire, England began industrial action on May 20 to protest planned cutbacks. During the strike that lasted eight hours just 25 firefighters were available compared to the normal staffing level of 120. The number of available fire engines was reduced from 43 to 5 full-time vehicles and 5 retained-crew fire engines as a result of the stoppage.

The firefighters are member of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), which has condemned as "savage" plans by Hertfordshire Fire Service to cut up to 40 jobs. Hertfordshire Fire Service said that no full-time firefighters will lose their jobs under the restructuring proposals.

The industrial action in the local county council is the first where the army is not providing back-up cover. The FBU plans to hold further strikes on May 26 and May 31 pending the resolution of the dispute.

Construction workers at gas plant in England protest over safety fears

On May 23 around 100 workers picketed the liquefied natural gas (LNG) fuel terminal being built near Milford Haven in Pembrokeshire, England. The workers protested due to safety fears over the removal of asbestos from the site.

The terminal is being built on the site of the former Esso refinery and will house gas shipped from the Far East. The gas will be cooled to liquid form for easy transportation and will then be turned back into natural gas before it is piped into the UK gas supply.

The dispute has been developing over a period of time. Earlier this month contractors walked off the job after the company announced that small quantities of asbestos cement pipe had been found last year in the concrete foundations. The workers requested that showering facilities were installed so that they did not go home "possibly covered in asbestos dust." Many of the workers involved claim that they have since been sacked by the company.

Commenting on the dispute, trade union shop steward Douglas Corbett said, "What we want are our jobs back and we are quite willing to return to work and discuss any other problems concerning this issue when we get back to work." He added that the removal of asbestos was being treated as a "clandestine operation" by the company.

Middle East

Protest against Israeli governments' welfare-to-work plan

Sawt el-Amel (The Laborer's Voice), and supporting organisations have called a demonstration May 28 against the "Wisconsin Plan," a government welfare-to-work plan that is to be piloted in Nazareth and other areas.

In April, the Nazareth Labour Court found in favour of two unemployed women whose income benefits had been suspended for one month under the Wisconsin Plan. More recently, a 46-year-old man participating in the Wisconsin Plan claimed that two days after he complained about the program in an interview with *Haaretz* program officials informed him they were taking away his National Insurance Institute support payment for May.

The *Haaretz* article, published May 15, interviewed several participants in the plan who complained that they were being forced to do "community service" at an army base. For fear of reprisals, all the interviewees asked not to be named, and were identified only by their first initials.

Increasing numbers of protests by Dubai construction workers

There has been a spate of protests over the past few months throughout Dubai's rapidly burgeoning construction industry, and a series of draconian responses on behalf of the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) ruling elite.

The latest protest resulted in the deportation of dozens of construction workers after they attacked strike-breakers who broke a five-day protest for better wages. Eighty-six construction workers for the Besix firm were deported May 22, a senior government official has confirmed.

On May 16, 8,000 Besix employees stopped work across the UAE, for a Dh5 daily increase, a larger food allowance, and several other demands. Labourers at Besix are paid a Dh15 basic wage and Dh8.5 for food daily. They are not given a wage or food allowance on Friday, their day off.

The protest halted work on about 17 projects, including on Burj Dubai, causing a direct loss of Dh5 million, and an indirect loss of between Dh10 million to Dh15 million. A representative of the Belgium-based company, Johan Beerlandt, said building work on two floors of Burj Dubai—projected to be the world's tallest skyscraper—was also delayed.

On May 20, some 50 labourers broke the strike and returned to work. Later there were reprisals against the strike-breakers as they returned to their accommodation, involving around 200 of their colleagues. Some of the men were injured and the strike-breakers went into hiding.

The incident took place against increasingly desperate protests by Dubai's construction workers, which has brought their plight to an international audience as well as revealing abuses in other sectors of the apparently booming UAE economy.

Strikes and walkouts by workers demanding back pay or better living conditions have become an almost daily occurrence. A government committee set up a year ago to deal with labour grievances revealed that it intervened eight times last year to resolve complaints in favour of 19,249 workers. In March, a riot by building workers saw equipment and cars smashed up, and there was another violent protest in late April at the sprawling Dubai Marina project.

Africa

South African security guards continue strike

Striking security workers showed their determination to continue their action in pursuit of an 11 percent pay increase. A meeting on May 19 between the employers and the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (Satawu), was deadlocked.

Zukile Ngesi, chairman of the strikers in Philippi, Cape Town, spoke of the poverty-level wages paid to security workers: "With what we're earning at the moment, we sometimes can't even afford food and electricity."

A march by striking security guards on May 16 was attacked by police using rubber bullets.

Ghanaian Polytechnic teachers begin indefinite strike

Teachers belonging to the Ghanaian Polytechnic teachers' association (POTAG) began indefinite strike action on May 19.

Benjamin Kojo Otoo, POTAG national president, said they were taking action following the government's refusal to negotiate pay and conditions. At a press conference Otoo explained, "The last time negotiations were held was on March 10, this year, the agreement was that by March 31, 2006, negotiations would be finalized," but this had failed to materialise.

Ghanaian wood workers take unofficial action

Workers at the Coppon Wood Processing factory in Akyem Oda took unofficial action on May 18 in protest at the non-payment of wages and harsh conditions. The workers surrounded the factory holding the management in the premises.

Workers have not been paid for the last three months and are expected to work 12-hour days, including weekends and public holidays. Some of the workers also explained that in spite of being employed for 12 years by the company they are still not classed as permanent workers.

Zambian teachers in strike action

Teachers in Kitwe, in the Copperbelt area of Zambia, took strike action over a long-running dispute in which the government has failed to honour its agreement to restructure salary scales and pay housing allowance arrears.

The teachers originally took strike action in January 2005 but returned to work after the government promised to address their grievances. Last year Zambia National Union of Teachers general secretary Roy Mwaba explained that the government owed teachers K52 billion in housing allowance arrears.

The Zambian education minister has declared the strike illegal.



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