

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

3 August 2012

## Greek bank staff strike

On Monday, bank employees staged a 24-hour strike against possible salary cuts, job losses and changes to pension arrangements as a result of a consolidation of the sector following the takeover of state-owned Agricultural Bank of Greece (ATEbank) by Piraeus Bank, the country's fourth largest lender.

The strike shut down thousands of branches across the country.

International lenders are placing pressure on Greece to consolidate the sector before the completion of a €50 billion bank recapitalisation programme, as part of the second tranche of an agreed €174 billion loan.

Two more sales of loss-making lenders are due. France's Crédit Agricole is disposing of Emporiki Bank, "while bids for the healthy assets of state-owned Hellenic Postal Savings Bank are being examined by the country's central banks," reported the *Financial Times*.

## Cement factory workers in Cyprus strike over wage cut

The workforce at the Vassilikos cement factory took strike action Tuesday in protest at a six percent wage cut. The Vassilikos cement factory is the only one on the island.

Workers at the plant held a strike in March over cost-cutting measures, including scrapping wage rises and changes to overtime.

## Workers at London Olympics sponsor vote to strike over poverty pay deal

The workforce at Atos Healthcare and Atos IT Services has voted to strike after overwhelmingly rejecting a below-inflation pay offer. They are members of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS).

An official Olympics Games sponsor, the company is at the centre of a government drive to cut disability benefits. Atos is the IT partner of the games and is building the web site.

The involvement of around 400 administrative and reception staff may mean health assessment centres having to close. Its IT division provides round-the-clock technical support to BBC production staff and on-air presenters across the UK, as well as fault diagnosis at vehicle test centres.

The company has consistently refused to pay the official "living wage" to its staff—£7.20 an hour, or £8.30 an hour in London. Atos made annual profits of more than £280 million, a 6.7 percent increase on the previous year.

Although the Public and Commercial Services allowed the ballot for

industrial action by the 1,600 Atos workers, it suspended at the eleventh hour a planned walkout by around 16,000 UK civil service workers on the eve of the Olympic Games' opening.

## Staff on Heathrow Express to be balloted for industrial action over pay

On July 31, the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT) confirmed it was preparing to ballot staff on the Heathrow Express for industrial action and action short of a strike in a dispute over pay.

The workers in dispute include cleaning, facilities and asset management and mechanical engineering staff.

The company has offered staff a mere 1.75 percent pay increase and nothing for working during the Olympics. This constitutes a direct cut in pay, as well as a regression on a previously secured deal concerning Olympics recognition and reward agreement.

The Heathrow Express is an airport rail link between London Heathrow Airport and London Paddington station. It is operated by a wholly-owned subsidiary of British Airports Authority (BAA) and is not legally part of the National Rail system, even though it shares track with National Rail trains for much of its journey and terminates at a London mainline station.

## Italian steelworkers in open-ended strike

Workers at the Ilva-Taranto steel mill in Taranto, Italy, began an open-ended strike July 27, to protest the threat to jobs following an order to partially close the plant in a pollution probe.

According to *Reuters* the closure order and the placing under house arrest of eight executives follows "a long inquiry into whether dioxin and other chemicals pumped from the plant caused abnormal rates of cancer and respiratory and cardiovascular diseases in the impoverished southern Taranto area."

Court magistrates ruled that the plant's fumes and dust particles endangered the health of thousands of workers and nearby residents. A study requested by them linked 386 deaths among the local population over 13 years to Ilva's fumes.

According to trade union sources, around 5,000 people joined a protest last week. Police said workers had blocked highways and two bridges leading to Taranto. The Ilva plant—owned by the Riva Group—is the largest steelworks in Europe, equipped with five blast furnaces. A shutdown of one of the few large industrial sites in the south of the country could destroy around 12,000 jobs.

The Riva group has foreign subsidiaries in Germany, France, Belgium,

Spain, Greece and Tunisia. The company lawyers are to present their case against the seizure of the plant units to a court in Taranto today.

