

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

1 August 2008

## Europe

### Dockworkers attacked by riot police in Greece

Dockworkers clashed with riot police outside the Merchant Marine Ministry in Athens July 25, as they protested the deaths of eight people killed by a gas explosion. The riot police attempted to disperse the dockworkers by firing tear gas at them. The dockworkers have also called a three-day strike.

The workers were protesting violations of safety procedures at the state-run Perama dockyard, 20km west of Athens. The explosion occurred on the Panamanian-flagged "Friendship Gas" tanker at the dockyard and was reportedly caused by workers using acetylene torches.

In July 2007 two workers were killed in a similar incident in the Perama dockyard.

The public sector workers union claims that the lack of safety measures and the impunity of ship-owners have resulted in the facility becoming a "permanent death-trap for workers."

### Unite calls off strike by Argos staff in the UK

On July 23 the Unite trade union suspended a proposed strike by distribution workers employed by the UK retail company Argos. The strike was due to be held on the following day. A further four days of strike action were scheduled to begin July 30.

Argos workers are in a dispute with the company over pay. The union called off the industrial action after receiving a revised pay offer from Argos following negotiations. The offer is being put to the Argos distribution workers this week in a ballot.

On July 17 some 2,000 Argos workers staged a 24-hour strike following a ballot in which 70 percent of those voting supported a call for industrial action. In that ballot the workers rejected the company's below-inflation pay offer of 4.0 percent.

According to the union, the company also plans to make changes to the sick pay scheme and implement monthly pay instead of weekly pay without any compensation.

Unite national secretary Jennie Formby issued a statement in which she boasted of the union's collaboration with the company: "Argos distribution workers helped to save over £10 million for the group in the last fourteen months alone. They have cooperated fully by accepting changes to working practices including significant increases in flexible working. These savings alone will fund the total cost of the very reasonable increases we are seeking several times over. This is a hugely profitable company and all our members are asking for is a fair share of the wealth they've worked so hard to create."

## Middle East

### Egyptian education staff protest for pay increase

*Daily News Egypt* reported that non-teaching staff within the Ministry of Education protested July 21 on the steps of the Journalists' Syndicate against the ministry's decision to deny them a 50-percent pay increase. It was the fourth protest by administrative workers since the formation of the committee.

Protesters held up banners reading "We demand a decent wage and equality" and "A minimum wage is the right of all." The workers also reiterated their demands for parity with teaching staff.

An administrative worker from Suez and one of the founders of the committee, Fathy Abdel Fattah, told *Daily News Egypt* that administrative workers from Mahalla who had been planning to attend the protest had apparently been prevented from leaving their area by security forces.

Atef Hassan Mohamed from the governorate of Suez, who has four children, told *Daily News Egypt* that after 20 years of employment as an administrative employee he earns LE 360 per month.

"We live in a remote area and the children have to take the school bus every day. This alone costs me LE 150 a month. On top of that I have to pay for their private tuition. How do I make ends meet?"

Khaled Ali of the Hisham Mubarak Law Centre said recently that there had been 273 strikes in Egypt in the period between January and May 2008.

“We had feared that the events of April 6 in Mahalla, when over 600 people were detained and there was a violent crackdown on those involved in the uprising, would have the effect of frightening workers,” Ali said. “In fact this hasn’t been the case at all.”

### **Protest by Iranian rubber workers damages factory building**

According to the state-run news agency ILNA on July 23, workers at the Kiyan-Tire (Alborz- Lastik) factory set part of its building ablaze in their 13th day of a strike over unpaid wages. The rubber workers are demanding three months’ back-pay.

According to the Iranian Workers’ Solidarity Network, the 1,200 striking workers have said that if their demands are ignored then “they are prepared to take other measures to get their wages and rights.”

Over 600 workers chanting anti-government slogans gathered outside the management’s building, in Chahardangeh, a western suburb of Tehran, according to ILNA.

The workers threatened to have their next demonstration outside Iran’s Majlis (parliament) if they do not receive a positive outcome to their protests soon.

The workers went on strike April 12 for the first time when management called in the State Security Force (SSF) to crush their demonstration. A number of the workers were arrested.

In the past year, thousands of workers employed by government-owned factories and workshops have gone on strike over pay disputes.

Five thousand workers employed at the Haft-Tapeh Sugar Cane factory have been on strike since last March.

## **Africa**

### **South African telecommunication workers set to strike**

Workers at Telkom, belonging to the Communication Workers Union (CWU) and the South African Communications Union (SACU) are due to start 4 days of strike action Friday August 1.

The union is demanding a 12.5 percent wage increase for the year ending March 2009 and a retroactive increase of 8.7 percent for the previous year. They are also seeking improved sickness benefits and standby allowances.

The company began negotiations with the unions under a proviso of an agreement signed in 2006, which said talks on the agreement would be reopened if annual

inflation went beyond 3 percent during the agreement period 2006 to 2009—which it was last year.

Four thousand Telkom workers belonging to the Solidarity trade union won a 10.5 percent wage increase earlier this month. Telkom is Africa’s largest telecommunications business and employs around 26,000 workers.

### **Lecturers at Uganda’s Makerere University plan strike action**

Lecturers at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda are threatening strike action when the new semester begins August 9. They say the university authorities have failed to fund staff pensions by Sh 1bn (US\$612,000) or to provide Sh 3bn (US\$1,836,000) for salary enhancement.

Academic staff association general secretary Gilbert Gumoshabe spoke following a meeting of over 600 lecturers. “If our pension fund is not refunded, we will not start teaching when the semester begins,” he told the *New Vision* newspaper.

Lecturers are also protesting against cuts in funding and the plans to merge daytime and evening programmes at the university. The university lecturers were on strike for over a week in February. That dispute was over lack of teaching materials, poor conditions and the diversion of the pension fund monies.

### **Shop workers strike over low pay in Tanzania**

All five of the Tanzanian outlets of Shoprite, the supermarket chain, were hit by a strike July 24, as over 300 workers took action to demand a salary increase, medical benefits and more leave. The strikers were also angered by the wide pay differences between local workers and those brought in from other countries.

In Arusha, workers gathered outside the premises singing “Solidarity Forever” and displaying placards. The strikers are members of the Tanzania Union of Industrial and Commercial Workers (Tuico). Their union has been involved in arbitration at the Tanzanian Labour Court since the first day of the strike. Four months of fruitless negotiations preceded the walk-out, according to a striker cited in *The Citizen* newspaper, based in Dar es Salaam.

Shoprite sells food and beverages at 600 stores across Africa with 58,000 employees.



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