

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

16 March 2007

Europe

Dutch port workers ordered back to work

On March 10, a court in Rotterdam ordered striking workers at the ports services group Smit back to work. The injunction was called for by various petrochemical refinery firms whose ships were caught up in the strike.

The court in Holland's second city ordered the towage workers to return to work for four days after every five days on strike in order to clear the backlog of work.

Italian air and rail affected by strikes

According to Associated Press, Italian airliner Alitalia announced that it was cancelling 96 flights on March 13 after Rome's air traffic controllers declared they would hold a four-hour strike to protest staff shortages.

Although most of the cancelled flights are domestic, they also include routes to Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Lisbon, Paris and Cairo.

In a separate development, rail workers from the Italian Filt-Cgil union called for an eight-hour strike on April 13 to protest possible job cuts.

Strike closes Bulgarian-Greek border checkpoint

A strike by Greek agricultural workers closed the Kulata border checkpoint between Bulgaria and Greece for a number of hours on March 10.

During the protest, all traffic was redirected through the Ilinden checkpoint.

Paris strike shuts down French film production

Film production workers in Paris went on strike March 7, shutting down work on a dozen French movies but leaving foreign shoots unaffected.

The striking film workers held a rally outside the Centre National de la Cinematographie to voice their opposition to industry attempts to cut pay and invoke partial wage deferrals, union leaders told *Variety*.

France's film workers are paid the minimum wage set under a longstanding collective bargaining agreement that has been renewed but never signed by some of the country's largest movie companies; some producers get around the legal regulations by paying fixed fees rather than hourly wages. This prompted suggestions last year by French business to lower of minimum wage to reflect industry practices.

A dresser on a French film reportedly earns about US\$19.70 per hour (US\$787 a week) on a typical 12-week shoot.

Cypriot airport workers threaten strike

Staff at the two main airports in Cyprus called a two-hour strike on March 13 to protest the government's failure to give permanent contracts to airport vets, who are currently paid by the hour.

The veterinary officials, who operate under the wing of civil aviation, claim they have yet to be made permanent despite a cabinet decision to the effect in July 2005.

Cyprus Mail quoted a union announcement: "The workers condemn the actions of the civil aviation not to implement the decision fully to hire the temporary workers. The department has many times stated that they face dangers and costs because they are short staffed."

Irish nurses protest for better deal

Irish Independent reported March 13 that nurses held their first meeting with the government's industrial relations arbiter, the National Implementation Body (NIB), over their postponed national strike.

Up to 40,000 members of the Irish Nurses Organisation and the Psychiatric Nurses Organisation have mounted lunchtime demonstrations in recent weeks in Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick. They are demanding a 35-hour week, increased pay and a bonus for working in Dublin to cover higher living costs in the capital.

Irish airline dispute

Negotiations have been held between management and unions at the main Irish airline, Aer Lingus, over a Labour Court recommendation calling for significant changes in work practices.

The court made a recent "cost-cutting" recommendation. It also wants a compensation package negotiated within four weeks.

On March 12, SIPTU national industrial secretary Michael Halpenny and the union's shop stewards met Aer Lingus management to "flesh out" issues raised by the court recommendation. The union has 1,800 members working in Aer Lingus. Further meetings will be held over the coming weeks with local management in various operations throughout the company.

A threatened 24-hour strike was called off by SIPTU and the airline's craft unions at the beginning of the month after the Labour Court's intervention. The row was about controversial new contracts for existing staff, which would change the terms and conditions of workers for the worse.

Middle East

Strike at Baghdad's Sheraton Hotel

Around 250 workers at the Sheraton hotel in Baghdad organised a strike on March 3 and 4 calling for the payment of overdue wages and other benefits amounting to around 200,000 Iraqi dinars (equivalent to US\$140) in addition to other arrears.

