

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

## Portuguese Volkswagen workers rebel against Workers Commission collaboration

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Europe

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

### Portuguese Volkswagen workers rebel against Workers Commission collaboration

Employees at Portugal's Volkswagen plant in Lisbon struck Wednesday, paralyzing production, after having voted by 75 percent to strike. It is the first strike by VW workers in Portugal.

The action was provoked by the introduction of extended Saturday working, which had been agreed with the company by the workers' supposed representatives, the Workers Commission (WC).

The workforce has asserted that it will carry out further strike days throughout September if the company pursues the extension of the workweek.

VW is expanding its operations in Portugal and looking to double the production of its SUV model. The Workers Commission has represented workers at VW since its inception in 1991, with the body working closely with management.

The hostile response from autoworkers to extended working came as a surprise to both management and the WC, forcing the leaders of the latter to resign.

### HTC Wolffkran construction workers to strike in UK over pay

HTC Wolffkran construction workers in Britain are to strike for 24 hours on September 9 in a pay dispute.

The Unite union balloted its members on July 26 after accusing HTC Wolffkran's management of "unnecessarily increasing industrial tensions."

This was after the company refused to continue negotiations and imposed a two-year deal on the workers, which involved a 3 percent pay increase in both years. In effect, this is a substantial pay cut in real terms as the retail price index is running at 3.6 percent. Workers are also in dispute over the company's annual leave policy.

Some 260 drivers from HTC Wolffkran will stop work across the UK for 24 hours. Among the HT Wolffkran Construction workers striking are

those employed on Tottenham Hotspur Football Club's new £800 million stadium in London.

Unite is working to ensure the strike is prevented, with its national officer for construction Jerry Swain stating: "Even at this late stage Unite is entirely open to holding further talks and to explore ways in which industrial action can still be avoided."

### Georgian police arrest protesters at a solidarity rally for striking railway workers

On August 24, 10 protesters were arrested at a solidarity rally for striking railway workers in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi.

Tbilisi City Court is to decide whether to fine them on September 8.

The rail strike is in response to the decision by the Georgian Railway company to move the jobs of several employees without offering them reimbursement for travel to the new site or accommodation.

The striking workers say their salaries are not high enough to cover the additional costs.

According to OC Media, since August 15 protesters have been attempting to set up tents outside the state-owned Georgian Railway company's headquarters, but police have prevented them from doing so.

An attempt by protesters to enter the headquarters in the evening of August 24 ended with clashes between protesters and police.

A number of protesters are continuing a hunger strike, which began on August 15. According to rail workers on hunger strike, they are no longer allowed to enter the Georgian Railway office.

Middle East

### Israeli chemical workers strike to protest job losses

Israeli workers withdrew their labour at the Teva Chemicals Company in response to the sacking of 150 employees in its national operations.

An agreement was eventually brokered with the Histadrut trade union and its members returned to work, with the company agreeing a reduced number of redundancies.

The company paired back the number to lose their jobs to 120. Overall, the chemical company is reducing its international workforce by 7,000, after a \$6 billion loss.

### **Israeli airlines prepare to confront airline staff**

The Israeli airline El Al has settled a dispute with its maintenance workers over fears that a new delivery of Boeing Dreamliners would mean job losses. According to the Globes web site, the deal includes a 5 percent pay increase in all salary elements, including pension contribution, for all maintenance workers. It added that “3 percent of the increase will be effective immediately, with two later 1 percent increases.”

In a response to the settlement, the workers’ trade union committee said that their main task was to ensure that any pay increase would not hinder the future profitability of the airline. Its statement read: “Our El Al is in one of the most challenging periods in its history, with the replacement of the air fleet at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars, the upgrading of systems, and investment in equipment and procurement on an unprecedented scale. We all need to buckle down and prove to the entire world and the company’s management that investment in the maintenance workers is a worthwhile investment—a safe investment that will pay off quickly and generate a profit for the company.”

The airline is in the process of instituting cost reductions. Other sections of airline staff are in conflict with the airline, with 120 stewards taking them to court over pay. Airline pilots are also in dispute following new regulations being brought in regarding airline procedure.

