

French public sector strikes; further protests in Algeria; union ends wage strike at South Africa's Sibanye Gold without an agreement

## Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

22 March 2019

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

### Public sector strike in France

Tuesday saw nationwide strikes by public sector workers in France. It is estimated a quarter of all French primary school teachers took part, joined by students.

The Stalinist CGT, FO and FSU union members are calling for better pay and conditions and against the cuts in public sector jobs—expected to reach 120,000 by 2022. Marches took place in Paris, Lille and other towns and cities.

### Work-to-rule by French custom staff hits Eurostar trains

French custom staff are continuing their work-to-rule action in support of enhanced pay and staff numbers to cope with an expected increased workload when the UK leaves the EU. The action has led to Eurostar cancellations and the hold-up of road traffic.

### Belgian air traffic control strike

Belgian air traffic control staff employed by Skeyes at Brussels airport came out on strike Tuesday evening, returning to work midday Wednesday. It follows a similar strike last week. The CSC-AVC union members are striking over issues including staff shortages and workload.

### Icelandic hotel and tourist bus strike

Hotel staff providing cleaning, laundry and catering services in Reykjavik, Iceland, are to strike on Friday. Bus workers providing transport services to tourists will also take action.

The Efling union members are demanding a pay increase and cut in working hours. A two-day strike is planned next week followed by a series of three-day strikes throughout April and an indefinite strike, to begin May 1.

### Romanian Electrolux plant workers take action

Around 400 workers at the Electrolux plant in Satu Mare in Romania have gone on strike for a pay rise. They turned down a company offer of 5 percent plus a bonus. A march in support of the striking workers was planned for Thursday. The plant employs around 1,000 staff.

In a separate dispute, employees of Nestle's Timisoara plant began protests this week against the company's plans to close the factory in May, threatening 400 jobs.

### Coordinated strike at several UK colleges

College lecturers at 10 colleges across the UK were to take three days of strike action this week. However, action at five of the colleges was suspended.

The University and College Union (UCU) members are fighting against low pay, which has left them with salaries around £7,000 a year less than schoolteachers.

Strikes were called off at the Bath Petroc and Wolverhampton colleges after their managements offered further talks. The strikes at Bridgewater and Taunton colleges were suspended after management offered a 2 percent pay rise paid over nine months. The planned strike at New College Swindon was called off after management offered a 2 percent pay increase backdated till August.

Strikes went ahead at Bradford, Croydon, Harlow, South Bank (Lambeth) and West Thames colleges. For lecturers at Bradford college, it was their third strike action this year. Bradford college management has refused to negotiate since the January stoppage.

### Strike by oil workers in Scotland

Workers employed by Aker and Petrofac, servicing companies at three Total offshore oil platforms, held a 24-hour strike Tuesday. The affected platforms were the Elgin-Franklin, North Alwyn and Dunbar.

Those striking are opposing the imposition of a new rota of three weeks on and three weeks off. The 200 Unite members had voted to strike. After talks on Monday between the union and Aker and Petrofac management broke down, they walked out.

Last week, workers at the on-shore Shetland Gas Plant held a one-day strike over the change in rota patterns. The Unite members had voted to take five days on strike to oppose the changes. Further action is scheduled for March 27, April 10, April 27 and May 8.

### **Staff at UK tax office strike over closure threat**

Staff at the Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) tax office in Ealing, London, took part in a half-day strike on Wednesday.

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members are opposed to plans by HMRC to close around 90 percent of its offices. Ealing is scheduled to close by 2020/2021. Further strikes consisting of a half-day strike on March 26, a one-day strike on April 3 and a three-day strike due to begin April 10 are planned.

### **Refuse workers strike in Birmingham, UK, ends**

Refuse workers in Birmingham have returned to work. They began a series of twice-weekly strikes at the end of February, following a work-to-rule that had begun at the end of December.

The 300 Unite members had been penalised for a three-month dispute against job losses in June 2107. GMB members who did not strike received secret payments.

Under the terms of the settlement, Unite members who were balloted for a strike in 2017 will receive a £3,500 payment and workers in the present dispute who have had holiday leave refused will get a £500 payment.

### **Protest by housing maintenance workers in southeast England**

UK workers employed by contractors Mears and Mitie held a protest outside Crawley Council offices on Tuesday. Crawley Council outsourced its housing maintenance work to the contractors in 2010. Since then, the workers have received only small pay increases, below inflation levels, and the Unite members estimate they have suffered a real-term drop in pay of 28 percent.

### **March and rally to oppose job losses at UK Honda car plant**

A march and rally are planned for Saturday, March 30, in Swindon in southwest England. Car manufacturer Honda plans to close its car plant there, with the loss of 3,500 jobs. It is estimated around 12,000 jobs in the wider supply chain will also go.