Management agreed to the workers' demands, and the strike was ended. The salaries of the workers of Sheraton, Meridian, and Baghdad hotels and many others were frozen when occupancy of the hotels suffered a dramatic drop as a result of the recent upsurge in violence in the city.

Iraqi power workers take strike action

On March 13, workers and technicians at Taza Electricity Plant 15K, outside Kirkuk, carried out a one-day strike calling on the local authorities to improve protection from attacks that are endangering and killing many workers. The strikers also called for a pay increase.

On the same day, workers at Baghdad's main electricity plant protested the Minister of Electricity's decision to abolish their allowances.

Migrant Indian catering workers strike in Kuwait City

About 200 workers at a catering company in Kuwait City went on strike March 12 over underpayment of wages.

The workers, who are staying at the company camp in Riggai, told the *Arab Times* that they were brought to Kuwait by the company four months ago after extensive interviews conducted in India. One of the workers claimed that at the interviews in Kerala, in south India, they were

promised a salary of KD60 plus overtime: “The Egyptian managers had personally come for the interviews. But from Bombay airport we were told that for the first three months, the probation period, we would only be paid KD26.”

Angry workers allege that the catering company’s agent in Bombay colluded with management to ensnare them.

According to the *Arab Times*, last week the workers collected signatures and sent a letter to the head office in Kuwait City explaining their plight. On March 12, the workers learned that seven of their representatives were being considered for deportation.

A protest was organised, and two managers and three supervisors are alleged to have come to the camp and manhandled some of their employees. The *Arab Times* quoted a worker as saying, “In the ensuing scramble, one of the workers suffered a deep cut in his leg from a broken piece of glass.” The managers wanted to speak to the workers one by one, which the workers were not willing to do. “They told us that the seven people will be sent back, and that our present salary of KD26 is approved by the ministry, which is a farce. The five management people also ransacked some of our flats.”

The company also charges the workers for “violations,” such as uncut hair or an unshaven face. A fine can amount to KD5-KD10.

Most of the workers had paid between Rs.75,000 and Rs.100,000 for a visa and flight. “Some of us have incurred debts to pay that amount, and we are hardly able to save anything, leave alone repay our loans,” one said.

Bank of Israel workers strike over wages

A year-long wage dispute between the Bank of Israel, its workers and the Finance Ministry came to a head March 12 when 800 employees took industrial action.

In the following days, the bank staff stepped up their action, as no wage agreement has been signed and because Ministry of Finance Director of Wages has ordered bank employees to return excess salary and benefits payments.

The Israeli media speculated that Bank of Israel Governor Stanley Fischer had made a last-minute decision not to resign, after he cancelled a press conference hours before it was scheduled to take place. The Tel Aviv Stock Exchange’s benchmark TA-25 index fell as much as 1.4 percent on news of the scheduled press conference.

The strike followed a letter from Fischer on March 11 to Finance Minister Avraham Hirschson, Eli Cohen, the ministry’s director of wages, and Rimona Leibowitz, chairman of the central bank’s workers union, that claimed the year-long wage dispute could damage the central bank’s international reputation and the country’s economy.

On March 9, Bank of Israel workers committee chairperson Rimona Leibowitz ordered a shutdown of the bank’s clearing and updates system for the commercial banks—disabling deposit or withdrawal of monies in their accounts with the Bank of Israel, as well as the ability to verify their account balances.

Bank representatives told the *Jerusalem Post* that they were making arrangements for continued customer service and that the strike would have no impact on their business, so customers need not worry about cash shortages.

According to *Bloomberg*, Wage Director Cohen said on March 11 that he was resuming an inquiry into central bank wages, at the end of which he may cut salaries and request reimbursement from employees and pensioners for compensation deemed improper.

In a letter to Fischer on March 12, Hirschson said he was freezing until next week the letters to the central bank workers summoning them to a hearing over the excess pay it wants back.

Israeli dock workers shut down port

Dockers went on strike at Ashdod port on the night of March 11 against the Israeli Finance Ministry’s changes to an agreement between port

workers and the Ashdod Port Authority.