Africa

### **Gambian transport workers strike over fare reductions**

Union members working in the Gambia transport industry struck last week. The cause of the strike is a proposed deal between the government and several stakeholders in the industry to reduce fares.

What is being termed a sit-down strike affected commuters across several areas of Gambia. Police intervened to stop striking drivers encouraging non-strikers to leave their posts.

The government has put out a press release saying the union leaders now encouraging the strike complied with the fare reduction agreement.

The strike ended, after union officials took part in discussions with the security agencies. The Gambia *Standard* wrote, “Officials and unionists, believed to be sympathetic to the strike action, have been called by security agents for a meeting where an understanding has been reached for the strike to end, opening an opportunity for further negotiations.”

The government said that irrespective of the opposition to the fare reduction it would be implemented.

### **Kenyan nurses continue strike**

Nurses are continuing to strike in Kenya in a long-standing dispute. They have been striking since the beginning of May.

Factional disputes among the heads of the Kenyan National Union of Nurses (KNUN) are developing as the strike continues. The union chair stated that their secretary general has used the strike for his political ends, i.e., to be elected as a state governor.

According to John Bii, the dismissed union chair, the strike should have been called off in May as soon as it was deemed illegal by the federal

government. The nurses’ strike has been started, and called off, on several occasions over several years, as the demand to have a 2013 collective bargaining agreement (CBA) was ratified but then reneged.

A new 2017 CBA was signed in December but was again reneged on when it was to be implemented at the end of April.

Bii is calling for the nurses who are still out on strike to go back to work and wait for a new council of governors, elected August 8, to be inaugurated to resume negotiations, which will take place in September.

Talks were arranged for August 28 between the union and governors to set the terms for negotiations, which will include job regrading.

The KNUN’s factional leadership have consistently facilitated the government and the states in depriving nurses of their demand for improved wages and working conditions.

### **Mali financial workers stop work over sacked union official**

Financial workers walked off the job in Mali last week, closing down the banks and affecting the insurance and financial system. According to reports, 90 percent of union members joined the strike, which was called in defence of a union official.

The strike was for a three-day period, with a union spokesman saying they would now decide the next step.

A spokesman for the banks and financial institutions’ trade unions said the employee of the Nigeria Sovereign Investment Authority (NSIA) was unlawfully sacked.

The NSIA manages the Nigeria sovereign wealth fund and operates financial, banking and insurance transactions out of Abidjan Ivory Coast and across 12 West and Central African countries.

### **Nigeria’s Benue state workers threaten strike over unpaid wages and pensions**

Benue state public sector workers in Nigeria are threatening to strike over a demand for unpaid wages and pension allowances.

In a provocative statement the state governor, in an appeal for workers not to strike, said they should recognize the “success” of the state in paying wages once every two months.

The *Nigerian Tribune*, referring to the conclusion of a closed-door meeting with the unions at the new state banquet hall, said the governor cited the reduction of federal government funds for the shortfall in wages. He then highlighted the fact that the state had saved N500 million (US\$1.4 million) in wages.

The Nigerian Labour Congress said a decision to strike would be taken after a further meeting with the governor.

### **Nigerian university unions threaten strike over broken agreements**

Academic and non-academic unions in Nigeria’s universities are proposing a national strike. The unions say the strike depends on the results of ballots, which will be returned August 29.

The unions are represented in the Joint Action Committee (JAC), which said they were frustrated by management reneging on previous agreements.

The JAC went on to list a host of unresolved demands, including non-payment of allowances, irregular payments of wages and corruption in the university system.

In the event they take industrial action, the JAC will line up with the Academic Staff Union of Universities, which is striking over their list of outstanding demands.

### **Nigerian transport workers strike over unpaid minimum wage payments**

Nigerian transport workers went on strike at Harmony Holdings on August 23 in the Kwara State capital, Ilorin.

Harmony Holdings is a government management company running Kwara State Transport Corporation and is one of the many subsidiaries it operates throughout the region.

Workers embarked on industrial action to demand of N46 million (US\$127,000) owed by the company in arrears of minimum wages, N9 million (US\$25,000) in Co-operative Society payments and one year of pension fund deductions.

The company has paid about half of the debt and acknowledged it has not paid the balance.



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