The march and rally have been organised by the Unite trade union.

Swindon suffered big job losses when the rail works closed in the town in 1986.

### **Strike by drivers in London borough**

Transport drivers for disabled children in the London borough of Hackney held a 24-hour strike on Tuesday. Further strikes are planned for March 26 and April 2 and 4. The Unite members want to be paid a £50 a week payment backdated to July of last year, when a split-shift scheme was introduced. The 33 drivers are responsible for transporting disabled children each day to and from their schools.

### **Israeli train drivers' wildcat action**

Several Israeli train drivers stopped trains with wild-cat action last week, despite the Histadrut union federation declaring the ongoing official dispute had ended. The drivers were protesting against heavy workloads, which can only get heavier as the rail network expands. The action took the form of a coordinated sick-out.

### **General strike in Gaza**

A one-day general strike took place in Gaza on March 13. The protesters were calling for more jobs and greater social justice.

### **Further protests to oust President Bouteflika in Algeria**

Students, medics and professors marched through the Algerian capital of Algiers on Tuesday demanding the immediate departure of President Bouteflika. Meanwhile, on Sunday, workers at the country's largest natural gas field went on strike for the same demand.

### **South Africa's miners' union ends strike at Sibanye Gold**

The Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) has agreed to a settlement of the wages dispute at Sibanye Stillwater Gold. A deal proposed by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) was put to the membership last Friday, after the union abandoned its call to spread the dispute to the platinum mines following a Labour Court ruling.

A court action brought by AMCU to prevent 7,000 redundancies at Sibanye Stillwater Gold was also rejected.

The 15,000 AMCU members at Sibanye Stillwater Gold began striking in November for an annual wage increase of R1,000 a month over three years. Three other unions settled for what the AMCU called a "slave labour deal."

The union accepted the CCMA's proposals even though it had been

rejected by the company. Sibanye Gold said the CCMA proposals are similar to its own offer, except that the union wants a further R2,700 in back pay.

A union spokesman said, "Even though Sibanye-Stillwater did not accept the proposal by the CCMA, AMCU remains positive this will create the necessary momentum to see a speedy resolution to the wage dispute."

### **South African casual workers strike at labour agencies**

One thousand casual workers at South African labour agencies Real Tree and Monyetla Services downed tools last week. They are protesting against the companies ignoring the recent Constitutional Court ruling that after three months casual workers should be taken on the books.

The National Union of Metalworkers is threatening to bring out all steel giant AMSA's 20 contract companies.

### **Union accepts company offer to end South African bakery workers' strike**

Six hundred striking workers at Premier Food's Blue Ribbon bakeries, Cape Town, South Africa, returned to work after 105 days of striking without pay.

After meeting with the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration, the Food and Allied Workers Union accepted the company's offer of an 8 percent pay increase over three years. The workers were striking for 10 percent and funeral cover. The company withdrew its threat to abolish paid lunchtime breaks and reduce overtime pay.

Blue Ribbon instituted a scabbing operation, employing temporary workers and employees from other plants, while accusing the strikers of violence.

### **Kenyan medical workers to strike over failure to implement 2017 agreement**

Doctors in Nyanza province, Kenya, issued a seven-day strike notice March 15 over the refusal of the government to implement the medical workers' 2017 collective bargaining agreement.

Nyanza county officials did not turn up for a meeting arranged with the Kenya Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentists Union, planned for last month.

### **South Sudan oil workers union suspends pay strike**

The oil workers union in South Sudan suspended a strike planned for March 12 over non-payment of wages and bonuses. Some demands go back more than five years.

The 600 strikers are employed by GPOC-PETRONAS of Malaysia, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, and the state-owned Nile Petroleum Corporation.

A CNPC spokesman said wage and bonus deficits were the product of five years of civil war.

### **Zimbabwe senior doctors strike over hospital shortages**

Senior doctors came out on strike and picketed outside Zimbabwe's Parirenyatwa group of hospitals on March 11.

Conditions in the hospital mean they cannot perform their duties. Dilapidated machinery and the absence of drugs are causing high death rates, particularly in maternity. Doctors say conditions have deteriorated since the junior doctors' strike over the same issues in December last year.

Management secured funds for drugs and medical machinery in Real Time Gross Settlement dollars, but international suppliers would not accept the currency.

### **Liberian brewery workers in Monrovia strike over unpaid wages**

Liberian beer production workers at Poovin Beverages, Monrovia, went on strike last week over unpaid wages.

The 36 workers demonstrated outside the factory to demand six months' back pay and other grievances. The company admits to owing two months' pay. Workers are concerned the company may close without paying up.



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