

The Complete Chronicle of the Wolt Strike

The Ten Days That Shook Cyprus - About the continuous strike of Wolt delivery drivers

IWW-Cyprus

2022

In Lieu of a Prologue – The Working Conditions

Wolt (and the other food delivery platforms in Cyprus, Foody and Bolt Food) "employ" two categories of drivers, a) a very small number of "self-employed partners", mostly EU immigrants, third-country nationals married to EU citizens and refugees whose asylum application has been approved; b) a four-digit number of workers (asylum seekers and students from third countries, who are not legally allowed to be self-employed) working for one of the ten fleet management contractors. In addition, Wolt (which consists of 3-4 businesses depending on the activity) directly employs its managers and workers who load and unload products in the Wolt Market buildings. The "self-employed", who are considered falsely self-employed by an increasing number of countries around the world, are legally allowed to work as long as they want and must pay 15.6% for social security and access to the General Health System, plus a hefty income tax. However, Cyprus may be the only country in the world where workers in this sector have it worse than the "self-employed". Fleet management companies, many of which are owned by people with links to organized crime, until recently deducted 30% of drivers' earnings, both for the social insurance contributions and access to the General Health System (about 11%), and the rest to cover labour costs and for their profit; now they have raised their dividend to 41%. In addition, when Wolt (which sets the wages of all drivers) started its operations in Cyprus in 2020, it paid around 4 euros per delivery under 1 kilometre, 50 cents for each additional kilometre, higher wages for work on Fridays and Saturdays, various bonuses e.g., for working in bad weather etc. Since then, and as prices rise, Wolt (which in the summer of 2022 was bought by the multinational Door-Dash) has gradually reduced wages, and at this point pays only 2.26 euros for a basic delivery. In addition, it stopped paying the extra 50 cents per kilometre, all sorts of bonuses and the slightly higher wages for Fridays and Saturdays.

Drivers, in addition to the rising cost of living, must use this meager income to provide their own motorbikes or bicycles (or rent a bicycle for €200 a month), cover their vehicle insurance under a business contract and to pay for maintenance and fuel. In addition, Wolt charges them 100 euros for the basic equipment with its logos (extra equipment such as raincoats are charged extra), money that drivers are supposed to get back when they are terminated and return the equipment, but the company in most cases finds excuses not to give that money back. In order to

survive, these workers are forced to work far more than the legal working hours limit, which is 20 hours a week for students (38 during non-school periods) from third countries and 48 hours for asylum seekers. Directly related, road accidents are treated as traffic accidents rather than occupational accidents by all parties involved. People without a yellow slip (such as students from third countries), while paying for access to the General Health System, are not allowed to register with a personal doctor and are therefore de facto excluded from the GHS. Workers from third countries like Nepal and Bangladesh are deprived from the pensions they have been paying for if they move back to their countries after they retire, because Cyprus does not have a relevant bilateral agreement with those countries. And the cherry on top, the government recently deprived asylum seekers from getting a drivers' license, leading to a high number of fines and (extra) abuse by the police (the decision is heavily opposed by the platform companies themselves, and as such is currently being reviewed although it will definitively not be reverted any time soon).

Sunday 11/12/2022 – Day 0

Wolt makes the latest wage cut, from €2.40 to €2.26.

Monday 12/12 – Day 1

40-50 Wolt delivery drivers in Nicosia spontaneously decide to go on strike, and gather for hours outside the company's headquarters, at Wolt Market Nicosia. Their main demands to Wolt are the restoration of wages to €2.60, the reinstatement of the extra 50 cents per kilometre, all sorts of bonuses as well as slightly higher wages for Fridays and Saturdays, while to fleet management contractors the return of cut-offs to 30%. Neither Wolt nor any contractor agrees to meet with the strikers.

Tuesday 13/12 – Day 2

The number of strikers, according to them, rises to 100. Employers continue to refuse to meet with the strikers.

