

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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

Greek energy workers' strike against privatisation plans

On June 20, electricity workers at the state-owned Public Power Corp. (PPC) began an open-ended strike against privatization plans that form part of government austerity measures.

The strike affected operations at 16 power plants across the country, with a combined capacity of 3,750 megawatts—approximately a third of PPC's total power capacity.

There were power cuts to selected towns across Greece as the national regulator, the Hellenic Transmission System Operator (HTSO), decided to shed load in order to protect the overall stability of the power grid.

PPC and HTSO refused to give further details about projected demand, the extent of the planned power cuts or whether Greece was preparing to import electricity from neighbouring countries.

In May last year, the Greek government accepted a €110 billion bailout from other eurozone countries and the International Monetary Fund and is now seeking a further €100 billion to cover its borrowing needs for the next three years. As part of those loan deals, the government is seeking to implement a five-year austerity program on the backs of an increasingly restive working class.

As part of the austerity plan, the government intends to reduce the state's holdings in PPC from 51 to 34 percent, as well as cut its stake in other state-owned organisations.

Danish IT workers strike

Over 300 striking IT workers picketed the Valby headquarters of CSC (Computer Services Corporation) Denmark last week to oppose a 10 percent pay cut.

CSC Danmark is Denmark's second largest private supplier of IT solutions. Its connections to the state go back decades and government ministries and public services rely heavily on its data management services.

Around 450 IT specialist workers of CSC's 2,900 employees have taken action.

CSC is claiming that the salaries of the IT workers are 11 percent higher than the industry average at 14 rival firms. Average base salaries for CSC's IT employees are between 48,000 and 50,000 kroner per month.

"We have an acute need to get the salaries and benefits for workers in Denmark on a level with the competition," CSC's head of Nordic

Capability Management, Lars Lundsgaard, told *Politiken* newspaper.

Last week 190 strike-breakers, belonging to the HK/Privat union, were bused into CSC headquarters amid taunts of "scab" from strikers mainly from the Prosa union.

CSC Danmark is Denmark's second largest independent contractor, with 121 contracts in 15 different government ministries. The IT corporations' dealings with the state began in 1959 as the state-owned Datacentralen (Data Central). In 1996, US IT giant CSC (Computer Services Corporation), with 91,000 employees in 91 different countries, bought 75 percent of Datacentralen and changed its name to CSC Danmark.

According to the Copenhagen Public Library web site, "If the CSC strike continues it could cripple many public services and ministries, as much public records data is handled by CSC contracts."

Affected departments would include the police, hospital and tax records, public employees' payroll, university admissions and library systems, along with many more.

Czech transportation workers strike over austerity measures

Transit workers across the country staged a 24-hour strike June 16, in a protest against the government's austerity measures, which entail attacks on pensions and health care.

The limited industrial action affected urban transit and railways.

The centre-right government aims to bring the national budget deficit down from an estimated 4.2 percent of gross domestic product this year to below 3 percent by 2013 and to balance the budget by 2016. It is imposing pay freezes on much of the working population and slashing social spending.

The government is also committed to delaying the age of retirement, introducing a pension system that would divert part of workers' social security payments from the current pay-as-you-go scheme into private retirement accounts.

Petr Necas, the Czech prime minister, recently told the *Financial Times*, "The steps we are taking are neither popular nor populist. We are taking steps that we must take. For this reason, we don't expect that our steps will be joyfully received by the public."

The *Financial Times* report concluded, "The strike also led Václav Klaus, the president, to call off 70th birthday celebrations planned for Thursday. Mr. Klaus, an ardent advocate of free markets, has called on the government to sack the strikers and hire hundreds of buses to keep the country moving."

Protest at Cypriot university attacked by police

A demonstration of hundreds of teachers, parents and students converged on the Eastern Mediterranean University rector's office, in Famagusta on the island's east coast June 21 to protest the planned sell-off of schools attached to the state-run university.

The demonstrators shouted, "This country is not for sale," referring to the sale to a Turkish educational conglomerate, and "No to privatisation!"

According to the *Cyprus Mail*, the demonstrators found themselves barred from the university building by riot police. "[S]cuffles then broke out, apparently as protesters realised their identities were being recorded by other members of the university's staff."

The head of DAU-SEN teachers' union, Huseyin Ozkaramanli, told the paper, "We found ourselves face to face with hundreds of police in full riot gear. They were acting as if we planned to storm the building."

Following an unsuccessful attempt to meet with EMU's rector, the demonstrators headed to the primary and secondary schools, located within EMU's campus.

Several protesters were injured, including a 17-year-old girl who was hit on the head by a police baton. Four were arrested and taken into custody.

