

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

14 March 2008

Europe

Greek workers strike and protest attacks on pension rights

On March 12, scuffles broke out outside the Labour Ministry in Athens, as 5,000 demonstrators marched to Parliament in the latest of a string of protests against proposed wide-ranging changes to the country's pension system.

The Conservative government, which holds a one-seat majority in the 300-seat parliament, want to merge pension funds and cut early retirement benefits, forcing many more workers to retire later in life and receive less money when they do.

The country's largest labour union, GSEE, called a three-hour work stoppage March 12 to coincide with a debate on the "reforms" by lawmakers at committee level. A GSEE statement read, "The measures in the bill are categorically rejected as unacceptable and destructive for social security. Strike action will continue until this bill is withdrawn."

The dispute involves many sectors of workers, including civil engineers, telecommunications employees, factory workers and other large private enterprises. Professionals including doctors and lawyers are also involved in the dispute. The walkout has shut down 16 power plants; 3 others are shut because of maintenance work.

Rail and bus transport have also been severely disrupted. Public transport in the capital was halted during the stoppage, while state carrier Olympic Airways was forced to cancel 14 flights and rescheduled at least a dozen more. Several other airlines also rescheduled flights.

Bank employees held a 24-hour strike on March 6 due to the pension changes, and a strike at the central Bank of Greece crippled the country's payments system and led the Athens Stock Exchange to shut down for two days.

A weeklong strike by municipal workers has already left thousands of tons of uncollected rubbish on streets throughout Athens. Striking garbage collectors pelted riot police with rubbish. The Associated Press reported no injuries or arrests.

Both the public and private sector umbrella unions were to join a three-hour work stoppage on March 12, while several employee groups, including municipal and local council workers, said they will strike for the whole day. Both umbrella unions have also planned a 24-hour strike for March 19.

Slovenia hit by private sector strike

More than 200,000 private sector employees in Slovenia staged industrial action on March 12 as part of an 18-hour stoppage in a struggle for higher wages, the STA news agency reported. This eclipsed Slovenia's largest mass strike ever, on November 17, 2007.

Workers in the retail, manufacturing, energy, waste disposal and water utilities joined a call for a general strike from the country's main private sector unions, who are demanding wage increases to offset higher inflation, which rose to more than 6 percent in January. The length of the stoppages varied from sector to sector.

The main private sector union, the Alliance of Independent Unions of Slovenia (ZSSS), has been demanding wage hikes of 5.6 to 10 percent,

depending on the category of worker, a €50 increase on all minimum wages and an agreement for further increases if inflation remains high.

In the public sector, unions and government came to an agreement for a 3.4 percent pay rise in January, according to *Thomson Financial News*.

In December 2007, the country's gross average monthly earnings, based on inflation-adjusted terms, had risen by less than 1 percent, compared to the same period in 2006. The country's inflation rate in December had grown to 6.4 percent. Less than a year ago, when Slovenia adopted the euro as currency, its inflation rate had been 2.8 percent.

Polish nurses and midwives begin sit-in strike

Nurses and midwives from the regional hospital in Bialystok, northeast Poland, began a sit-in strike on March 10. The hospital workers decided on strike action after an unsuccessful meeting between the nurses and midwife representatives with the hospital management.

Initially, the staff had demanded a pay rise of 500 zlotys a month each. Later, they agreed on a 380-zlotys increase effective from March, but both proposals were eventually rejected by management. By the end of the year, the nurses and midwives are calling for a monthly salary increase of 1,000 zlotys net each.

Nurses in Derby, England, stage protest over pay

The *Derby Telegraph* reported that more than 100 people turned out to protest at lunchtime against plans to downgrade the roles of some hospital nursing staff in Derby, England. Derby Hospitals NHS Trust is trying to save £55 million over the next three years after the government cut its annual budget by 3 percent.

The Trust has not disclosed how many staff will face downgrading but has confirmed that workers in surgical services, who care for patients after operations, and staff from women's and children's services at Derbyshire Children's Hospital would be affected. It was also announced that hospital bosses are asking staff for ideas on how to save money.