Wednesday 14/12 – Day 3

The number of strikers in Nicosia, always according to them, rises to 150 (the total number of drivers in Nicosia ranges from 200 – 400). 40-50 of them march in the rain in the centre of the city, succeeding in gaining publicity for their struggle, which until then remained invisible. In the afternoon of the same day, officials of the Pancyprian Labour Organization (PEO, one of the two major trade union federations in Cyprus, whose offices are very close to Wolt Market), approach the picket and call the strikers to the PEO offices for a meeting. Strikers attend en masse to get advice on next steps as Wolt and fleet managers refuse to meet with them. It is decided that the following day there will be a picket outside the Wolt Market from 8:30 to 22:30, which will be attended by the Labor Inspection Service as well as by the media.

Thursday 15/12 – Day 4

The picket takes place with a massive attendance of strikers. Strikers, organizers from PEO and other groups (e.g., Industrial Workers of the World, antifa leukoşa and others) gathered outside Wolt Market for more than 13 hours. The drivers met with the Labour Inspection Service, whose workers came and interviewed almost 100 workers one-on-one, recording the characteristics of their employment relationship as a first step in regulating the issue. Drivers also signed up with PEO and (at PEO's insistence to increase their bargaining power) the other major trade union confederation, the Confederation of Cyprus Workers (SEK). With the unanimous vote of the strikers, the demands of the strike evolved into immediate employment by Wolt (getting rid of

the contractors entirely) and the signing of a collective agreement that ensures decent working conditions.

Police harassment of strikers and threats by fleet managers in workers' chat groups were summarily dealt with by PEO and IWW trade unionists. The strike spread to other cities; first in Limassol, with drivers marching in protest, and later in the evening in Larnaca. Wolt greatly reduced its services in Nicosia and announced that its offices will be closed for at least a week. A boycott Wolt campaign is launched by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and other supporters of the strike, with deletion of the ordering app, bad reviews with references to the strike, emails to Wolt in Cyprus and Greece (Cyprus Wolt is a branch of the Greek one) etc.

Friday 16/12 – Day 5

A second 13-hour picket takes place in Nicosia, with parallel strike rallies in Limassol and Larnaca. Food, water, coffee, etc. are offered to the strikers by PEO, while in the afternoon the Nicosia strikers receive €50 vouchers (110 such vouchers were distributed) for purchases from a supermarket chain. Wolt managers come out of the offices and order the strikers to come inside to talk in groups of 10, which the strikers refuse. The same managers refuse to talk to the PEO organisers who are on site. The Nicosia contractors create a single chat (employers communicate with workers via apps like WhatsApp) and start deleting strikers from it, effectively firing them. Wolt even offers a €13 fee per order. In the afternoon, a relatively large number of sympathisers join the picket.

Late in the afternoon, and after most of the sympathisers had left, a strikebreaker appeared and accused a striker of stealing his helmet and other things using a knife, during their brief meeting in a shop in Aglantzia (the meeting actually took place). After causing a commotion for several minutes, he called the police who showed up immediately (something drivers say has never happened before when they had to call the police to report a stolen helmet). The police gave the strikers twenty minutes to return the helmet, promising that this would be the end of the story. "Unfortunately," both the accused driver and the other strikers claimed that they had not stolen anything, and even offered to replace the helmet with one of their own or with money. The strikebreaker refused and filed a formal police complaint against the alleged robber, so half an hour later the police called the accused striker to the Likavittos Police Station. The striker went there with a member of the strike committee, who was not allowed to enter the station. For more than an hour the police interrogated and threatened the striker in an attempt to get him to confess to the crime. The striker, knowing that he has done nothing wrong, remained unperturbed and was released after the intervention of the PEO trade unionists.

Saturday 17/12 – Day 6

Another strike rally took place in Nicosia, from 10:00 to 21:30, including a short protest march. Another 40 supermarket vouchers (as well as food and water) are distributed by PEO (confirming the number of over 150 strikers in Nicosia, as there were some who did not get it). The IWW distribute burlap for strikers to sit on (at the request of the strikers), as well as a brochure with the Cyprus labour law in English. Strikers, with the help of the IWW, make their own banner. Wolt offers a 50% discount to anyone who orders take away from its app.

