Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

14 December 2007

Europe

Greek workers stage general strike

On December 12, workers in Greece began a 24-hour general strike to protest government plans to restructure the pension system. The strike was called by the two largest trade unions, including the 2 million-strong General Confederation of Greek Workers, which organises in the private sector.

Workers involved included public transport workers, air traffic controllers, schoolteachers, health employees, including doctors and teachers, bank employees, lawyers, journalists and other working professionals.

Staff working on buses and trolleys struck for 24 hours. Workers at the Athens subway, electric rail and tram walked off the job from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Striking workers also attended a rally in the city centre at 11 a.m. Due to the air traffic controllers' action, no commercial flights flew in or out of the country.

The government of Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis plans to introduce new attacks on pension rights in the first half of next year. Among these plans is the reduction of 155 separate pension funds to about 20. The government also plans to cut back on the rights of mothers of dependent children to retire early. Some 700,000 people who are employed in 537 "arduous and unhygienic professions" are currently entitled to early retirement and other benefits.

Trade unions in Greece accept the government's claim that a restructuring of the pension system is necessary. Their only difference is what exactly these changes should constitute. Ilias Iliopoulos, the general secretary of the Adedy civil servants' union, stated, "We all agree there should be changes. We disagree on what changes there should be."

Italian truck drivers blockade roads as five-day strike begins

Truck drivers throughout Italy have been blocking highways outside cities and border points since Monday as part of a five-day strike. The truckers are protesting to demand lower gasoline prices, shorter working hours and to oppose deregulation.

The strike was called by seven unions, representing about 80 percent of drivers employed by an estimated 100,000 transport companies. Truckers set up roadblocks on highways outside Rome, Milan, Bologna, Genoa, Naples and other cities. At Ventimiglia, on the Italy-France coastal border, strikers ensured that no trucks crossed the frontier.

As a result of the strike, by the second day of the action, shortages of gasoline and perishable food had begun to be increasingly evident. The Fiat auto company was also severely hit by the protest and temporarily laid off 22,000 workers due to lack of supplies at factories. It announced that up to 50,000 of its workers could be laid off as a consequence of the action.

On December 11, the Transport Ministry issued an order to the truckers to return to work and set a date for new negotiations to be held on December 20. Ordering the strike to end, Premier Romano Prodi said on state TV that it was "an inadmissible violation of citizens' freedom." He added that the blockade was "damaging the country in the run-up to the Christmas holidays, in the most delicate period for our lives and for the economy." Echoing the comments of Prodi, Fiat said the strike was "drastically reducing the competitiveness of our country."

Metalworkers strike in Italy to protest work-related deaths

On December 10, thousands of metalworkers took industrial action throughout Italy. Workers also participated in a demonstration in Turin to protest against an increasing number of work-related accidents.

Last week, four workers died in a fire at a ThyssenKrupp AG steel mill in the city. Three other workers were also badly burned in the mill, with burns to more than 90 percent of their bodies.

Italy has one of the worst work safety records in the European Union, with 984 recorded deaths due to workplace accidents since January.

Among those who marched in Turin was the father of one of the victims, a 28-year-old worker.

An investigation is underway to find the cause of the fire. According to reports, workers have already informed investigators that safety measures at the plant were slack.

Rail workers strike in Belgium

Rail workers in Belgium struck for 24 hours on December 8 to demand the employment of more staff, including mechanics and drivers, and a pay increase. The stoppage called by the Independent Rail Workers Union (SIC) had a widespread impact, with most lines running no services in Flanders, one line running at 25 percent and the other at 40 percent.

In Wallonia, delays and cancellations were reported in the morning, but by the afternoon most routes were unaffected. TGV and Thalys services to international destinations were delayed from one to two hours in the morning. The union has also notified management of further industrial action on December15, 22 and 29, as well as strikes on Christmas Day and New Year's Eve.

Middle East

Teachers' strike continues in Israel

The eight-week-old teachers' strike in Israel continues following

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a breakdown in talks between the Secondary School Teachers Organisation and the Finance Ministry. Some 40,000 teachers are involved in the strike action.

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, Ran Erez, the leader of the Secondary School Teachers Organisation, walked out of the talks accusing the ministry of reneging on an agreement to end the action reached the evening before. The union said that it had already signed the agreement on Monday evening, which included a 5 percent increase in teachers' salaries through 2009. The deal also stipulated that the government would invest NIS 1.5 billion in lowering the number of children in school classes. It also included a clause stipulating that no strikes would be held in 2009.

The newspaper reported that the finance and education ministries called on Erez to return to the negotiations. This week, a deadline for an injunction issued by the National Labour Court ordering teachers to return to work is set to come into effect.

Striking lecturers in Israel continue action

Lecturers in Israel continued their seven-week strike this week as the finance ministry and trade union representatives continued negotiations.

Lecturers are striking at Israel's seven universities to protest a 35 percent erosion in their wages. Up to 120,000 students are being affected by the dispute.

Lecturers are calling for the restoration of salaries to their 1997 value. The government is instead seeking to calculate the erosion of wages in relation to the consumer price index, which they calculate works out at between 5.5 and 11.6 percent in the years 1997-2006.

Africa

Firestone workers shot by security forces in Liberia

Four Firestone rubber workers have been wounded by security forces. The workers allege that the shooting took place just after strike action had been called and that management had told the police to use maximum force to disperse strikers. Those responsible for the shootings were said by residents to belong to the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) forces.

"Management has refused to cooperate with our leadership and as the result we are not receiving our benefits.... It is our rights as citizens of Liberia to protest if we are not being treated in accordance with the laws of Liberia. This company has been involved in unfair labor practice for decades and this is the time for it to stop this unwholesome attitude," the workers told the *Inquirer* newspaper.

The workers say that although the elections for workers' representatives had been described as Firestone's most transparent and democratic electoral process ever, Firestone management has refused to recognise their results.

Strike leaders arrested as Burundian civil servants strike over pay

Burundian civil servants have extended their strike over wages indefinitely after their union representatives were arrested. The release of union members in Cankuzo and Ruyigi did not bring about a return to work. The civil servants went on strike on December 3 to demand a pay rise—their current pay is between US$35 and US$60 per month.

The government declared the strike illegal and threatened to punish strikers who did not return to work. After the arrests, Tharcisse Gahungu, chairman of the Confederation of Burundian trade Unions (COSYBU), said, "There are at least four representatives of trade unions in the countryside who have been arrested. Others continue to be intimidated by local authorities."

Eighty-five percent of the country's civil servants have not given way in the face of this intimidation, and only workers deemed essential are still at their posts. Having promised their employees a pay rise in July, the government was pressured by the IMF into delaying the increase. The government says it has agreed to fund an increase in January, but the details have not yet been published.

Cocoa workers on strike in Ivory Coast

Staff at the Ivory Coast's Coffee and Cocoa Bourse (BCC), which manages the export of cocoa from the Ivory Coast, went on a two-day strike from December 4, as part of their effort to secure a pay increase.

"The strike is carrying on today. No worker will be at his post. No cocoa will be registered [for export] today," Augustin Kouassi N'Goran, secretary general of the SYNASGFICC (Syndicat National des Agents des Structures de Gestion de la Filière Café Cacao) workers union, told Reuters.

Farmers in San Pedro have also threatened to strike and block roads, to push for their demand to be paid a fixed price of 600 CFA francs (US$1.34) per kg of cocoa.

Around two thirds of world production of cocoa comes from West Africa, and the majority of it is harvested in the months between October and January. The chocolate industry depends on its supply of cocoa from Ivory Coast, while the latter depends on the income it gets as a result.

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