Nurses and other health workers waved banners reading, "Derby hospital staff deserve better" and "No to pay cuts" outside Derby City General Hospital.

One of the nurses—a single parent of three who works part-time because she also cares for her elderly mother—stands to lose £3,500 a year under the proposals. "I'll have to take a night job to make ends meet," she said.

A similar protest took place later at Derbyshire Royal Infirmary, involving 100 staff. Some of the protesters waved their banners around the statue of Florence Nightingale in London Road. Last week, members of the Unison trade union asked to be balloted on strike action while Royal College of Nurses members gave the trust until today to suggest different proposals.

Staff at UK homeless charity strike again

On March 10, staff at the national homeless/housing charity Shelter took strike action for the second time in as many months over management plans to scrap their pay and grading structure and force them to sign new employment contracts.

Members of the Unite union began a campaign of strike action last week following months of unsuccessful negotiations over the issue.

London Underground workers to strike over safety concerns

The Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) union said its members have voted to support strike action by four to one. The London Underground (LU) workers have voted to strike in a row over safety and ticket office closures.

The union is involved in a dispute with the LU over a number of issues, including the use of agency staff and the closure of several ticket offices.

The Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) Union also plans to ballot its members on possible strike action over the same issues.

Members of the RMT working on the LU network went on strike in September in a dispute linked to the collapse of Metronet—a company supposedly overseeing Tube maintenance. Widespread disruption to travel across the capital ensued.

Irish ambulance crews to strike on April 7

Around 1,200 ambulance staff across the Republic of Ireland have served notice of industrial action on the Health Service Executive (HSE) when their contract expires April 7. According to the SIPTU trade union web site, the dispute concerns the HSE's unilateral decision to sign contracts with three private ambulance service providers in contravention of an existing agreement between the HSE and its ambulance personnel that no such action would be taken without their prior acceptance.

Polish Post Office workers to hold strike ballot

The general manager of the Polish Post Office has turned down pay demands put forward by Post Office employees for a salary increase of 700 zlotys a month. The workers had liaised with a number of trade unions, including the Solidarity Trade Union, and gave the Post Office GM a deadline to respond, the Polish Radio Information Agency reported.

The Management of the Post Office failed to present its position on time, which has been interpreted by the trade unions as a rejection of their demands. By Easter, the employees will hold a ballot on whether to launch a general strike. If 50 percent vote for strike action, the protest will be held at the beginning of April.

Turkish workers to hold two-hour strike against government's social security plans

Turkey's major unions planned to hold a two-hour strike on March 14 as a warning against the government's new social security "reforms" and threatened that this will be the first step toward larger protests.

The draft on a reform in the social security and health insurance law waiting for approval in parliament plans to raise the age of retirement to 65 and that employees would have to pay social contributions for 9,000 days before being entitled to a pension. Pension payments will be reduced by 23 to 33 percent, and retired people who are working will not receive pensions.

Anyone earning more than 139.6 TRY a month (around €73) will have to pay health insurance contributions of between 73 and 475 TRY. Those not paying contributions will not have access to health services. More than 10 million people in Turkey have no health coverage whatsoever.

Payments to cover people temporarily unable to work will be reduced.

Middle East

Egyptian staff at French embassy stage strike

According to *Almasry-Alyoum*, around 130 workers in the French embassy and its affiliates staged a strike on March 10. The workers picketed in front of the embassy, the Cairo and Alexandria consulates and the cultural centres at the same time in protest at the decision to lay off a number of Egyptian employees.

The strike was scheduled to last for two days so that the administration would "know how urgently they need us." Strikers carried banners in French reading, "No to worker layoff," "No to humiliation of workers" and "No to unnecessary expenditures."

Africa

Widespread strike action by South African municipal workers

Members of the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU)

have been on strike since the end of February in the Nelson Mandela Bay on the southeastern coast of the country, an area that unites Port Elizabeth, Uitenhage and Despatch.

