

70 Χρόνια από τους Απεργιακούς Αγώνες των Μεταλωρύχων, των Αμιαντωρύχων και των Οικοδόμων το 1948



« Κατέβηκε στα μαρμαρένια αλώνια ο ήρωας των μεταλλείων με τη χαρά και το τραγούδι στο στόμα. Έφερε μαζί του για όπλα τα δύο τιμημένα χέρια του. Πάλεψε σκληρά και ματώθηκε. Μα ματωμένος νίκησε. Χαιρέτισε τη νίκη του με το ίδιο γέλιο και το ίδιο τραγούδι. Πήρε τα δύο τιμημένα και άγια χέρια του και γύρισε πάλι στη δουλειά»...

Γιώργος Λέρνης, Αρχισυντάκτης εφημερίδας «Δημοκράτης»



70 years since the heroic strike of the Miners and Construction Workers in 1948

"The hero of the mines went down to the marble threshing floor with joy and a song on his lips. His two honored hands were his weapons. He struggled hard and bled, but suffering he was victorious. He welcomed his victory with the same laughter and the same song. He took his two honored and righteous hands and went back to work again"...

Yiorgos Lernis, Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper "Democrat"

70 years since the heroic strike of the Miners and Construction Workers in 1948

On the eve of the Second World War (1938-1939), the Mining Industry in Cyprus reached its highest point with significant exports of pyrite and chalcopyrite. The number of workers employed by all the mining companies exceeded 10,000 the majority of whom were landless peasants. Miners' working conditions and terms of employment were inhuman. The housing and living conditions of workers and their families were in a terrible state. Accidents at work occurred quite often, illnesses plagued workers and protective measures underground, in galleys and buildings were almost non-existent.

The brutal exploitation of workers was not confined to just the wretched working conditions imposed by the mining companies, but also regarding their way of life. For example, in Skouriotissa, Lefka, Mavrovouni and Xeros, the various canteens secured a monopoly of food supply to workers. As a result of the monopoly the owners of the canteens they were receiving the workers' payment files directly from the companies themselves. So the workers were left without money and were captives in the mining areas, obliged to continue their work, no matter how arduous and difficult this was.

The application to establish a Trade Union

In the period 1938-1939, the dark shadow of the British colonial regime of Palmer ruled Cyprus. In this vicious political atmosphere, the miners of the KME Company in their efforts to organize themselves in order to solve their problems sent the government their first application to establish a Trade Union. The government's intransigent attitude, which characterized the application as "*communist*" and ignored it. This left no choice to the workers other than to wage the honorable struggle to assert their just demands.

Preparing the struggles

The struggles of the Miners and Construction Workers in 1948 did not appear out of nowhere. The foundation of the Pancyprian Trade Union Committee in 1941, which was the joint formation of Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot workers, formed new preconditions and possibilities.

There had been a tough and long, organizational, political and ideological preparation which didn't restrict itself to putting forth only economic demands. They evolved into a fierce class struggle between the working class on the one hand and the ruling class, the employers, the big foreign companies, the government and the church on the other. The conditions were harsh and tough because the workers movement was forced to work and organize in conditions of brutal dictatorial measures imposed by the Palmer colonial regime.

The KME Miners' strike

The first major class struggle began with the strikes waged by the 2,100 miners of the US Company of KME, which lasted 121 days, demanding wage increases, a reduction in working hours, overtime payments and rest leave. During this battle, the colonial forces opened fire on the strikers, resulting in many injuries. During these strikes, 77 strikers were sentenced to imprisonment from 2 months to 2 years, and hundreds of others were fined. However, it was significant that the miners gained increases of 33%, forcing the company to negotiate. The strike of the miners workers followed, which lasted 29 days and more than 60 workers were imprisoned.

In one case, on 3 March 1948, angry strikers tried to stop strike-breakers, but came under cowardly police attacks who fired indiscriminately and so that day was drowned in blood.

The list of injured strikers was long. The strikers Tsakir Rizet, Ahmet Nejiyati, Yeorgis Yeorgiades, Izzet Ali Izzet, Mehmet Pilal, and Andreas Charalambous suffered serious injuries, who beaten brutally were transferred to the Nicosia Hospital.

The demands were an increase in wages, payment of overtime on Sundays, the recognition the Labour Disputes Committee, the repair of worker's homes and the rehiring of those workers who were sacked. The year ended with the strike of 1,200 construction workers which lasted 118 days. Their demands were increases in pay and an increase in the employer's contribution to Social Insurance. During the strike, 60 construction workers were convicted and imprisoned.

