

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

21 March 2008

Greek workers stage general strike

On March 19, millions of workers in Greece staged a general strike in opposition to a restructuring of the pension and welfare system by the government of Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis. The strike was the third since December in protest at the government's proposals. Opinion polls have regularly shown that a majority of the population do not support the government's plans.

The government is preparing to enact a new pension bill, as part of a programme of attacks on the social security and welfare system. It plans to merge 155 state-run pension funds into just 13 in order to slash the public spending deficit. The proposals also include raising the legal retirement age, which is currently 65 years for men and 60 for woman.

The strike was called by both public sector and private sector unions. It had a widespread impact and led to 150 flights being halted and many more delayed. Ships were confined to port while schools, government ministries and banks were closed. Many tourist and cultural attractions were closed as staff walked off the job. The Athens Acropolis was closed earlier in the day due to a strike by security guards. Striking TV and radio journalists also affected the output of broadcasting networks.

The strike action was accompanied by a demonstration of an estimated 100,000 people in central Athens.

Tens of thousands of workers continued to strike on March 20. Public transport, including the Athens metro, the suburban railway and the tram system, were hit by industrial action. TV and radio journalists also struck for a second day as did engineers, teachers and lawyers. The action was also supported by staff at the main power company, as well as municipal refuse cleaners.

UK Jobcentre and benefit office staff in two-day strike

Thousands of Jobcentre and benefit office staff in the UK began a two-day strike on March 16 in a dispute over pay. The workers are employed by the Department for Work and Pension (DWP) and are members of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS).

The PCS members are striking to protest the imposition of a three-year pay deal, which pays an average of 1 percent a year for some staff. According to the union, the lowest paid

DWP workers will see their wages rise to just 24 pence above the national minimum wage under the deal.

During the action, strikers picketed DWP offices, Jobcentres, benefits offices, the pension service and the Child Support Agency offices. The DWP said that two thirds of its staff remained at work and that the stoppage did not result in their complete closure.

Rallies were also held by PCS members in a number of towns and cities including Glasgow, Sheffield, Liverpool and Norwich.

Alitalia maintenance staff protest job cuts

On March 18, hundreds of maintenance staff employed by Alitalia airlines demonstrated in Rome, Italy, to protest thousands of threatened job losses. The airline is due to be sold to Air France-KLM for US\$216 million.

During the protests, riot police were involved in clashes with the strikers. The protests took place as Alitalia officials negotiated with the nine trade unions who represent workers at the airline. The agreement with Air France-KLM was announced at the beginning of the week and requires the sanction of both Parliament and all nine unions.

On March 19, Air France-KLM confirmed that it will cut a total of 2,000 jobs at Alitalia's airborne and ground services operations if it is able to complete the takeover.

On March 20, the CGIL trade union leader Guglielmo Epifani requested that the government postpone the sale of Alitalia until after the April general elections. He said, "The government and the company should find the way to guarantee life to Alitalia for another 60-70 days".

Air France-KLM has announced that it will invest US\$1.6 billion in capital into Alitalia's operation upon the completion of the deal.

Turkey: thousands strike to protest government pension and welfare cuts

On March 14, thousands of Turkish workers took strike action to protest plans to restructure the pension and social security system, including raising retirement ages. The plans are being implemented by the governing Justice and Development Party, at the behest of the International Monetary Fund.

Many workers, including doctors, nurses, teachers, civil servants, train drivers and metro staff, participated in the two-

hour stoppage. A demonstration in the capital city Ankara was held during the action with many workers chanting anti-government and IMF slogans.

The government has stated that it will continue with the reforms regardless of opposition. Industry Minister Zafer Caglayan said last week, "Whatever anybody does or says, Turkey is obliged to carry out social security reform." The government said it needed to cut public spending as the deficit had hit 4 percent of gross domestic product in 2007. The IMF has demanded that the cuts be implemented before it will approve a new loan of US\$1.3 billion.

Four Nigerian dockworkers crushed to death

All work stopped at the Lagos Ports complex at Apapa after four dockworkers were killed on March 14. Three of the men, who were employed by the ENL Consortium, were in the hold of the MV Green Reefers Majestic unloading frozen fish when a cable snapped, releasing a heavy crane that fell down crushing the men to death.

The dead men have been identified as Yusuf Ajadi, Akin Ajuwale and Aliu Olaleye. A fourth man was killed when the ambulance that was called to the scene failed to stop and crashed into the crowd. According to the *Nigerian Tribune*, seven men were also injured in the accident, some of them severely. The Union of Nigeria (MWUN) has declared the day Black Friday.

When news of the accident spread to other terminals around the port, all work stopped and the port was paralysed as dockers joined in angry demonstrations. *Vanguard* (Lagos) reported that the ambulance involved in the accident was burned along with other cars and equipment.

The commissioner of police for the port authority, J.O. Uzuagbunam, told journalists that it was just an unfortunate accident. However, *Leadership* (Abuga) reported that the Nigeria Ports Authority Security Personnel made desperate attempts to prevent journalists from covering the event. It took the intervention of the dockworkers, who insisted on leading the journalists to the scene of the accident. The protesting workers accused the ENL Consortium of enslaving the dockworkers. They claimed that ENL had no conditions of service, provided no training or safety equipment and denied medical allowances.

Warehouse loaders strike paralyses operations in port of Mombassa

Last week, loaders in the warehouses in the port of Mombassa downed tools to demand higher pay. The approximately 5,000 unorganised workers are demanding Sh15 (25 US cents) for every 90-kilogramme bag lifted and Sh7.50 (12 US cents) per for a 50-kilogramme bag. The loaders currently earn Sh9 (14 US cents) for the 90-kilo load and Sh4.50 (7 US cents) for 50 kilos.

The port employers are reviewing the wage claims but

insist that they cannot possibly pay the full amount. According to *Business Daily* (Nairobi), John Pondera Munga, chairman of the Kenya Ships Contractors Association, argued that "such a major increase" would cause the contractors to review their charges to the ships' owners, a development that would make the port more expensive.

Further problems are looming at the port as the Kenya Ports Authority attempts to impose a new working formula that would mean a reduction in overtime.

Business Daily reported that when the new scheme was introduced three weeks ago, workers immediately responded with a "go slow," forcing the authority to suspend the plan. According to the paper, the proposed system would result in a change in shift patterns and the application of a "time-off" concept in which employees would be given "off days" instead of overtime payments.

Council official held hostage by angry workers over non-payment of wages

Angry council workers are alleged to have held Theodora Giwa-Amu, Caretaker Committee chairman of Oshimili South local government council, Asaba, Nigeria, hostage for three hours on March 17. The workers were protesting to the council over the non-payment of their salaries since January of this year

According to *Vanguard* (Lagos), spokesman Seachmore Ochei told reporters that apart from owing the workers for the months of January and February, Giwa-Amu also "plunged the council into debt by borrowing money from a certain bank (names withheld) despite government's order prohibiting such borrowing." Giwa-Amu was released when armed riot police arrived on the scene.



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