

UK: Cammell Laird shipyard workers strike against redundancies, Iran sugar and steel strike continues against pay arrears, South Africa's Sibanye gold miners reject company/union pay deal

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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Europe

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

Greek private sector general strike as workers continue to protest austerity

The Greek umbrella trade union organisation GSEE, representing around 80 private sector trade unions, held a general strike on Wednesday.

Workers are protesting ongoing measures being imposed by the pro-austerity Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) government. They demand a higher minimum wage (which has been slashed to 580 euros), less taxation, an end to pension and holiday allowance cuts and to ban redundancies in firms receiving state subsidies.

The strike hit all ferry services as members of the Panhellenic Seaman's Federation joined the action. Buses in Athens halted, with drivers striking at the beginning and end of the day. Train services nationally were hit with hardly any services running. Athens tram, metro and trolley bus services were also affected with no services running.

A rally was held in Klafthmonos Square in central Athens.

Greek journalists stopped work for 24 hours Tuesday ahead of the strike. As a result, no news programmes were aired on TV and radio, and newspapers were not printed Wednesday.

UK college lecturers strike

College lecturers at six colleges throughout England took strike action Wednesday and Thursday. The six colleges involved were Bath, Bradford Croydon, Lambeth, New College in Swindon and Petroc College in Devon.

Taking part were members of the University and College Union (UCU). They are pressing for a pay rise of five percent or a fixed increase of £1,500 for those earning less than £30,000 a year. The pay of college lecturers has been eroded by around 25 percent over the last decade and they now earn £7,000 less on average than teachers in secondary schools.

UCU members at 110 colleges throughout the UK were balloted and

voted by a majority to strike at 108 of the colleges. However, under the Trade Union Act of 2016 brought in by the then Cameron government—with which the trade unions have acquiesced—a ballot for strike action is only valid if a 50 percent participation threshold is reached. Only the six colleges named above achieved the threshold.

Twenty-six colleges, which fell below the 50 percent participation threshold but were above a 35 percent participation threshold, are being re-balloted over the issue. The re-balloting began on November 28 and the result is expected December 19.

UK: Cammell Laird shipbuilders begin three weeks of action

Workers at the Cammell Laird shipyard in Birkenhead, England have begun a series of 24-hour strikes. The members of the Unite and GMB unions are opposing plans by the company to get rid of 291 jobs at the shipyard by March next year—40 percent of the workforce.

The unions' objection is not to redundancies as such but only "compulsory redundancies." The rolling strikes will not involve the entire workforce on any occasion. After different trades at the shipyard struck on separate days this week, fitters and welders will strike next on December 3 and 10, stores, riggers and labourers on December 5 and 12, cleaners, health & safety, machinist and shipwright on December 6 and 13, electrical labourers, electricians, maintenance, plant and quality control members on 30 November and December 7 and 14.

Staff at UK Arriva North Rail set to walkout again

Conductors at Arriva North Railway will hold a 24-hour strike on Saturday. The members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT) are striking against plans by the rail companies to introduce driver only operated (DOO) trains.

It will be the 15th consecutive Saturday strike with plans to continue them till the end of the year. The dispute against DOO, threatening passenger safety and 6,000 conductors' jobs, has been ongoing for two years.

On Thursday, the RMT offered "to suspend Northern Rail action this

weekend for talks if company meets key guarantees on second person on the company's trains."

Despite references to such guarantees, the RMT has limited action against the private rail franchises to regional, short-term strikes, isolating and dissipating struggles. It has already sealed deals with rail franchises at ScotRail and Greater Anglia. The union has agreed to a sell-out deal "in principle" with Merseyrail and the Labour Party-led Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, whereby "door control and dispatch of the trains will transfer to the driver" on new trains. In June, the RMT agreed a framework deal with West Midlands Trains, agreeing that "On such new or modified rolling stock, train drivers will operate the train doors and undertake train dispatch in normal circumstances..."

Refuse workers in Birmingham, England ballot for strike against job losses and restructuring

Refuse collectors in the English city, Birmingham, are being balloted starting today over two weeks. The members of Unite took part in a three-month strike in 2017 to oppose council plans to cut jobs and downgrade some roles.

The ballot was launched after Unite accused the council of planning to make a payment to GMB members who did not strike last year but withhold it from Unite members who did.

If the ballot is in favour of strike, industrial action will begin December 28.

UK Crown post office workers in strike ballot over Christmas working hours

Crown post office staff in the UK are being balloted after their employer announced it would not keep to the custom and practice agreement for staff to finish at 12.30 on Christmas Eve. The workers are members of the Communication Workers Union.