Solidarity and moral and economic support expressed towards the strikers from all the Cypriot people was extraordinary and moving from the beginning of the strikes. Money, food, clothes and all sorts of help was being received

from everywhere. Cars were being loaded daily from various towns and villages to head for the Mavrovouni and Xeros mines. The historic slogan of AKEL: "LETS SHARE OUR BREAD WITH THE MINERS" was turned into practice by the Cypriot people as a whole, demonstrating its support towards the struggle of the strikers against destitution and humiliating wages.

During this time of intensive class struggles, the alliance of workers - peasants and small-medium strata was forged and expressed in practice through the development of an unprecedented movement of solidarity towards the strikers. The battle to secure bread and milk for the strikers' children, the struggle for their moral and material support is one of the most glorious manifestations of genuine and unselfish social solidarity for which the Left movement, which had organized and led it, has every right to feel proud.

Although the demands of Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot workers were justified, apart from the employer's complete refusal to meet the striker's demands, they also had to combat the fierce reaction on the part of the colonial police, the strike-braking stand adopted by the "New Trade Unions" (SEK), as well as the Church's hostile stand. Indicative of the Church's stand was the circular it had distributed, calling on the strikers to surrender, while SEK, with its statement, urged the colonial police to seek the help of the English army in order to *"fight Communist anarchy once and for all."* It even reached the point of going around the villages, organizing strike-breakers for the American Company with the slogan *"Better 12 hours of blue, than 8 hours of red"*.

The then Director of the company, Hendrix, declared *"My country spends millions of dollars fighting communism around the world. It will not think about spending a few thousand pounds more for the same purpose in Cyprus."*

Achievements won by the strike

Despite the clashes, confrontations, the terror unleashed, the anti-worker policy pursued by the employers and those who supported them, the 1948 strikes ended successfully and attained the following:

- Collective agreements were established and strengthened.
- Significant increases in wages were achieved.
- Working hours were reduced, especially in mines.
- Overtime began to be paid.
- Paid holidays were won.
- The Social Healthcare Fund was strengthened.

- Working conditions in mines and construction sites improved.
- The cost of living allowance begun to be granted.
- The mass strength of the trade union movement of PEO and KTIBK was strengthened.

With the epic historical struggles of 1948, the foundations were built for the recognition of working people's right to organize and for collective bargaining on terms of employment. The working class believed in its power, gained self-confidence and discipline, learnt the value of organization and forged strong bonds of solidarity and alliance with the other oppressed social strata.

However, the most important achievement of the 1948 strike struggles is that the strikers succeeded in achieving the recognition of the existence and role of the Trade Union Movement.

Together, as genuine class brothers, Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot workers waged this unequal battle against local and foreign reaction, and they eventually were victorious.

This explains the nature and depth of the relations between PEO, and the Left more broadly, with the Turkish Cypriots. It is a relationship that was not created on the basis of some identification of temporary interests, but a relationship that was forged in the fire of common political and class struggles. It is a relationship based on the common interests, common goals and common visions of all Cypriot workers, regardless of whether their language or religion is different.

1948, therefore was a milestone in the history of our class-based trade union movement and justifiably the great strikes of 1948 hold a special place in the most glorious pages of its history. The strikes lasted for a total of 266 days and thousands of Construction Workers, Miners took part with the participation of the entire working class and the Cypriot people.

On the path of this glorious history, PEO this year is commemorating the 70th anniversary of the 1948 mass strikes of the Mineworkers and Construction Workers by organizing numerous events; events that will be a humble tribute in memory of those who with their their struggles, heroism and the support of the people as their only weapon, withstood the attacks against them, united Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots together on the front line of struggle, showing the way for working people's struggles today through the waging of organized struggles.

CENTRAL EVENTS PROGRAM

1. Sunday 8 July 2018

Visit and tour of the Amiandos mine and inauguration of a monument at PEO's Recreation Camp.

2. Friday 21 September 2018

Event - inauguration of a monument at the village of Katydata, erected in the village square due to the actions and financial assistance of the Construction Workers Union of PEO.

3. A scientific Seminar is to be organized by the Labour Research Institute INEK - PEO and "Prometheus" Research Institute in late September to early October.

4. Friday 23 November 2018

Main political cultural event at the central offices of PEO in Nicosia.

5. An event will take place in the occupied areas in cooperation with DEV-IS on a date to be announced.

Details of each event will be announced separately.

In addition to the above, provincial and local events will be organized.