Unions say the school's sell-off is a precursor to a planned sell-off of the university, which caters to around 20,000 students.

Care workers at Dublin nursing home in sit-in over closure

Ten migrant workers at the Rostrevor House nursing home in Rathgar staged a sit-in June 21, saying they were not leaving until the owners provided written assurances they would receive holiday pay and redundancy entitlements. Two of the workers blew the whistle on the alleged abuse of elderly residents at the south Dublin nursing home and were fired by the home last week.

The *Irish Times* reported that the dismissals were confirmed by the SIPTU union and the Migrant Rights Centre of Ireland, as the last resident was moved out of the home and it was closed.

One of the workers involved in the sit-in said she was upset at the way the Health Information and Quality Authority went about closing the care home: "They said nothing is going to happen and we would not lose our jobs, but everybody ends up losing their jobs."

Serbian road construction workers protest to demand bailout

Hundreds of construction workers blocked main roads across Serbia on June 22 to demand that the government bail out Nibens Grupa—a major building group with millions of euros of debt caught up in a fraud scandal.

According to *Reuters*, "Protesters, who brought parts of the capital Belgrade to a standstill, said the government needed to save Nibens Grupa to safeguard 5,000 jobs and upgrades to Serbia's motorway network."

Road constructors also blocked roads around the cities of Kragujevac, Nis and Novi Sad.

It is estimated that Nibens Grupa owes €110 million (\$158 million) to banks and about the same amount to suppliers. The company suspended all operations last month, after Serbian police arrested its owner, Milo Djuraskovic, and seven other executives during investigations into a €32 million fraud.

Bahraini authorities deport construction workers for striking

On June 21, 40 construction workers had their contracts terminated for taking part in an unofficial strike and are to be deported.

The *Trade Arabia News Service* (TANS) said the workers "were among 300 Asian workers who took part in the strike that started Saturday to demand pay rises.

"The other workers are expected to go back to their countries within this week."

TANS' sister paper, the *Gulf Daily News*, reported that "disciplinary action would be taken against the workers for going on an illegal strike."

"The workers from India, Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh claimed they received salaries ranging between BD65 (\$172.40) to BD85, which they said was not enough to survive. They also claimed they don't save enough to send to their families back home," reported TANS.

One of the workers, who was due to leave the country that night, said, "We went to the ministry, but no one from the company or embassies came. We waited for a long time and a ministry official said they would take action against us if we didn't leave the offices.

"He also said our demands are illegal and we could face prosecution and be jailed if we didn't agree to what the company is telling us. We agreed and returned to the accommodation to pack our luggage to go home. We didn't do anything, except ask for our rights. Now 20 workers are leaving and the rest will go within this week, based on availability of flights."

The ruling elite recently enacted a wave of repression against workers across Bahrain for their part in the protests and demonstrations inspired by the uprisings in the region.

Yemeni farm labourers close road to protest fuel shortages

Farm labourers closed the main Taiz-Aden road this week "in protest against the acute shortage of fuel Yemen has been experiencing for months amid continuous protests calling for change and the departure of the regime," reported the *Yemen Post* on June 21.

Eyewitnesses reported seeing cars queued on the road in Al-Rahida district on Sunday. When they asked about the cause they discovered that the labourers were blocking the road to pressure the government to order filling stations to sell them diesel.

Yemen Post said, "Yemen has experienced acute fuel and cooking gas shortages as well as day-and-night power outages in the last few weeks that added to other problems mainly blamed on the five-month crisis, including big blows to economic and productive sectors."

In addition to the shortages, the price of fuel and other supplies has more than doubled recently.

Egyptian university faculty to stage sit-in over unmet democratic demands

The *Daily News Egypt* reported June 21, "A coalition of faculty members at Egyptian public universities decided Monday to hold a nationwide on-campus open sit-in starting July 3, to push for the resignation of interim Minister of Higher Education, Amr Salama, for ignoring the coalition's demands."

The demands of the faculty members include the resignation of university presidents and faculty deans, for their past allegiance to the former Mubarak regime, the free and fair election of new heads of universities and deans and increasing the state's education and scientific research budget, according to a statement issued on the group's Facebook

page.

University professors are also calling for an increase in ministry spending to 3 percent of GDP in order to improve research and administrative conditions in universities.

The Facebook statement added that the sit-in would continue until all demands are met.

Military fire on Suez Canal workers' protests for better wages

Al Mary Al Youm reported that Suez Canal workers staged protests June 20 and blocked the Port Tewfik road to demand better wages.

"Traffic on the road was stopped for an hour before the armed forces managed to convince the protesters to end their protest, and promised to resolve their problems within three days."

A *Reuters* June 18 report said that "Egyptian troops fired shots in the air on Saturday to prevent hundreds of protesting workers at the seven Suez Canal Authority subsidiaries from storming into its office in Ismailia, according to witnesses."

One eyewitness from Ismailia told *Reuters*, "The workers were trying to get inside the canal administration office when an officer came out of a tank and fired around 15 shots in the air and dispersed the crowd."

Many workers at canal authority offices in Ismailia, Suez and Port Said have been staging protests throughout last week for higher pay and better work conditions. For at least the past two weeks, protesters have been camping outside the headquarters of the Canal Authority in the city of Ismailia, east of Cairo, demanding a 40 percent pay increase.

Nasr Abdu, a representative of the workers cited by the *Associated Press*, denied protesters tried to storm the building.

Suez Canal workers have gone on a series of strikes since the toppling of former president Hosni Mubarak in February.

A delegation representing workers of the seven companies is currently in Cairo to meet with Ahmed El-Boraie, Egypt's labour minister.

On April 19, the labour minister and the head of the Suez Canal Authority reached an agreement to add 40 percent of workers' bonus payments to their basic pay, remove the bonus ceiling and grant workers an extra daily meal. These decisions, were supposed to be implemented in June but have not been, prompting workers to resume their strike.

Armed forces also fired live ammunition in the air in the city of Suez in an attempt to force protesting workers from the Suez Arsenal company to end their strike.

"The army interfered to force us to do the necessary work for a gas tanker to move, essentially ending our strike," says Nasser Othman, treasurer of the company's workers' syndicate. "They were not successful."

Thousands of Egyptian Justice Ministry employees strike

Thousands of employees from the Justice Ministry's Notary offices across the country took industrial action June 22 to protest the delay in the payment of their monthly bonuses and to call for their authority to be independent from the ministry.

Tareq Azzouz, spokesperson for notary employees, told *Al-Masry Al-Youm* that around 480 offices nationwide are organizing an open-ended strike until their bonuses, which constitute 400 percent of their base salaries, are paid. The notary employees have not received their bonuses for two months.

The ministry employees threatened to stop issuing key documents for judicial purposes, parliamentary and presidential candidates, and the establishment of new political parties.

Yasmeen Ragab, a notary employee in Cairo, said the registry employs 9,000 people whose livelihood depends on their bonuses.

Some employees have accused the justice minister of using the notary's social and health care fund to pay large allowances to the judges and advisers who participated in the referendum on constitutional amendments, according to *Al-Masry Al-Youm*.

The striking employees also accused the head of their authority of giving preferential treatment to employees in central branches and governorate capitals.

Ghana: Palm oil workers demonstrate

Workers at the Ghana Oil Plantation at Kwaye in the Eastern region held a demonstration on Monday against their poor working conditions. Presenting a petition to the company's assistant manager, they declared a sit-down strike until their demands are addressed.

The workers' union had been negotiating with the company for 18 months to no avail. Amongst the workers' concerns are the conditions of contract workers, lack of medical equipment and the dilapidated state of the company's school for the workers' children.

Ugandan teachers threaten strike action over pay arrears

Secondary school teachers in Mbale district threatened strike action over non-payment of their salaries. The teachers have not been paid their May salaries yet by the district local government even though the Ministry of Finance says the monies have been released.

One of the teachers' leaders explained, "We have waited, appealed and there is nothing ... The high cost of living has made life difficult. We are in debt."

Swaziland: Unions plan further protests against government

Unions in Swaziland were due to launch protests this week against the government, opposing proposed cuts in wages and calling for regime change.

There were big protest demonstrations earlier in the year. Swaziland is ruled by an autocratic monarch enjoying a lavish lifestyle, while 40 percent of the population are unemployed and 70 percent live on less than \$1 a day. Political parties are not allowed.

The Swaziland National Association of Teachers president explained, "We want this government to vacate office ... we want regime change ... the system itself is flawed ... so much money is being lost to corruption."

The country suffered a sharp drop in revenue from the Southern African Customs Union and in April its deficit rose to 14.3 percent of GDP.

Kenyan dock workers strike postponed

The Dock Workers Union's proposed strike due to begin this week against Kenya Ports Authority (KPA) has been put back by a week. The union gave 21 days notice on May 26 for the strike.

The strike was to protest against casualization. Around 350 dock workers have worked as casuals for 15 years, while more than 2,000 have been working as casual workers for the last three years. The country's Labour Relations Act stipulates that workers should be given permanent status after six months.

Workers have been further angered by reports that the KPA plans restructuring, which they fear will lead to job losses. The union chairman arrogantly defended the postponement of the strike, saying, "We decided to extend the strike date by seven days to allow us to educate the workers on what will be required of them."



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