Strike by Austrian rail workers over pay

On Monday, rail workers employed by the OBB Austrian national rail company carried out a two-hour warning strike beginning at 12 noon.

The strike over pay disrupted the journeys of 100,000 passengers, bringing trains nationwide to a complete standstill. It affected neighboring countries such as Italy, Germany and Switzerland, as Austria is a major European rail hub.

The OBB employs around 40,000 workers. The members of the Vida trade union struck during pay negotiations, having rejected a three percent offer from OBB.

French refinery workers continue action over pay

The strike by French petroleum refinery workers over wages and bonuses is into its second week. Total SA, the country's biggest refiner,

has decided to shut its quarter of a million barrel-a-day production facility at Gonfreville. The members of the Stalinist-led CGT union rejected a 1.5 percent pay offer.

Joint pay strike by Dutch and German coffee workers

On November 22, production workers employed by coffee producer Douwe Egberts (DE) at seven sites in Germany and Utrecht in the Netherlands held a one-day strike. The action is in support of a pay rise and for a collective bargaining agreement.

Among the sites affected in Germany were Berlin, Munich and Stuttgart.

German DE workers traveled to Utrecht and held a joint picket with around 200 Dutch members of the FNV union. DE, which made a profit in excess of €400 million last year, is refusing to negotiate with the NGG union.

Strike by Italian medics for investment in health and better work conditions

Around 135,000 staff employed by the Italian health service (SSN) held a 24-hour strike November 23. They are demanding a new collective agreement to replace the current one, in place for 10 years.

Workers want an increase in government investment, as spending on the Italian health service is two percent lower than the European average. They cite the loss of around 20,000 hospital beds and the lack of medical specialists.

Irish health workers in Kerry and Cork to strike

Around 1,000 health care assistants in the counties of Kerry and Cork have voted by over 80 percent to strike. The members of the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union are opposed to the failure of their employer, Health Service Executive, to implement new agreed contracts. No date has been set for industrial action.

Meanwhile, hospital consultants have indicated they are willing to take industrial action in the New Year. They are protesting a 30 percent pay cut imposed on post-2012 entrants as part of the Irish government's austerity measures. The Irish Medical Organisation says the pay differential has resulted in a shortfall of around 500 consultant posts as many choose to work abroad.

Maltese pharmacists take industrial action over pay and conditions

Pharmacists working for the Maltese government at several hospitals and homes for the elderly began industrial action at the end of last week. The UHM union members want an improved pay offer and better working conditions. The action involved refusing to dispense medicines between 9am and 12 noon weekdays and 9am and 11am on Saturdays. Other forms of action include refusing to take telephone calls.

Further general strike set for January by Tunisian union for wage increases

Following the general strike in Tunisia by around 650,000 public sector workers on November 22, the UGTT union has called another national strike for January 17 next year.

Thousands of other workers joined the last strike, called to protest the government's refusal to increase wages.

It was the country's largest in five years. Schools, universities, municipalities and ministries were shut, and hospitals had only emergency staffing. Protests were held nationwide, including in Tunis, Gabes, Sfax, Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine.

Prime Minister Youssef Chahed's government plans to slash the public sector wage bill to 12.5 percent of GDP in 2020, down from the current 15.5 percent. The number of state companies will be reduced, and fuel subsidies slashed.

The cuts are being demanded by the International Monetary Fund, which loaned Tunisia \$2.8 billion in 2016 in exchange for a prolonged austerity programme.

Strikes by Iranian sugar and steel workers over wage arrears continue

The strike by workers at the Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane factory is now in its fourth week. They are protesting wage arrears and calling for the factory to be taken out of private hands.

Workers also demand the release of one of their representatives and a social activist arrested in previous demonstrations. The strikers have received one month of their wage arrears but arrears for three other months are still outstanding. On Tuesday, Haft Tappeh workers mounted their fifteenth day of protests outside the Shush County Hall.

A strike by 4,000 steelworkers working for the Iran National Steel Industrial Group is in its third week. They too demand payment of wages arrears. They have held previous strikes and protests this year in February, March, June and August. Joint protests with the sugar workers in front of the Shush County Hall have been held calling for unity among workers in both struggles.

Almost half of workers at South Africa's Sibanye Gold reject wage deal

Almost half the miners at Sibanye Gold, Johannesburg have rejected a three-year wage deal agreed between the company and the National Union of Mineworkers, Solidarity and the UASA.

