

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

15 February 2008

Europe

Greek workers stage general strike

On February 13, up to 2.5 million workers in Greece staged a 24-hour strike to protest government plans to restructure the state pension system.

The government of Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis plans to merge some 170 social security and pension funds into four to six main funds. It also plans to increase the retirement age for some jobs. Many workers fear that the overall value of the state pension will be reduced by the measures.

The strike was called by country's two main labour unions, the General Confederation of Greek Workers and the Civil Servants' Union, representing more than 2.5 million workers. During the industrial action, a stoppage by air traffic controllers resulted in all flights to and from Greek airports being cancelled, while trains and buses were only running on a heavily reduced schedule.

Hospital doctors struck and were treating only emergencies cases. Journalists on TV news programmes struck, forcing them off air. Schoolteachers, dentists, lawyers, construction workers, engineers, civil servants and port workers were also involved in the strike. All ferries to Greece's islands were cancelled.

During the day, tens of thousands of workers marched through central Athens to the parliament building to protest. Many held banners, with some reading, "Hands off our pension funds" and "The future belongs to the workers." A further 9,000 people marched through the northern city of Thessaloniki, and workers protested in many other cities and towns.

The industrial action is the second such strike in two months.

Air traffic controllers strike in Paris, France

On February 11, air traffic controllers at Paris airports staged industrial action to protest plans to restructure the air traffic control system in the French capital. The action is being held over a one-week period and was called by the General Labour Confederation union.

The French Civil Aviation Authority plans to centralise air-traffic control in Paris at a single base.

On the first day, the stoppage disrupted flights at two airports, Orly and Charles de Gaulle, leading to numerous delays and cancellations. At Orly, only one flight in two will go ahead as scheduled this week.

Staff at *Les Echos* newspaper in France strike

Staff employed at the French business daily newspaper *Les Echos* struck February 13 following the resignation of the editor-in-chief, Erik Izraelewicz. The strike followed a vote by staff not to publish the newspaper and to stop production of the paper's web site.

The action follows the sale of *Les Echos* by the publisher Pearson to LVMH, a luxury goods company controlled by multibillionaire Bernard Arnault, for €240 million. Journalists at the paper were opposed to the sale, stating that they feared there were inadequate guarantees of editorial independence. Several strikes were held during the negotiations prior to the sale.

The Journalists' Union commented, "We think that LVMH and the new management of *Les Echos* did not allow Erik Izraelewicz to carry out his job as editor-in-chief with total independence."

Carrefour staff in Marseille, France, continue industrial action

Staff at the retail company Carrefour continued to strike in Marseilles, France, this week to demand better pay and working conditions. On February 12, the action by checkout, shop floor and warehouse staff entered its eleventh day. The action began with a national one-day retail strike.

The workers are employed at the Grand Littoral branch of the company in the city, with more than 100 of the store's 571 employees estimated to have participated in the action. Many of the staff at Grand Littoral are on part-time contracts, often 30 hours a week with a monthly income of just €840 after tax.

One of the strikers employed in the fruit and vegetable department said, "With our salaries, 11 days of strikes is pretty tough, but we are determined. We'll stick it out because we've had enough of being treated as though we're nothing."

Middle East

Strike at Egyptian textile factory

Textile workers employed at the Makarim Textile Company in Mahalla, Egypt, began industrial action February 6 to demand a 15 percent increase on the basic salary social allowance payment and a 7 percent salary increase.

The strikers at Mahalla are demanding that President Hosni Mubarak intervene in the dispute, claiming that Minister of Manpower Aisha Abdel Hadi had not kept promises she made

when they ended their last strike. Strikers have also revealed the comments of Managing Director Ahmed el-Shafei, who has threatened to sack them. He wrote in a memo, “Go strike at home.”

Railway employees strike in Egypt

On February 7, 100 workers employed at the Mahmoud Abdel Salam Company in Egypt began strike action to protest the sacking of a co-worker. The workers are employed to maintain sleeping carriages.

The sacked worker, Mohamed Mekhemar, had filed a lawsuit with 149 others against the firm for not paying bonuses and for their ill treatment of staff.

In a statement, Mekhemar said, “The 500 workers of the company have been suffering for years. They are not treated at par with their colleagues at the Railway Authority. Their wages range between 200 and 500 pounds only, and they were denied their bonuses. When we filed a lawsuit, the company started to persecute us. I was transferred to another department that we call Abu Ghraib Prison because of the misconduct of its director insulting the workers. When the management did not consider my complaint, I filed police protocol No. 362/2 on October 9. I was fired the next day”.

Africa

Namibian university workers strike over pay

More than 900 workers at the University of Namibia have voted to take indefinite strike action from February 15, in support of their demand for a 12 percent pay increase. They are members of the Namibian Public Workers’ Union and the Namibian National Teachers’ Union.

The university authorities are insisting on no pay and transport allowance increases. In a recent referendum, 94 percent of those participating voted in favour of the action.

The cost of living has recently increased considerably, and according to *New Era* (Windhoek), workers are struggling to pay for basics such as food and transport. They currently receive a transport allowance of between N\$500 (US\$65) and N\$1,000 (US\$130), depending on grade, and want this to be increased by N\$250 (US\$32.60) across the board.

It is expected that the strike will bring the university to a standstill.

Nigerian judiciary workers threatened with dismissal for going on strike

On February 12, the Nigerian government threatened to dismiss any member of staff from the Court of Appeal who goes on strike in support of the national industrial action of members of the Judiciary Staff Union of Nigeria (JUSUN). The JUSUN members began their national strike February 4 to demand better working conditions.

According to *Leadership* (Abuja), the acting chief registrar of the Court of Appeal, Bode Thomas, has issued a circular to all staff in which he claims that “some staff of the court, under the guise of the ongoing picketing of the court, have begun to absent themselves from duty.” The statement has been sent to

Court of Appeal headquarters and all its branches in Lagos, Ibadan, Kaduna, Benin, Enugu, Abuja, Port Harcourt, Jos, Ilorin and Calabar.

University workers in Sierra Leone protest non-payment

Junior workers at the Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM)—part of the University of Sierra Leone—launched a protest February 7 against the non-payment of around 30 percent of their basic salary since 2007.

One of the workers told *Concord Times* (Freetown) that two years ago, half their salaries was deducted for social security, but they later learnt from the National Social Security and Insurance Trust that they were not even registered with the scheme.

According to the paper, Minister of Labour Minkailu Mansaray has told the demonstrators to stay away from work until their backlog salaries and allowances are paid.

Ugandan lecturers defy government ultimatum

Around 2,500 striking lecturers at Makerere University in Uganda have been issued with an ultimatum that they either return to work by February 14 or face dismissal. They have been on strike since February 6 to demand the supply of teaching materials, payment of non-teaching allowances and better working conditions. According to *New Vision* (Kampala), the striking lecturers also claim that management has been diverting their pension funds to pay salaries.

On February 13, a meeting of the strikers, who are members of the Makerere University Academic Staff Association, rejected the ultimatum. One of the strikers, Edward Matovu, from the Faculty of Forestry, told *New Vision* he would not return to work unless teaching materials like chemicals are made available. He said in the last semester, students were unable to carry out most of their practicals because the university lacked the required chemicals.



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