### **Egyptian pilots in sit-in for civilian minister of civil aviation**

Since Tuesday up to 200 pilots have been staging a sit-in in front of the Cairo headquarters of the Civil Aviation Syndicate. They are calling for the appointment of a “non-military, technocratic minister of civil aviation” who is not associated with the former regime of ousted president Hosni Mubarak.

The current Minister of Civil Aviation, Hussein Massoud, is a former officer in the air force and the current chairman and chief executive officer of Egypt Air.

Mubarak’s last aviation minister was the former commander of the Egyptian Air Force, Ahmed Shafiq.

### **Sit-in by Bahraini workers demanding reinstatement following privatisation**

Twenty-six sacked workers from the Information Affairs Authority (IAA) staged a sit-in July 30, in Riffa, Bahrain, demanding reinstatement after being dismissed last year as a result of the privatisation of their section.

The workers say that outstanding dues and salary have not been paid to them. They were employed in the make-up, decor, design, carpentry and engineering departments in addition to other specialisations.

### **Dispute re-declared on Israeli airlines as “open skies” agreement signed**

On Tuesday, the Histadrut trade union federation renewed an industrial dispute it declared in February involving the El Al, Arkia’ and Yisrair airlines.

The renewal of the dispute follows Monday’s signing of the “open skies” agreement by the government.

It is feared that due to the removal of limits on flights to Israel by foreign carriers, fewer flights will be available for domestic carriers resulting in a loss of jobs.

### **Tanzanian teachers strike**

A strike by hundreds of thousands of teachers in public schools and colleges began on Monday. The teachers organised in the Tanzania Teachers Union (TTU) went on strike over their demand for a doubling of their pay, plus additional amounts for science and maths teachers and those in rural areas.

The strike went ahead following a 48-hour notice by the TTU on Friday to the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training after talks arranged under the Commission for Mediation and Administration broke down.

### **Liberian public work employees down tools**

Around 20 workers employed by the Ministry of Public Works in Lofa County have gone on indefinite strike over wages arrears. The men were promised \$5 a day to do maintenance work on drainage, wells and road verges but have not been paid since April. A spokesman, Kelley Bryant, told the press, “If you do not eat, how will you get the energy to work”?

### **South African phosphate miners’ strike**

Around 1,100 workers at the Forskor phosphate mine in Phalaborwa, Limpopo went on strike at the weekend after talks with management over medical aid, long service benefits and the provident fund broke down.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) had been in protracted negotiations with the company to try and settle the dispute. A strike due to take place in April, after the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration granted the NUM a certificate of non-resolution, was cancelled by the union.

### **Zimbabwean teachers plan strike action for new school year**

Teachers represented by the Public Services Association, the Zimbabwe Teachers Association, the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe, The Teachers Union of Zimbabwe and the College Lecturers Association of Zimbabwe, under the umbrella body of the Apex Council met this week to discuss strike action at the start of the next school year.

Schools are due to close this week for the summer holidays, but the unions say they will use the holidays to mobilise teachers for the proposed action at the beginning of the new school year. The teachers along with other public sector workers have conducted a long running campaign for all public sector workers to be paid at least a minimum monthly salary of \$564. The current minimum figure is \$296.

### **Sudanese hospital workers strike over director’s arrest**

Last week employees from all departments at the hospital in Kass in Sudan went out on strike to protest the arrest of the hospital director, Dr Abd El-Sameea last week. He was protesting at security services using the hospital’s electricity supply and was later released.

### **Tunisian postal workers’ strike**

Postal workers in Kasserine went on strike Monday, protesting the government’s plans to pay 20,000 subcontractors employed by the government through post office outlets.

The postal workers argue the post office does not have the capacity and necessary security arrangements to pay such large number of subcontractors and that payments should be made through the banks.

## Tunisian primary school teachers' strike

Teachers in the Union of Primary Education, supported by the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), mounted a one day strike throughout the country on Tuesday.

The strike was to protest the government's decision to deduct three days pay for strike action taken by the teachers, on May 16, 30 and 31. The strikes were to demand higher pay and an improvement in educational standards.

The government's decision to deduct the pay goes against the agreement between the union and the government following the strikes in May, for the Education Ministry to address the need to improve educational standards.



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