The members of the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) began strike action Wednesday against the deal—a 5.5 percent wage settlement, while other major South African gold producers have settled for a 6.5 percent wage increase. They want a R12,500 basic wage and a R1,000 increase for each year over three years.

Sibanye Gold employs 32,200 workers at its three gold mines. 43 percent are members of the AMCU.

A NUM member was shot and killed last week and four others injured last week at the Welkom mine in Beatrix. The union said it was still investigating the incident.

Miners continue strike at Gold Fields mines, South Africa over job losses

Miners are into their fourth week of strike action at South Africa's Gold Fields mine opposing the loss of over a quarter of the 5,500 workforce.

According to Gold Fields, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) had agreed a return to work deal including an enhanced redundancy package and an extension to the period of payback by miners for time striking under the no-work no-pay rule.

The NUM, however, stated that the company had not reduced job losses, which included 16 out of 24 NUM full time shop stewards.

Gold Fields is pressing ahead with the redundancy programme and has warned that no gold will be produced before Christmas.

South Africa's unemployment stands at 27.5 percent and among the youth it is 52.8 percent.

South African Cape Town MyCiti bus drivers wildcat strike against casualisation continues

The MyCiti bus workers stoppage in Cape Town, South Africa is entering its seventh week. The wildcat strike is to demand direct employment by the city rather than an agency.

Over 60 bus drivers were sacked by the casual labour agency company, Kidrogen, for not attending disciplinary hearings. Drivers at other agencies are also being sacked.

Some workers returned to work when the union promised agency employers there would be no more strikes before 2020.

Besides getting less pay and none of the employed driver's conditions, casual drivers often have to eat their lunch in the toilet or on the pavement, not the work's canteen provided.

South African West Rand workers strike over non-payment of benefits

Workers have been on strike for five weeks in West Rand municipality, South Africa over unpaid medical aid premiums, pension fund contributions and other benefits.

Workers were only paid last month because they reportedly held the mayor, councillors and senior employees against their will. The municipality found the money the next day.

Council services have not been provided during the strike and workers have kept utility vehicles locked up.

South Africa's Buffalo City casual workers strike to demand permanent jobs

Municipal workers in South Africa's Buffalo City, Eastern Cape Province are continuing a month-long wildcat strike for direct employment and better working conditions. An official strike was called November 20 by South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU).

Hundreds of strikers, including garbage collectors, fire fighters and security guards, demonstrated at East London City Hall on Wednesday.

Some have worked as casuals for over 10 years and are still paid under R3,500 minimum wage and not equipped with safety clothing.

The casual workers have been blamed for sabotaging water and electrical supplies although Buffalo City is widely known for its poor water and electrical provision.

South Africa Durban, Kwazulu Natal Mortuary workers strike over pay and conditions

Mortuary workers at the Fort Napier mortuary in St. Pietermaritzburg, Kwazulu Natal, South Africa began a strike November 22. For two weeks workers engaged in a go-slow over pay and conditions in a bargaining council agreement, which the province had withdrawn.

At Fort Napier mortuary, the air conditioning system and freezer units have broken down, making work unbearable, a condition repeated throughout the province's mortuaries. The mortuary has only one doctor, putting extra demands on staff to carry out work they not trained to perform and do not get paid for. Staff also complain of lack of protective clothing and gloves, which they use repeatedly.

Patients who die in hospitals are laid on ward floors until they can be transported to the mortuaries. Burials are delayed. Strikers have blocked the road to the mortuary.

Nigerian academics continue strike to demand agreement is implemented

Nigerian academics are continuing their three-week strike after negotiations with the government broke down.

Members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities are demanding an agreement signed in 2017, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), be implemented in full and the negotiating committee leadership disbanded. They are also protesting increased university fees and the introduction of an education bank (government financed student loans).

The Education Minister said he wants to end strikes in the education sector.

Nigerian judicial workers union resurrects suspended strike

Court workers came out on indefinite strike a fortnight ago in Nasarawa state over a block on staff promotions and in-service training.

They are also demanding back payment of unpaid increases to promoted staff and the repayment and the stopping of inappropriate wage deductions.

The employer National Justice Commission, claims the members of the Judiciary Staff Union of Nigeria are striking illegally.

JUSUN accuses the management of refusing to negotiate so they have commenced a strike suspended in February.

Nigerian communications workers threaten strike to demand new contract

Workers employed in Nigeria's satellite communications industry have threatened to strike December 3.

The members of the Senior Staff Association of Statutory Corporations and Government Owned Companies are demanding state-owned Nigeria Communication Satellite negotiate for a new terms and conditions contract.



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