

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

18 May 2007

Europe

Greek workers stage national strike in pension fund dispute

Thousands of workers throughout Greece participated in a national 24-hour strike on May 14 to protest the government's attacks on pension funds. The strike disrupted public transportation and domestic and international flights at all airports, and halted news broadcasts at private and state-run media. At public hospitals, only emergency cases were being treated.

Dozens of flights were halted due to a four-hour strike by air traffic controllers between noon and 4:00 p.m., and industrial action by civil aviation staff and workers at state carrier Olympic Airlines also halted flights.

The protest stems from the government allowing state-guaranteed pension funds to make risky bond investments on the stock markets. On April 28, the Greek Labour Ministers resigned over the dispute. The Finance Ministry has since stated that investment rules regarding pensions will be examined.

Italian workers in the tourism and cleaning industry strike

On May 11, thousands of workers in Italy struck and protested to demand a resumption of negotiations to renew the national collective agreements in the commerce and services, distribution cooperative, tourism and cleaning sectors. The striking workers are mainly employed in the tourism and cleaning sectors. The protests were called by the FILCAMS CGIL, FISASCAT CISL and UILTuCS UIL trade unions.

During the protest day, a demonstration was held at the Palalottomatica Building in Rome from 9:30 a.m. Workers in the sector are calling for an agreement providing decent wages, less flexible work, job security and maternity provisions.

Polish doctors strike to demand pay increase

On May 15, Polish doctors began strike actions at more than 250 public hospitals and clinics to demand increases in pay. The doctors are calling for a minimum monthly salary of about US\$1,800. Emergency wards were providing medical treatment only in cases where a patient's life was in danger.

The government has rejected the pay demands, stating that doctors have already received a 30 percent increase in their monthly salaries in the 2007 state budget.

The doctors have threatened an open-ended period of strike action if their demands are not met. They warned that this could lead to a shortage of medical staff, as doctors and nurses would have little choice but to leave the country to find better-paying jobs abroad.

German mineral water workers strike over collective bargaining

On May 15, staff at the Nestlé Waters plant at Neuselters Mineralquelle (mineral springs), in the state of Hesse, Germany, began strike action. The company bottles the Neuselters and Aquarel

brands.

Action began when night-shift workers at the plant halted production and workers due to begin the morning shift remained outside the factory gates.

The strike was called to protest the company's refusal to engage in a serious discussion over a collective bargaining agreement with the employees' food and allied workers union trade union, the NGG. A ballot for industrial action was completed the day before the strike and showed a majority of 96.6 percent of the union's members in favour.

The dispute has continued since October 1 of last year, when Nestlé Waters Germany revoked recognition of the sector-wide framework agreement. Workers took strike action in January and April.

Middle East

Strike at Jordan Telecom

Around 3,000 workers at Jordan Telecom went on an open-ended strike May 13, causing partial disruption to the company's services and forcing its branches to close.

The employees are demanding a JD50 raise to meet the increase in living standards, two months' salary for every year of service as end of service compensation, an additional 15th-month salary and the distribution of meals to all employees—not restricting such benefits to those working in the company's City Centre offices in Jabal Amman.

The staff also accused the company of arbitrarily discharging some employees and not paying overtime. The Trade Union of Public Utilities and Free Trade claimed that Jordan Telecom reassigned 22 of its employees, most of them holding senior positions, to work as data entry officers of subscribers' contracts to meet conditions set by the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission.

Describing the strike as "illegal," Jordan Telecom has said it is open to continue the negotiations under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour.

Strike threatened throughout oil industry in southern Iraq

Industrial action looms, involving all workers and technicians throughout the oil industry of southern Iraq, stopping production in all of the oil companies in Basra, Misan, Thi-Qar and Muthanna and affecting all domestic oil products as well as the export of crude oil.

The strike threat was initially made in a public letter to the Iraqi oil minister on April 27, following discussion at the union's executive board meeting with broad member representation the previous day in Basra. The meeting formulated a list of demands, and the call for a strike was unanimously adopted if the demands were not met by May 10.

The strike date was postponed from May 10 to May 14 as the union entered negotiations with a committee formed by the Iraqi Council of Ministers. A second postponement of the strike was due to the intervention of Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki.

