

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

8 April 2011

The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Greek workers launch strike at main refineries

Workers at Greece's biggest refiner, Hellenic Petroleum (HP), began a 10-day strike on April 3 to demand the hiring of more employees.

The company has been accused attempting to start a new gasoline unit in Thessaloniki without adequate staffing.

The strike covers HP's three refineries in Greece. HP controls three of the country's four refineries—Aspropyrgos, Elefsina and Thessaloniki—and more than 60 percent of the market. A sustained strike would cause serious fuel shortages, adversely affecting the country's already battered economy.

HP management has filed a court petition requesting that the strike be declared illegal.

Journalists begin four-day nationwide strike in Greece

Journalists in Greece began a four-day strike Thursday to protest the impact of the social democratic PASOK government's austerity programme. It is being held over two rolling 48-hour periods, starting at 6:00 a.m. Thursday and ending at 6:00 a.m. Monday morning and was called by the ESIEA (Athens journalists), EPIEA (Athens media enterprise staff) trade union and several other smaller organisations.

The media workers are demanding secure collective labour agreements, an end to pay cuts and job losses and the protection of entitlements. The journalists' union in Athens has called for the rehiring of some of the workers who have been dismissed due to the austerity cuts.

During the strike no television or radio news bulletins will be broadcast nationwide and no newspapers or magazines will publish until Tuesday. The strike will also halt the update of Greek news web sites. The Athens News Agency-Macedonian Press Agency ANA-MPA will not function during the stoppage and the action also closes public sector and local authority media enterprises.

A strike by ANA-MPA staff, due to be held from March 31 to April 7, was ruled illegal and abusive by an Athens court the day it was due to begin.

The strike had been called by the ESHEA union and EPHEA federation to demand that the ANA-MPA not be given the status of a state-owned public utility company, for an adherence to collective agreements and to oppose a second 10 percent cut in staff salaries.

Municipal workers strike in Attica, Greece demands permanent jobs

Municipal contract workers in Attica, Greece staged a 24-hour strike on Wednesday to demand the government make their contracts permanent and to protest an attack on them the previous day by riot police. The strike followed a weeklong occupation of the City Hall in Athens by municipal workers.

On Tuesday, riot police prevented the employees from protesting outside the Interior Ministry and used teargas to disperse demonstrators, injuring some of the workers. The association of local authority workers POE-OTE said that its members had been subjected to an "unprovoked attack" by the police.

Greek air traffic controllers union cancels strike

A scheduled 24-hour strike by Greece's air traffic controllers, due to be held on Wednesday, was suspended by the controllers unions after it was ruled illegal by a court in Athens. Controllers were set to strike to demand the immediate hiring of 50 workers.

The stoppage would have affected all flights to and from Greece. No further details have been announced by the controllers union regarding cancellation of the action.

Russian air traffic controllers protest dismissal of union leader

Air traffic controllers have threatened further action over the sacking of a union leader, after picketing the building of Russia's air transport agency Rosaviatsia.

Around 100 controllers picketed the Rosaviatsia building in Moscow after the Russian Federal Air Controllers Trade Union's vice president, Yury Batagov, was given his final notice for the third time in just over a year. Oleg Babich, secretary of the trade union umbrella group Zashchita Truda, said the dismissals—one for alleged absence without leave, the other two for certificate expiry—were trumped up.

Strike announced over jobs at Newcastle College

Staff at Newcastle College, England are to take industrial action on April 12 in a fight to save jobs.

Over four-fifths of members the University Colleges Union (UCU) who voted in last month's strike ballot supported industrial action against plans to make over 170 redundancies, three-quarters of which are teaching posts.

The UCU has accused senior management of using the current funding crisis in further education as an excuse to make cuts. It was revealed last month that the principal of the college, Jackie Fisher, received a 32 percent annual pay rise for 2009/2010.

Protest at exploitation of migrant labour in Czech Republic forests

On March 27, a small protest of activists and migrant workers gathered outside the Czech Ministry of Agriculture, in the capital Prague, to draw attention to the exploitation of migrant workers employed under near slave conditions in the country's forests.

A group of protesters later planted a tree before going to continue their protest at the Interior Ministry.

According to the protest organizers, up to 600 forestry workers from Romania, Slovakia and Vietnam have not received the wages they were promised and many have been forced to live in overcrowded conditions.

Strikes called in Finnish retail sector

Three separate and limited strikes have been called in the Finnish retail sector by the Service Union United (PAM) after the breakdown of talks over a new collective agreement.

The first strike, encompassing K-Citymarket and Prisma shops, is to begin April 15. It affects around 13,000 employees and 129 outlets.

The second strike, at warehouses of central stores, is set to begin April 18. Some 4,000 workers and 14 locations would be affected.

The third strike is scheduled for April 20. This larger strike covers 30,000 employees and 746 outlets and would involve K-Citymarkets, K-Supermarkets, Prismas, S-Markets and Stockmann.

