Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

1 July 2011

48-hour general strike in Greece

Hundreds of thousands of workers struck for 48 hours this week in opposition to the Greek parliament's endorsement of a further €28 billion in public spending cuts. It comes on top of the severe austerity measures already implemented on the demands of the International Monetary Fund and the European Union, which have greatly undermined public sector salaries, pensions and other benefits, while raising value-added taxes.

The social democratic PASOK party carried the measures on Wednesday and went on to agree to a €50 billion fire sale of Greek state assets.

The public sector union ADEDY and the private sector union GSEE were involved in the action, representing up to two and a half million workers. The strike caused major disruption, particularly to travel, as air traffic controllers staged four four-hour strikes over the two days, leading to flight cancellations and delays.

Piraius port in Athens, which is to be sold off, was closed, and trains and bus services ran a restricted service, where they were able to run at all.

There were violent scenes outside the parliament in Athens, where police ran amok against protestors—unleashing a barrage of tear gas and beating people.

Hungarian transport workers' unions block lanes, instead of strike

The Hungarian trade union confederation Liga called off a planned general strike Wednesday, joining a police union's nationwide demonstration involving the blockade of single lanes on roads instead.

Liga president Istvan Gasko called a general strike two weeks ago over the ending of early retirement schemes, but called it off on the pretext of negotiations with the government on July 4 in what he described as a "forced gesture to the government".

The police-instigated demonstration reportedly covered all the 19 counties, with lanes to be blocked on the main access roads to cities and lasted for 12 hours.

Transport strike in the Netherlands

Public transport was hit in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague June 29, due to a strike by bus, tram and metro workers against government cuts.

The government plans to force the three big cities to put public transport services out to tender by private companies, as well as €120 million spending cuts announced by Transport Minister Melanie Schultz van Haegen that she says can be met through privatisation.

Virgin Atlantic pilots to strike

The pilots' union Balpa has said that it will announce strike dates unless a pay dispute with Virgin Atlantic is resolved. Balpa members voted overwhelmingly for strike action in protest at a 4 percent pay rise that follows a series of pay freezes.

In response, Balpa General Secretary Jim McAuslan urged Virgin boss Sir Richard Branson to become "personally involved", according to *The Independent*. Branson responded with a letter stating that he was "extremely sad" about the strike threat and offering talks to prevent "an indelible scar on the company". He described the pay offer as "fair…. From the company's point of view possibly a little too fair."

He threatened job losses and the withdrawal of the pay offer.

Southampton council workers extend walkout

Refuse workers in Southampton, England, have extended their strike by a week in a protest over pay cuts.

A strike by 300 council workers began Tuesday and involves binmen, street cleaners, librarians, toll collectors and parking attendants.

The Conservative-led council has threatened another 400 job losses if the pay cuts are not accepted. It has already announced 285 redundancies, and is making budget cuts of £25 million, including cuts in hours for all workers earning more than a measly £17,500, 65 percent of staff.

The Unison and Unite unions have said the council refused to withdraw dismissal notices for staff who would not sign a new contract by July 11, the BBC reports. Street cleaners have voted to extend their strike until July 12. Binmen are working to rule.

Strikes at Faifax School, West Midlands, England

Teachers and staff are taking three days of strike action at Faifax School, in Sutton Coldfield.

The walkout by about 30 teachers began June 29 against plans to turn the school into an academy. It continued yesterday as part of the national protest against the attack on state pensions and today.

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The school was open to pupils for the first two days of the strike, but with activities replacing some lessons.

Solidarity strike at UK Fujitsu IT plant

Staff at the Fujitsu IT plant in Crewe voted 52 percent to 48 percent to take industrial action June 30, to oppose the potential dismissal of a work colleague.

Alan Jenney, who is a union rep, could be dismissed early next month.

The Unite union said that he had "been singled out and put at risk of redundancy." The union claimed this was discriminatory, as Fujitsu had "responded to hundreds of job losses elsewhere by supporting staff through redeployment."

South London journalists' strike called off by union deal

A four-day strike over job losses began by journalists employed by *Newsquest South London* on June 27 has been called off by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ).

NUJ chapel members voted to accept an agreement to replace vacancies occurring over the next six months and to retain two extra editorial positions.

The industrial action by *Newsquest* journalists arose over opposition to management plans that included axing the whole sports and leisure department, involving eight journalists and making one commercial features writer redundant.

Staff returned to work at *Newsquest* offices in Sutton and Twickenham, ending a work to rule and calling off the last two days of a four-day strike.

NUJ head of publishing Barry Fitzpatrick said, "The outcome of this dispute shows the need for management to work together with the NUJ to tackle the problems of the newspaper industry."

It was the second recent strike by the journalists over redundancies. The sports editor, at the news group, and one sports sub-editor have already been made redundant.

Egypt: Suez Canal workers continue strike to demand resignation of Authority chairman

Around 850 workers from two Suez Canal companies in the city of Ismailiya have been on strike for a fortnight to demand the resignation of Suez Canal Authority chairman Ahmed Fadel.

Nasser Othman, treasurer of one of the workers' syndicates in Ismailiya, told *Ahram Online*, "He violated his promise to resolve our troubles...so he's supposed to leave…. Suez Canal's Fadel incited the employees of the main canal operations against us. It was something like a counter-revolution."

Othman also said that protests by workers at the five other companies in Port Said and Suez were ongoing and making the same demand.

Ahram Online also reported June 26, "Workers' strikes at seven Suez Canal Authority companies have intensified over the 12 days, with protesters in the cities of Ismailiya and Suez blocking key roads on 20 June."

Port workers are demanding a 40 percent increase in basic salary, 7 percent bonus payments and an increase in their meal allowances.

Workers claim they were promised raises in pay and bonuses by Ahmed Fadel, CEO of the Suez Canal Authority, on April 19.

The Suez Canal is one Egypt's main foreign currency earners, generating US$4.5 billion in 2009-2010.

Palestinian workers strike over collective wage agreement

Haaretz.com reported on June 23 that Palestinian workers had begun an "unprecedented strike" against an Israeli-owned business over their working conditions.

The 40 workers at the Sal'it Adumim quarry, in the West Bank, are demanding that management sign a collective wage agreement with the workforce. The workers decided to go on strike until management signs the agreement.

Zimbabwean civil servants strike

Public sector workers in Zimbabwe began an indefinite strike last Wednesday; they are demanding a minimum wage of $500 a month. Currently, government workers earn an average of $200 a month. The teachers' union, Progressive Teachers of Zimbabwe, began its strike on Tuesday.

The government had earlier in the year promised a 100 percent pay increase using finances from the sale of diamonds from the controversial Marange deposits in Eastern Zimbabwe.

Lecturers in Sierra Leone enter third week of action

Lecturers at Fourah Bay College (FBC), University of Sierra Leone, have been on strike since the middle of June. The lecturers, members of the Academic Staff Association (ASA), are seeking a pay increase and a review of their conditions of service. They gave the college a 21-day ultimatum on May 20, and when this produced no result began their strike.

The ASA chairman at FBC, Charles Sylver, explained that the lecturers were faced with poor salaries and poor conditions of service and the lecturers were "demanding an immediate reverse of such a trend."

Nigerian power workers in one-day strike

Employees working for the state-run Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN), organised by the National Union of Electricity Employees, held a one-day strike Wednesday June 29. The workers are demanding the implementation of a previously agreed 50 percent pay increase. They are also opposing the government plan to appoint Professor Barth Nnaji as energy minister.

President Goodluck Jonathon outlined plans to privatise the company in a speech he made in Lagos. The workers plan further action in pursuit of their demands.

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