

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

13 October 2006

## Europe

### **Greek workers and students continue strikes and protests against cuts**

Thousands of Greek civil servants, transport workers and primary school teachers took industrial action and demonstrated in the capital Athens on October 11.

The teachers were continuing an ongoing dispute, while civil servants were striking for 24 hours to demand that the government abandon planned public spending cuts in the 2007 budget. The demonstration was supported by Greece's two main unions, the General Confederation of Greek Workers and the Public Servants Union.

During the day, bus and train staff in Athens supported the strikes, leading to public transport disruptions. Government office staff and state bank employees also struck, forcing offices and banks to close down for the day.

The government of Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis plans to cut spending in the

2007 draft budget to below the level required by the European Union, in order to avoid sanctions. It proposes cutting the fiscal deficit to 2.4 percent of gross domestic product so as to meet euro zone requirements. The EU imposes a 3 percent cap to ensure the euro currency is not threatened by any increases in member states' public spending.

Education Minister Marietta Giannakou condemned the strike action and said that "Certain political groups want civil unrest. They are backing a cause that is fading."

The police used tear gas against protesters following skirmishes at a Starbucks coffee shop and a far-right publisher's bookstore.

On October 9, police attacked a demonstration of teachers outside the Education Ministry. The same day, a 48-hour strike by high school teachers came to an end.

The strike by the teachers has won widespread support among pupils. A reported 100 schools were forced to close over the last week as students demanded more government funding for education and a change to criteria used for entry to universities.

### **Romanian health workers protest to demand higher pay and increased health spending**

On October 9, more than 5,000 health service employees demonstrated in the Romanian capital Bucharest. The protesters gathered in the Piata Constitutiei public square and demanded

increases in pay and more money for the health service budget. They threatened to stage a general strike. The demonstration was called by the Sanitas Federation.

Many of those present wore white flags with the Red Cross symbol and chanted, "We want justice for the health system!"

Health workers' trade unions are calling for staff salaries to be increased by 70 percent. The rally's organiser said that Health Minister Eugen Nicolaescu had stated that the government would allocate 4.2 percent of the gross domestic product for the 2007 health budget, but ruled out a salary increase. The average salary for an employee in the health service is just 190 euros a month, and many workers, including doctors, have been forced to leave Romania to seek work in other countries.

### **Bus drivers strike in Stockholm protest passenger violence**

Bus drivers in Stockholm, Sweden, staged industrial action on October 7 to protest escalating levels of passenger violence against them. The drivers are members of the Kommunal trade union and decided to walk off the job following the brutal robbery of a bus driver near the Slussen bus terminal the previous evening.

Later, passengers who did not have a pre-purchased ticket or travel card were allowed onto buses free of charge as drivers refused to handle cash. The protest was the third of its kind in recent weeks and was opposed on the previous occasions by the Work Environment Authority. The Authority is now considering a complete block on drivers handling cash in Stockholm from next year, as the new bus ticket system in the city has increased cash handling fourfold, increasing the risk for drivers.

## Middle East

### **Medical workers in Jerusalem join protests**

Employees of MDA Emergency Medical Service's southern district have announced they will join a series of work stoppages already underway in Jerusalem. The ambulance staff will not demand payment from patients being transported to hospitals in protest at the organisation's new rank system, by which employees display military-type ranks on their uniforms.

Jerusalem Histadrut official Danny Ben-Sheetrit has informed Jerusalem City Hall that if private ambulances are hired to stand by during a parade set for this week, sanitation service

along the parade route will be halted in protest.

### **Bangladeshi textile workers protest against abuse in Jordan**

Over 200 Bangladeshi migrant workers at a textile factory staged a sit-in on October 1 to protest against physical and verbal abuse by their employer.

The workers, who were demonstrating outside the office of the governor of Zarqa, 30 km east of the capital Amman, said they would continue the strike until their rights were respected and demands met. These include the release of six colleagues from police custody detained on orders from the Zarqa governor. The six men were accused of instigating the strike.

The Bangladeshis work at the Rainbow Textile Factory in Duleil Qualified Industrial Zone, which houses several factories, including Rainbow, which manufacture major American brands such as Levi Strauss, Gap and Calvin Klein. The workers signed a document detailing the abuse inflicted on them by their employer, including “severe beating, verbal insults, threats of deportation and forcing them to sign blank documents.”

One of the workers, Hilal, said five people, including two women, had been beaten over the past two days. “They want us to work like slaves,” he said.

Employees first went on strike on September 27, protesting against delayed payments, prolonged working of up to 15 hours a day without overtime, and confiscation of their passports.

Last month, 1,000 Bangladeshi workers at Duleil QIZ also staged a one-day strike demanding improved working conditions.

Factories in this industrial zone are often accused of maltreating their employees, according to labour rights organisations such as the local General Federation for Textile Industries and the Washington-based National Labour Committee for Worker and Human Rights. A report earlier this year by the New York-based National Labour Committee for Worker and Human Rights stated that tens of thousands of foreign workers in Jordan’s textile sector were not being paid their full wages and were forced to work extra hours.

### **Africa**

### **Nigerian port workers strike after colleagues killed in avoidable accident**

Hundreds of port workers at the Tin Can Island Port, Lagos, Nigeria, stopped work on October 3 to protest a lack of safety provisions that led to the deaths of two of their colleagues. The two had fallen asleep on top of a container on October 1 when they were hit by another container being unloaded from a ship. They died from their injuries.

The strike was also in protest at the Nigerian Ports Authority’s threat to cut jobs without having specified the severance payments. One dockworker was quoted by the Lagos-based Guardian newspaper: “We are tired of this nonsense. Whatever they want to pay us, let them do [it] instead of keeping us waiting endlessly. Now, we have lost two of our

colleagues without a dime from the federal government. Yet, we work like machines with poor remuneration since we are regarded as casuals.”

The strike blocked the entrance to the port and brought it to a halt until the strikers were dispersed by police using tear gas.

### **Nigerian teachers strike against sell-off of schools**

Nigerian teachers at the Unity Schools owned by the federal government have launched an indefinite strike against plans to privatise them. There are 102 Unity Schools or Federal Government Colleges. They are secondary schools that were established after independence, ostensibly to foster national unity among the pupils.

There are news reports of school students shouting “no to privatisation of Unity Colleges” after finding that their lessons had been cancelled. The Association of Senior Civil Servants of Nigeria (ASCSN) predicted that the sell-off would cause the loss of 27,000 jobs. A union spokesperson said that the strike would continue until the education minister calls them into talks.

### **Thousands of Namibian garment workers vote to strike**

Ramatex garment workers in Namibia have voted to take strike action to oppose the company’s low wages and poor conditions. With the total number of votes cast standing at 2,734 after three days of voting, the proportion in favour of a strike was 90 percent. The two main reasons given for the strike are the lack of a pay rise since the company came into being in 2001 and the health hazards faced by workers.

The Namibian Food and Allied Workers Union (NAFAU), which organised the vote, has yet to announce if and when it will act on the ballot result. While the vote was taking place, the company announced a 60-cent hourly increase (less than 8 US cents). The general manager of Ramatex said, “Production is still below our expectations, but we realise that the industry we’re involved in is still very new in this country. So we can’t expect workers to be experts overnight.”

Currently, Ramatex workers receive between N\$3 and N\$4 (39 to 52 US cents). Management showed their hostility to the union by canceling the meeting at which the requested wage increase was to be discussed.



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