The retail sector's collective agreement was valid until the end of 2013, but was dependent on annual agreement on pay increases. A new agreement would ultimately concern around 200,000 employees.

Finnish telecoms strike to save jobs

Around 3,100 customer service employees at TeliaSonera began a five-day strike March 30, in protest against planned job cuts.

The company has been accused of attempting to transfer jobs to subcontractors.

TeliaSonera said last month it would cut up to 200 jobs in broadband business service support operations in Finland.

Finnish paper workers strike

Up to one thousand workers at selected paper-making plants have started a two-week strike in an attempt to speed up stalled talks on pay

raises and working conditions.

The action is expected to cause plant closures, mostly at UPM-Kymmene Corp factories—the world's largest magazine papermaker with €8.9 billion in revenue last year.

The strike will include UPM's cargo handling company in Kotka, which will halt shipment of paper products.

The corporation has made clear that the disruption would cost millions of euros and may force it to look overseas for paper production. Finland has seen eight paper and pulp mills and thousands of jobs cut in five years.

Israeli doctors launch action over pay and work conditions

A strike by hospital doctors across Israel went ahead after talks held April 4 with Ministry of Finance representatives broke down over pay, staffing, privatisation and other issues.

Public hospitals are to operate on an emergency footing. Doctors at Clalit Health Services and Leumit Health Fund are also striking.

The Ministry of Finance proposed to the Israel Medical Association to refer the dispute to arbitration. The ministry insists that the arbitrators should only deal with doctors' salary terms, and not with manpower, the return of private medicine to government hospitals, and other issues.

The Israel Medical Association is demanding a 50 percent increase in doctors' hourly wage, plus changes in employment terms.

The Ministry of Finance is prepared to grant doctors only a 1 percent pay rise per year as part of a five- to eight-year labour contract. It is also offering a special supplement of NIS 600-1,200 for specialists, doctors in the periphery, and doctors in professions where there is a shortage.

The last time a nationwide strike of hospital doctors in Israel took place was in 2000.

Suez Canal workers continue strike

An estimated 7,000 workers at the Suez Canal Authority are continuing their strike and refuse to return to work until their demands are met.

The striking workers demand parity with their colleagues in the Suez Canal Authority. The striking workers are employed by six companies affiliated to the Authority in Suez, Ismailia and Port Said. The workers began their protest April 3.

Two passenger ships, the Queen and Wadi El Nil, which had docked in the Suez Maritime Arsenal that specialises in maintenance, are ready to be returned to water. But the company workers responsible for releasing the ship have refused.

Workers protest in front of Cairo Cabinet offices

Around 300 workers, employees of the Egyptian Ministry of Agriculture and the Amonsito Textile Company, began a strike and demonstration April 4, in front of the Cabinet offices in downtown Cairo.

The Ministry of Agriculture workers came mostly from the governorate of Behaira to voice their anger over the fact that they have been working with temporary contracts for 15 years.

Employees, most of whom work in the Tree Planting Project, earn LE41 per month and claim that they have not been paid since June 2006.

“[Prime Minister] Essam Sharaf. Tell us, how we can live with LE41 a month?” chanted the crowd, insisting that they want to talk to officials from the ministry. “We will not leave without our permanent contracts.”

About 150 workers from the Amonsito Textile Company, owned by Syrian-American tycoon Adel Agha, also held a demonstration asking the government and Banque Misr to pay them the rest of their redundancy package. The company was closed down after Agha fled the country in 2007 with massive debts.

After being denied their wages, the Amonsito workers held a 21-day sit-in in March 2010, until they reached a settlement agreement which stipulated that those employed for more than 20 years will receive three months’ pay for every year worked, whereas those employed for less than 20 years will receive four months’ salary per year worked. The compensation package totalled LE106 million. Workers claim they have only received LE65 million of the package and demand that the bank pay the rest.

South Africa: Waste management workers to strike

Workers employed for Pikitup, a Johannesburg waste management company, have served notice of intention to strike.

The workers are affiliated to the South Africa Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU). They have grievances over how the company has dealt with industrial relations issues. They have been conducting go-slow action at some depots for some time, which has led to a backlog of uncollected rubbish.

South African grocery workers strike

Around 6,000 sales and merchandising workers began strike action Monday. The workers are members of the Food and Allied Workers Union. The strike is over union recognition.

They work for brokers as shelf-stackers for particular products. Lekgotla Morake explained to the *Sowetan* newspaper how the companies operate:

“The middleman will tell Checkers (a retail grocery store chain), for example, that if it buys certain products, he will send workers to pack those products onto the shelves... To get this job you must have your own car. We get sent all over the place all day long, yet we don’t get any petrol money. That is why we joined the union. You can work for this company for 10 or 15 years, but there is no pension fund for you.”

The workers employed by the brokers to fill shelves are paid around R2,200 (\$330) a month, while permanent sales and merchandising workers earn around R6,000 (\$9,000 a month).



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact