

Oil workers strike in Oman

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Omani state oil workers have gone on strike to demand higher wages, joining other sections of workers who have launched strike action and ongoing popular protests against the regime of Sultan Qaboos bin Said.

The work stoppage by employees at Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) is the first strike at a national oil company in the Persian Gulf countries since popular protests erupted in January and swept across Arab North Africa and the Middle East.

The strike began Tuesday when some 400 workers held protests in front of PDO headquarters in the capital, Muscat, and stopped work for several hours at the Marmul oil field and the Karn Al Alam gas field.

Marmul is the site of 12 of Oman's 400 oil fields and Karn Al Alam is the country's biggest gas field. There are only several hundred workers in each location. The protests and stoppages continued Wednesday.

Reuters news service quoted a protesting PDO employee, Suleiman Al-Harthy, as saying, "We are the least-paid oil workers in the Gulf. We want to be paid the same as other oil workers in other Gulf countries."

Oman produces 800,000 barrels of petroleum per day, accounting for over 70 percent of the nation's income. PDO produces over 80 percent of the country's crude oil and natural gas. The government owns 60 percent of the firm and Shell owns 30 percent.

Earlier this month workers at Oman Air went on strike for higher pay, one week after the monarchy carried out deadly attacks against workers' protests over jobs and wages in the north of the country. The Oman Air walkout was the first strike following the outbreak of protests at the end of February in the northeastern industrial city of Sohar in which six people were killed and at least 20 injured.

The demonstrations then spread to Muscat, the eastern coastal town of Sur, the southern city of Salalah and the Omani-United Arab Emirates border town of Al Buraimi. Sultan Qaboos, who has ruled the small oil-

producing nation with an iron hand for 40 years, with the backing of the United States, began to make economic concessions in an attempt to quell the protests.

He pledged to create 50,000 new government jobs and distribute 150 rials (\$390) a month to unemployed workers. This, however, only encouraged opponents of the regime to step up their protests, with the working class coming to the forefront of a movement demanding better wages, more jobs, an elected parliament and a new constitution.

The Oman Air strike as well as a walkout at Bank Muscat were settled, but strikes and protests are ongoing at other firms, including Oman International Bank, Oman Investment Finance Company and Muscat's government-owned Intercontinental Hotel.

The government more recently said it would double monthly welfare payments and increase pension benefits, and on Tuesday the state news agency reported that the sultan had ordered a salary hike of up to 100 rials (\$260) a month for civil servants, including security forces, beginning April 1. Qaboos has also fired 12 cabinet ministers so far.

In addition to the strikes, protesters continue to camp out nightly in tents in front of parliament in Muscat, outside the governor's office in Salalah in the south, and in Sohar.

Meanwhile, protests have broken out in a number of Arab countries against the crackdown in Bahrain spearheaded by some 1,000 Saudi troops and UAE security forces. The demonstrations have been dominated by Shiite workers and youth in solidarity with the majority Shiite population in Bahrain, which is ruled by a Sunni monarchy and police-military establishment.

Some 2,000 protested Wednesday in central Beirut at a rally called by Hezbollah. The demonstration was attended by Sunni as well as Shiite religious figures.

There was also a rally of some 2,000 in Sadr City, the Shiite slum east of Baghdad. The protest was called by Muqtada al-Sadr. Smaller protests were also reported in the south-central town of Ad Diwaniyah and in Basra and Najaf in southern Iraq.

About 1,000 people in Saudi Arabia's mostly Shiite eastern city of al-Qatif defied a ban on demonstrations and protested Tuesday to demand the withdrawal of Saudi troops from Bahrain. A separate protest was held in the city of Awwamiya.



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