The cost per day of the strike is estimated at anywhere from NIS15 million to NIS50 million. The Israel Manufacturers Association says that more than US\$35 million worth of products are currently stuck at the port.

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, the port workers and the Ashdod Port Authority had almost reached an agreement over numerous issues when the Treasury stated that the settlement was not going to be approved by the government.

Israel’s ports were privatised in 2005. Ashdod’s port workers received salary increases and additional benefits, including stock options, in return for agreeing to a period of “industrial quiet” for at least five years. Additionally, the port management agreed that any future negotiations could not be completed without Finance Ministry approval.

The port workers were involved in a similar strike in early February. As of going to press, the strike has ended a day after the Ministry of Finance approved the labour contract at the port, which it had previously called “a public scandal.”

Strikes hit Israeli schools, colleges and universities

Teachers in all Tel Aviv-area district high schools and some of its junior highs went on strike March 12, while the Secondary School Teachers Association announced that it intended to extend the strike on March 13 to schools in Jerusalem.

Post-elementary schools in the centre of the country also closed.

The teachers began the strike after negotiations with the Finance Ministry over salary agreements and pensions reached a dead end. The teachers have threatened to continue holding strikes at schools throughout the country until their demands are met.

According to Haaretz news service, March 14, the Association of Secondary School Teachers is planning to strike at high schools in the northern and southern districts.

Meanwhile, the Students’ Union declared a strike in Tel Aviv University on March 13 and in colleges on March 14.

The students’ strike is in opposition to a plan to hire lecturers on a private and not collective contract basis, a move that would adversely affect tuition. Students will also strike in protest of the Shochat Committee, which, they say, is leading towards a decision to raise tuition fees.

Africa

South African gold miners on strike against “apartheid” managers

Around 480 gold miners at the Primrose Gold Mine in Germiston, South Africa, have been on strike since March 1, against a management style that National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) regional secretary Mluleki Senene called “reminiscent of [the] apartheid-era.”

The strikers’ demands include management’s recognition of the NUM, resumption of pay bargaining, and the cessation of edicts cutting pay. Senene said that the management had reneged on an agreement that led to the suspension of a previous strike in December.

South Africa’s Vodacom obtains court order forcing strikers back to work

Striking communications workers at Vodacom in South Africa have been forced back to work following the issuing of a court order. The strike was to demand bargaining rights for the Communications Workers Union (CWU).

“It is unfortunate that the judge granted Vodacom the interim interdict. That has forced us to suspend our strike,” CWU spokesman Mfanafuthi Sithebe told the Sapa press agency.

Vodacom claims that union membership has fallen to 10 percent, and that an agreement signed by both sides at the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) in 1999 stipulates that a level of 30 percent is needed for the union to get bargaining rights. The CWU says that more than 1,200 workers out of the workforce of 4,500 are CWU members, putting the level of membership at around 30 percent.

Sudanese translators on strike over non-payment of wages

More than 150 translators working for the African Union (AU) in the Darfur region of Sudan have gone on strike to protest not being paid for the last three months. The translators are also demanding a pay increase and a danger allowance.

Those on strike are responsible for translating between Sudan's official language, Arabic, and the non-Arabic languages spoken in the Darfur region. An AU official denied that it was three months since the translators were paid, but admitted that they had not been paid since January.

Striking Ghanaian health workers threatened with dismissal

Striking health workers in Ghana were told that unless they returned to work by March 6 they should consider themselves dismissed. The threat was contained in a letter sent out by the Ministry of Health, in spite of the fact that the strike had been taking place for only a few days at the time.

A work to rule was initiated some weeks ago by the Health Workers Group (HWG), to protest against anomalies in the salary structure. The participants were working to rule from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. from Monday to Friday only. At the end of February, some of the workers in the Greater Accra Region decided to escalate their action into a strike. This was deemed illegal by the National Labour Commission.



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