The strikers have a programme of demands, including the withdrawal of the council's recruitment policy, an end to all privatisation and outsourcing, the reinstatement of SAMWU chairperson David Toyise, an end to all harassment of members and the addressing of the severe health crisis in the area.

On March 6, 137 strikers were arrested and held in custody overnight. On the following day, SAMWU issued a press statement claiming that "their only crime was to take part in a protected strike." It continued, "SAMWU believes that it has grounds for legal action against the Ministry of Safety and Security since the police opened fire on the workers without any warning and without provocation."

The Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) has ordered SAMWU to adhere to strict picketing rules, limiting pickets to not more than 100 in certain locations and banning all picketing at others. Pickets must stay between 5 and 10 metres away from the entrances. It declared, "Any contravention of this order will be decisively dealt with by the police and other law-enforcement agencies with the active support of our safety and security personnel."

Public sector workers in other parts of South Africa are also involved in separate disputes.

Municipal workers at Phalaborwa, in the northeast of the country, marched through the streets on March 12 to protest against the way their employers were filling posts.

In Cape Town, workers at the Bellville Nursery were locked out for three days when they demanded that the produce from the nursery should be used to service the townships instead of being used consistently to "green" the predominantly white suburbs.

In Heidelberg, Gauteng, 500 SAMWU workers decided to take strike action. They have issued a statement demanding that all employees should have their salaries adjusted up two levels like those of the municipal manager and his executive managers.

On March 7, the total workforce of 150 workers at the Lenasia Depot of City Power downed tools and held a mass picket to demand the sacking of Electrical Team Leader Owen Smith, whom they accuse of regularly using racist abuse against workers.

Nigerian mineral water workers protest non-payment

Employees at the Nigeria Mineral Waters Industries in Onitsha, Anambra state, staged a protest against the non-payment of their salaries for the last three months. The workers are mostly drivers of articulated vehicles.

The workers' spokesman alleged that the managers had contracted out the company's activities, including the use of forklifts and trucks, when they could be provided in-house, and of bringing in casual workers whilst at the same time not paying their own workers.

Having stopped the company's activities, the workers marched around the town's main streets with placards saying, "Pay us our three months salary" and slogans directed at the Anambra governor.

Nigerian transport workers protest working conditions

On March 8, Nigerian transport workers employed by the Golden Transport Company Ltd., a subsidiary of Flour Mill Plc, carried out a protest demonstration to demand improved working conditions.

Their spokesman said that the company has withdrawn all medical, leave, housing and accident allowances. He claimed that management had reduced the salary of the most senior drivers from N32,000 (US\$278) per month to N8,600 (US\$75) per month without any justification. He added that some other workers had their pay reduced to N700 (US\$6) at the end of January without any explanation. Accusing the management of inhumane treatment of their employees, he referred to the case of a driver who was killed in an industrial accident, claiming that his family was paid

no compensation.

Uganda: lecturers' dispute continues

On March 11, *New Vision* (Kampala) reported that gunshots enveloped the Kyambogo University in Uganda when anti-riot police took control of the campus. Seven students were arrested and a policeman was injured and two vehicles burnt. The university is closed due to a strike of its lecturers.

The present dispute is over lack of an acceptable salary structure. According to *New Vision*, the unrest began several years ago at the start of the integration process of three formerly independent institutions into one university.

Lecturers claim that a proper salary structure has been delayed. *New Vision* reported remarks made by Senior Dr. Maria Kaahwa, from the education faculty: "They are making us suffer. I feel like crying because we are being mistreated.... I have been here for seven years and the continued promotions and promises have been our daily, though unfulfilled consolations. Management is just buying time."

According to the paper, lecturers insist that they have always been silenced by intimidation, something the acting vice-chancellor, Dr. Mpandey Basiima, denies: "We are not intimidating anyone. This university has to be built by all of us, through cooperation. We are supposed to discuss and avoid running to court all the time."

There is resentment over the fact that last year, the salaries of 331 lecturers were reduced following queries from the auditor general (AG) and the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Finance. Another complaint is over the non-payment of enhancements from July of last year.



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