Sunday 18/12 – Day 7

In the early morning, unknown persons vandalize the banners that the solidarity groups had hung since Thursday, and steal the banner made by the strikers. At the strike rally (which by the strikers' wish would take place between 9:30 and 22:00 this time, to cover the hours of high profitability), the banners were restored or replaced. A picket also took place in Paphos, while the

picket in Larnaca reached 110 strikers (about 100% of the drivers). In Limassol, where no strike rallies had been called for the weekend, an attempt by 20-25 strikers to gather spontaneously outside the Wolt Market was broken up by police harassment. PEO again took care of food and water, while the IWW saw to it that the strikers were supplied with rags to sit on, as well as being informed in their languages what exactly a trade union is and does. The strikers' dinner was provided by a solidarity worker from another courier platform, who cooked food.

At around 20:00, and as a PEO officer was talking to the gathered strikers, the manager of one of the largest contracting companies, and at the same time a member of the far-right party ELAM, Marios Rousogenis, passed by with his car and issued threats to the members of PEO. Information immediately arrived that the neo-Nazi in question was gathering like-minded people to attack the picket line. After a brief meeting it was decided to end the picket one hour earlier than planned (at 21:00 instead of 22:00). The syndicalists remained on site until the last striker had left, and then a group of IWW and sympathizers went out on patrol to ensure no strikers were endangered.

Monday 19/12 – Day 8

The picket in Nicosia shows signs of fatigue, while the strike in Larnaca breaks completely. On the contrary, Paphos remains at the same levels while more than 100 strikers (about 50% of the drivers) attend the picket in Limassol. Friday's events are repeated, with Wolt managers coming out of the offices and ordering the strikers to come inside to talk in groups of 10, which the strikers again refuse. Wolt's regional manager, who came to Cyprus from Greece due to the strike, agrees to have a short informal meeting with PEO officers.

In the evening, PEO arranges for a greater number of its officers to come to the site of the picket in Nicosia, while a call is made by the IWW for support of the picket line during the evening hours. Between 19:30 and 21:00, when the strike rally ended, a large number of people gathered in solidarity, including a group from Gate 9 of the People's Athletic Club "Omonia 29th May", who told the strikers that they have their support for whatever they need.

Tuesday 20/12 – Day 9

The strike continues only in Nicosia and with limited participation. It is decided to make a spontaneous march to the Department of Labor Relations, to demand an official mediation meeting as soon as possible. 40-50 strikers, with PEO flags and a central IWW banner, carry out a dynamic march with the support of a small group of sympathisers. Arriving at the Department, a delegation of the strikers, voted on the spot by them, goes up to the offices and has a meeting with the head of the Department, who set an official mediation meeting for the next day at 9:30. The Department invited the strike committee, their unions, Wolt and every contracting company to this meeting. Returning, again with a march, to the site of the strike gathering, the majority of those present decide to continue the strike until after the meeting.

Wednesday 21/12 – Day 10

During the meeting at the Department of Labour Relations, the strike committee, the trade unions (PEO & SEK) and the employers (Wolt and four of the approximately ten contracting companies), it was decided to start a statutory dialogue with a timetable for the final solution of the problem, i.e., the regulation of the labour rights of workers in the sector. The Department has asked for time to find a way to settle the matter, and drivers decided to meet with their unions in the coming days to formalize their demands to the government, Wolt and contractors. Next meeting was set for 12/01/2023. Contractors and Wolt pledged that none of the strikers would lose their jobs.

After the meeting, the strikers voted to end the strike (at least for now) in a democratic way free from outside interference, as they have done with every decision in this ten-day epic. Drivers won visibility and recognition of their employment relationship and a governmental commitment that their profession would not remain unregulated. They brought a multinational corporation and a number of shady companies to the bargaining table, and are now working to secure a collective agreement.

In lieu of an Epilogue – The Developments Since Then

In the following days, Wolt returned the wages to 2.26 – 2.36 euros, and despite its and the contractors' commitments, at least two strikers were deleted from the platforms. The drivers' committee had a meeting on Tuesday 27/12 with PEO (to which they reported the dismissal of their colleagues) to finalize their requests and prepare for the next meeting at the Department of Labour Relations.

We call on people to remain vigilant for any further retaliation against drivers due to the strike, bearing in mind that, as the strikers themselves put it, this fight was only the beginning.

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<https://cyfootnotes.blogspot.com/2022/12/the-complete-chronicle-of-wolt-strike.html>
Article of IWW-Cyprus which circulated on 28/12/22 on Facebook, documenting the strike at
Wolt in Cyprus, which took place in December of 2022.

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