

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

23 May 2008

## **Greek workers stage nationwide strike against government privatisation plans**

On May 16, thousands of workers throughout Greece took strike action and demonstrated against plans by the government of Karolos Papoulias to privatise several state-run operations, including the main commercial ports of Piraeus and Thessaloniki.

The strikes included port workers, hospital and civil aviation authority staff, and workers at OTE, Greece's biggest phone company. The OTE employees were protesting the day after the government sold off a stake in OTE to Germany's Deutsche Telekom.

The strike was called by a number of private- and public-sector trade unions representing 2.5 million employees, including the GSEE federation.

Dozens of flights were halted due to a three-hour stoppage by air traffic controllers and a strike at state carrier Olympic Airways. The airline was forced to cancel 40 flights to and from Athens and had to reschedule another 16 international and domestic flights. Aegean Airlines also cancelled mostly domestic flights.

Many government offices were closed. Post office workers and staff at electric utility PPC struck, as did workers at Athens Water and banking employees.

During the day, several thousand striking workers marched to the parliament in Athens, carrying banners stating "Enough of reforms" and chanting slogans such as "Public property is not for sale."

On the day of the national strike, the fuel truckers' union ended 10 days of industrial action, which resulted in a national shortage of fuel supplies and businesses being heavily disrupted. The role of the trade unions in establishing order was summed up by the comments of Angelos Falaris, general secretary of the fuel truckers' union. He said, "Our demands haven't been fulfilled, but we are suspending the strike, because we feel a social responsibility. We will give the government time to reconsider our demands."

## **Airport workers in Norway end five-day strike**

On May 21, airport workers in Norway ended a five-day

strike following an agreement over pay. The action began on May 16, resulting in the closure of six airports and soon escalated, leading to a further six airports closing.

On May 19, some 50 flights were cancelled, with airports in Bergen, Molde, Kristiansund, Mo i Rana, Harstad/Narvik and Mosjøen closed. A reported 5,000 passengers who had attempted to leave Oslo on flights to other Norwegian cities were stranded. Oslo's main airport remained open, as it was not targeted by the main LO Stat trade union.

By May 20, the airports at Stavanger, Alta, Leknes, Sandnessjøen, Sogndal and Svolvær were also forced to close.

## **Belgium railway workers strike for better pay and conditions**

Industrial action by 38,000 railway workers in Belgium disrupted the national and European rail network on May 20. The railworkers struck for 24 hours to demand better pay and conditions.

High-speed links via the capital Brussels between the Netherlands, Germany, France and Britain were halted. The strike had a widespread impact, as up to 500,000 people use the scheduled services on the rail network each day. The stoppages led to traffic blockades around Brussels, as many passengers were forced to make coach and car trips to Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris.

## **French dockworkers and fishermen strike**

French harbours and fuel depots were blocked by fishermen and port workers in two separate strikes on May 20.

The dockworkers struck for 24 hours over government proposals to privatise part of the port network. French state-run ports are divided between the private-sector cargo handlers and public-sector authorities managing the infrastructure, including the loading cranes.

The action was held at the nation's largest oil hub, Fos-Lavera near Marseille, and resulted in 13 oil tankers being prevented entry.

During the day, workers and police were involved in clashes after the police attempted to prevent them from

approaching Marseille city hall. Police used tear gas against the workers.

The fishermen are demanding government support to counter increasing marine fuel costs. Protesting fishermen shut off roads leading to Fos-Lavera and blockaded around 20 ports on the Mediterranean, Channel and Atlantic seaboard. A reported five other fuel depots were blockaded by the action.

President Nicolas Sarkozy said €53 million had already been agreed to assist fishermen this year—of which €30 million had already been disbursed—and insisted that the government would press on with port privatisation. “All the world’s major ports are developing their activities while ours are losing ground,” he said. “I will press ahead with the reform of the ports and I will press ahead without faltering because it is in the interests of the French economy.”

He also demanded that dockworkers drastically increase their productivity, stating that crane operators at the port of Marseille work 2,000 hours a year, whilst employees in Spain’s Barcelona or Anvers in Belgium work 4,000 hours.

#### **Namibian zinc miners’ strike continues**

A strike at the Skorpion Zinc Mine, near Rosh Pinah, Namibia, which began on May 10, is continuing. As soon as the dispute began, the owners, Namzinc (Pty.) Ltd., appealed to the High Court for an injunction to prevent effective picketing.

At the end of the hearing, the presiding judge issued an order directing the Miners Union of Namibia (MUN) and its members employed by Skorpion Zinc Mine “not to interfere with or obstruct the normal functioning of the mine’s business, not to intimidate, harass or interfere with any mine employee or people connected to the mine’s business, and not to prevent these people from entering or leaving the mine’s premises.”

The union was not represented in court when the application was heard. The pickets had allowed night-shift contractors to enter the pit to carry out maintenance work.

The original demand of the strikers was for a wage rise of 14 percent and a housing allowance of N\$2100 (US\$281) per month. This has been reduced to an increase of 13 percent and a housing allowance of N\$1,900 (US\$254) a month. The company’s original offer was 10 percent plus a housing allowance of N\$1,780 (US\$238). This has now been increased to 12 percent.

The mine owners are insisting that any agreement to end the strike be conditional on the union endorsing their application for an exemption from the payment of

overtime for work on Sundays and for other hours worked in addition to the normal 12-hour shift. The MUN has so far refused to accede to this demand, saying that to do so would undermine their current case at the Labour Court over non-payment of overtime since 2005.

Skorpion Zinc normally produces 150,000 tonnes of special high-grade (SHG) zinc per year and exports its products to Europe, Asia and South Africa.

#### **Striking South African local government workers face dismissal**

Council workers in Tshwane, South Africa, who began strike action on May 5, have been sacked by the contract companies that employ them. The strikers are demanding improved salaries, better working conditions and that the authority halt its current restructuring process.

Gabriel Twala, spokesman for the Council’s Corporate and Shared Services, told *BuaNews* (Tshwane), “Those workers who are said to be on strike are former employees of those companies that are contracted by the city.... I can confirm that because I have been in contact with the companies. Also, the court has declared the strike illegal and unprotected.... The city has no obligation to continue with negotiations because none of its employees are on strike.”

The union representing the workers, the SA Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU), suspended the strike on May 14, on the grounds that it wanted to “give negotiations a chance.” SAMWU has now called for the continuation of the action.



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