The strike call came after several demands by the union that the Iraqi government had promised to implement in 2006 had still not been met, while other outstanding commitments were made several years ago. Most of the workers' demands are related to wages and working conditions, including a demand for wage increases, the payment of a previously agreed bonus that is based on the distribution to workers of a proportion of company oil revenues, no salary deductions to be made for agreed vacation days, and the delivery of land parcels for housing to workers.

Further demands are for the recruitment of new graduates, as well as the promotion of workers where this has been stalled. The union also calls for full-time permanent status to be given to workers presently classed as temporary contract workers. Due to increased pollution in oil facilities and evidence that there is a major increase in the incidence of cancers among the workforce, the union has placed health and safety demands in the forefront.

On going to press, a meeting has hurriedly been arranged between Al-Maliki and a delegation of the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (IFOU), in Baghdad, in a late attempt to avert a strike. The IFOU, previously known as the GUOE-Basra, has more than 26,000 members throughout the 10 state oil companies in the south of Iraq.

University of Basra workers protest over wages and conditions

On May 8, dozens of university workers at the University of Basra protested, demanding improved wages and working conditions.

Idris Alaakili, the vice president of the Association of the University of Basra (part of the Iraqi teachers' union), who led the protest, said, "Our strategy is to broaden the acceptance rate in post-graduate studies for university staff and in order to provide staff with opportunities of higher diploma studies in humanities."

He added that the protest also involved the issue of temporary staff contracts and called for them to be employed on a permanent contract. Alaakili warned the university authority to honour their pledge within 10 days, otherwise the union would initiate a general strike.

Africa

Strike at South African goldmine

Goldminers at the Buffelsfontein mine in South Africa began indefinite strike action on the night of May 9. The National Union of Mineworkers called the strike after rejecting a management offer of a 10 percent overall average increase for 2007 for category 3 to 8 workers and a similar increase for the following year.

With the exception of safety procedures, all underground work at the mine has stopped, although surface operations are continuing.

The mine, which was previously owned by DRDGold, was put into provisional liquidation in 2005 on the grounds that it was losing money. It was bought by Simmers, which commenced an operation to "turn the company around."

Deon van der Mescht, chief operations officer for Simmers, told *Mining Weekly* that they had had to address the "disproportionately high wages bill." He said, "With the support of organised labour a new agreement was reached that would reduce labour costs and streamline the wages structure. This enabled the company to save 4,200 jobs at the time."

According to *Mining Weekly*, the current strike is costing the company about R1.8 million (US\$260,000) a day.

Also in South Africa, strikes are continuing at the Kroondal and Marikana mines owned by Aquarius Platinum. The actions are in response to staff cuts and demands for a bonus by workers employed by the contractor Murray and Roberts Cementation (MRC). Four thousand contractors are taking part in the strike, and output levels

from the two mines are down by 85 percent.

General strike by public service workers in Chad

Public sector workers in Chad have been involved in a general strike for more than two weeks. They are demanding substantial pay increases across the board in pensions and indemnity payments, which according to Reuters news agency would be equivalent to a 300 percent rise in salaries. The government is offering 10 percent.

Montanan Ndinaromtan, a union leader and lab technician at the main hospital in N'Djamena, capital city of Chad, told Reuters, "When you look at people's faces in this country, they are etched with misery. We don't have even the minimum of things a human being can expect.... Our [monthly] salaries are gone in one week. We cannot afford to feed our children, to educate them or even to build a one-room house."

Chad is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranked 171 out of 177 by the United Nations. However, the discovery of oil several years ago has resulted in production of approximately 160,000 barrels of oil a day.

The unions claim that this new oil wealth is not benefiting the working population. Djibrine Assali Hamdallah, secretary general of the UST group of unions, told a Reuters correspondent, "The country has many resources such as oil—it has never had as much money as it has now."

Nigerian civil servants on strike over wages and benefits

Civil servants in Imo State, Nigeria, went out on strike on May 14, to protest the nonpayment of a "monetisation" benefit (cash payment in place of other benefits) and for the implementation of a 15 percent wage increase agreed with the federal government earlier this year. One effect of the noncompliance with the agreement by the government is that pensioners are owed considerable sums in arrears of pensions and gratuities.

According to *Tide Online*, the Joint Negotiating Council in Imo supported the action but was opposed by the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), which advised workers not to take part. Taking their cue from the NLC, the Nigeria Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) and the Radio, Television, Theatre and Arts Workers Union of Nigeria (RATT-AWU) called on their members not to obey the strike call.

In spite of NULGE's directive, most local government workers ignored their union and took part in the strike.



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