

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

7 March 2008

## Europe

### **Public sector workers strike in Germany in pay dispute**

An estimated 100,000 German public-sector employees staged industrial action on March 5 to demand increased pay. The strike was called by the service sector trade union, Ver.di. The union is calling for a pay increase of eight percent for two million federal and local government staff.

The action resulted in the closure of targeted hospitals and major airports in the west of the country.

The Deutsche Lufthansa airline was forced to cancel some 300 out of 1,850 scheduled domestic flights, affecting 18,500 passengers. At Germany's largest airport, Frankfurt International, more than 2,000 baggage handlers, firemen, check-in staff and ground crew began strike action at 5.00am, resulting in 80 scheduled flights being cancelled. Strikes by workers at Stuttgart, Munich, Hamburg, Düsseldorf and Cologne airports grounded 142 domestic flights scheduled by Lufthansa.

### **Greek workers strike to protest pensions legislation**

Subway, utility workers and employees in other sectors in Greece staged a number of national strikes on March 4 and March 5 to protest against the restructuring of the pensions system.

The government of Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis is preparing to enact a new pension bill, as part of a programme of attacks on the social security and welfare system. The government plans to merge 155 state-run pension funds in order to slash the public spending deficit.

Some 2,500 employees at the Bank of Greece took a second day of industrial action on March 5, leading to the closure of the Athens stock exchange. In a concerted effort to break the strike, the Bank of Greece

applied to the labour courts, claiming the action was "illegal and abusive."

Workers employed by the Public Power Corporation shut down six production facilities on March 3. The strike was called by the General Federation of Employees of Public Power Corporation and Sector of Electric Energy. The union is protesting the government's plan to merge its members' pension programme with the larger state pension fund IKA.

The industrial action resulted in a reduced capacity of 1300 megawatts being available to the national power network.

### **UK coastguard staff stage first ever strike action**

On March 6 coastguards in the UK took strike action for the first time in their history. The 24-hour strike involved up to 700 workers who are members of the Public and Commercial Services union.

Workers at 19 search and rescue co-ordination centres are in dispute with the Maritime and Coastguard Agency over pay. The stoppage affected emergency calls and operations, but response teams were still sent out to emergency situations during the action.

The PCS said that coastguards receive "poverty pay" and have called for a wage increase of £3,000 on top of their current base line of £14,000 a year. Geoff Lewtas, pay co-ordinator of the PCS, said, "It is a scandal, quite frankly, that an organisation that's got such great importance as the fourth emergency service, is running its operation with its permanent staff paid on shoestring wages. It's because they are on poverty pay in many cases and because their pay isn't on a level with workers in similar situations providing emergency services, such as the police, ambulance and fire."

MCA management has acknowledged that the coastguards are underpaid and said it was not able to increase pay as it was bound by government rules on public sector pay.

## **Africa**

### **Striking Swazi textile workers assaulted by police**

More than 7,000 textile workers in Nhlanguano, Swaziland, have been assaulted by the police using teargas and rubber bullets while picketing their workplace. After dispersing the pickets, the police chased many four kilometres into the town.

The workers voted to go out on strike on February 27 after pay negotiations between the Swaziland Manufacturing and Allied Workers Union (SMAWU) and the Swaziland Textile Exporters Association (STEA) failed to reach an agreement. The strike is reported to have started on March 4.

SMAWU went to the courts to obtain a restraining order against the STEA, Zheng Yong Ltd., FTM Garments and Ho's Enterprise from interfering with their pickets. However, the courts refused to issue the order.

Over 16,000 workers from ten factories are reported to have taken part in the national strike. The workers are demanding a pay rise of 12 percent, to keep up with rising prices.

The Swazi textile industry grew quickly from 2001, after trade agreements made it a profitable location for companies to set up factories exploiting Swaziland's cheap labour. Swaziland has become the base for a number of foreign textile companies, mainly from Taiwan but also from India and Sri Lanka. Zheng Yong is a subsidiary of Best China Garments. Zheng Yong, Ho's Garments and FTM are all Taiwanese companies that manufacture jeans and T-shirts for the US market.

In 2005 the industry employed 14,373 people. That number fell to 11,493 in 2005 in a trend that continues. The record of the industry has been one of arbitrary dismissals, victimization of trade union militants and low pay that contravenes Swaziland's minimum wage laws.

The short-lived boom in textiles has produced a rapid growth in the working class, which flocked to the growing industrial towns. Many other industries, particularly transport, have developed in line with the growth of textiles and now face a similar crisis.

### **Ugandan lecturers strike over cut in salaries**

More than 300 lecturers at Kyambogo University in Uganda have been on strike since February 27 to protest a cut in their salaries and management's refusal to address their complaints.

The lecturers are demanding that the salary cut be rescinded and that the change is backdated. Some lecturers told *New Vision* that the University council had earlier promised to restore their previous salaries, but then had reversed its decision.

The council was due to hold an emergency meeting on March 2, but its outcome has not yet been reported.

### **Zambian smelter workers strike for better conditions**

More than 500 contract workers at the Chambishi Copper Smelter in Zambia struck on March 3 to demand an improvement in their conditions of service. The average salary is 250,000 kwacha (\$65) a month.

The National Union of Miners and Allied Workers (NUMAW) told the workers to return to work the next day when negotiations with management were due to begin.

The Chambishi Copper Smelter is at the heart of the African Economic and Trade Zone that was inaugurated by Chinese President Hu Jintao during his African tour in 2007. The smelter is a joint venture between China Nonferrous Metal Mining (CNMC) and Yunnan Copper Industry (YNCIG).

Safety conditions are poor. In 2005 50 workers died in an explosion at a Chinese-owned copper mine nearby. In 2003 the smelter had to cease operation when 55 workers fell ill from poisoning.

The German company Norddeutsche operates in conjunction with the Chinese companies at Chambishi. Ord River Resources Limited, an Australian company, also has a stake in the venture.

### **South African metro workers strike**

Metro workers in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, have taken strike action over the impact of restructuring and privatisation. The workers belong to the South African Municipal Workers' Union. They are also calling for the reinstatement of SAMWU's Provincial Chairperson, David Toyise, who was dismissed in January for leading a march against restructuring and privatisation.



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