

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

11 May 2007

Europe

Norwegian workers strike to protest pension restructuring

On May 9 an estimated 40,000 members of the Norwegian trade union federation staged a two-hour strike in opposition to the government's pension reforms. Last month the Norwegian Parliament agreed to legislation that cuts government's pension costs and raises the national retirement age to 67. At present many workers have pension clauses built into their retirement agreements allowing them to receive pensions from 62. The federation is demanding that the current contractual pension system be retained.

Prior to the strike the Norwegian Employers' Confederation stated that the strike was illegal. During the strike buses, tram services and public transport ground to a halt for several hours in the main cities, including the capital Oslo. In smaller towns a series of public rallies were held. Some 160 trade unions participated in the action with many strikers carrying placards with slogans such as "Stop the pension robbery."

Spanish treasury staff strike for higher pay

Thousands of Spanish treasury workers began a national three-day strike on May 3 to demand a higher, better paid grade within the civil service. The action coincided with the beginning of the national tax filing period. The Finance Ministry has refused to accept the workers' demands and said that the strike would not affect the processing of tax return forms. The ministry estimated that more than 3,000 of its 6,000 staff participated in the industrial action.

Miners in Sweden end unofficial strike

On May 9 striking miners at Sweden's state-owned mining company LKAB ended their unofficial action. The miners began the strike over pay on May 7 and by the following morning the pit at Kiruna, in the north of Sweden, was forced to close. Miners at other LKAB pits also walked off the job.

The miners are demanding pay increases of 4,000 kronor (US\$594) a month. The LKAB had offered 800 kronor but agreed this week to resume talks with trade unions after the employers' association and the Metalworkers Union both raised objections to its offer. According to the firm the industrial action has cost the company 80 million kronor.

National Bank of Greece strike in Cyprus

Staff employed by the National Bank of Greece in Cyprus

began strike action last week in a dispute over the hiring of four management personnel. The action was called by the ETYK trade union. The union claims that under existing agreements it has the right to approve the appointment of bank employees coming to work for the bank from abroad.

The strike began on May 2 when the trade union instructed five of its members at the NBG Cyprus' data processing centre to walk off the job. It also called on members working in other banks not to handle any NBG transactions or clear any NBG cheques. The union said this week that a large majority of its members approved of its stance, with only 12 members out of a total of 804 voters not agreeing with the actions of the union.

This week the bank threatened to "lock out" the ETYK trade union from all of its 20 branches. Management at the bank said that if the union did not agree to end the industrial action it would not allow staff to return to their employment. The bank also threatened to cut the pay of its striking staff.

Care workers at two centres in Inverness, Scotland vote to strike

Care workers at two local authority centres in Inverness in Scotland voted to strike this week to oppose cuts in transport. The staff are members of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU).

The workers are employed by Highland Council, which is proposing to cut the number of minibuses serving the Mackenzie and Corbett care centres from four to three. The Mackenzie Centre in Inverness provides services to elderly people and the Corbett Centre looks after adults with learning difficulties. The Highland Council said the cuts were necessary to avoid the need to cut staff numbers and would save it £10,000 a year.

The care workers have raised objections to the move, stating that it threatens health and safety. As a result of the vote to strike, the care workers are to begin a series of weekly half-day stoppages on May 30.

Middle East

Iraqi teachers strike over pay

Teachers in southern Iraq went on strike April 29 to protest against a new salary scheme in Basra. The president of the Teachers Union in Basra, which was founded after the US-led invasion of Iraq, said the new scheme had had a negative impact on the living standards of a large number of teachers.

Egyptian cement workers stage sit-in

Over 500 workers at el-Qawmiya Cement Company in Helwan, Egypt staged a sit-in May 6 in front of the office building of the CEO, Nabil el-Gabri, demanding their full annual bonuses. The workers were officially entitled to a total profit share of LE30 million (roughly 10 percent of the LE306 million profits made by the company the previous year). In addition to the cash sums, part of this money was to be allocated to the housing and social services.

The management only paid LE13 million, triggering industrial action by the workers. The Factory Union Committee apparently lobbied for only another LE7 million, which was refused by the workers, who demanded the full remaining amount. During the sit-in, workers chanted slogans against their Factory Union Committee officials, calling for their impeachment.

Africa

Strike at South African platinum mine

More than 5,500 members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) employed at the Northam Platinum mine, near Thabazimbi in South Africa, went on indefinite strike on April 29. The action was unofficial and was not supported by the NUM. One of the demands of the strike was the sacking of the mine's human resource manager and his assistant, whom the strikers accuse of being racist and treating workers unfairly. They also wanted the mine's manager to be relocated from Northam to the company's head office in Johannesburg.

Members of Solidarity (the other main union at the mine) were advised by their union not to take part in the strike, but workers refused to carry out the duties of their striking colleagues. The company lost between 10 million and 12 million rand (US\$1.45-1.74 million) for each day of the strike.

In an attempt to resolve the crisis, Solidarity set up a commission to investigate labour relations at the mine after 28 disciplinary actions had been brought against workers. According to the union, workers were suspended without pay pending investigations and management "showed no respect for the existing disciplinary code." A proposed meeting with management was called off because of the ongoing strike action.

On May 7 Northam managers obtained a ruling from the Johannesburg High Court ordering the strikers to return to work.

In a separate strike on May 7, around 1,000 members of the NUM went on strike at Murray and Roberts Cementation near Rustenburg to demand reinstatement of 130 drivers, who had been dismissed earlier this year for taking part in a go-slow. The strikers are also demanding bonuses and payment for overtime they worked. According to IOL, the NUM was meeting management on May 9 in a bid to end the strike.

Kenyan sugar factory workers on strike

Production stopped at the Nzoia sugar factory in Kenya on May 7 as workers joined forces with cane farmers in

demanding the suspension of managing director, Josephat Akoyo. According to the *Nation* (Nairobi) the action concerned the alleged involvement of Akoyo in a scandal involving the sale of Sh12 million (US\$179,000) of sugar.

The paper reported that very soon after the strike began eight union leaders at the factory were arrested and taken into custody by the Bungoma police. They included Roselinda Simiyu, national chairperson of the union who is also secretary of the local branch, as well as other branch officers and committee members and the factory's chief shop steward. They were later taken to court and charged with involvement in the strike.

Police attempts to enter the factory to prevent the strikers from switching off the turbines were foiled by the strikers. Tractors loaded with sugar cane lined the roads for 2km, after unloading had stopped.

Striking Ghanaian health workers threatened by employers

Health workers at the Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital (KBTH), who have been on strike since April 30, have been threatened by the hospital's chief executive officer. According to Myjoyonline, he has instructed unit heads and administrators to submit a list at the end of each day of "absentee workers" who are perceived to be on strike, so that "necessary action" can be taken. The strikers are members of the Health Workers Group (HWG), as are many of the administrators.

The HWG has issued a statement condemning the directive and calling on its members to "remain steadfast in pursuing a legal cause." It stressed that under Ghanaian labor law, "the termination of a worker's employment becomes unfair if the only reason for the termination of employment is that the worker refused or intends to refuse to work to enable him or her to participate in a lawful strike action."

The National Labor Commission (NLC) has designated the strike as illegal and called for it to be ended immediately. At the same time it called on the Ministry of Health, as the strikers' ultimate employers, to state their position on the strikers' grievance. The strike action was in protest against the disparity between the pay of doctors and other health workers.



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