

Greece hit by further 24-hour strike; Strikes and protests continue in South Africa

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

4 October 2019

## Greece hit by further 24-hour general strike

A 24-hour strike took place in Greece on Wednesday by GSEE and ADEDY union members to protest anti-democratic measures being proposed by the recently elected New Democracy (ND) government.

Under proposed legislation the names of trade union members would be maintained on databases as part of a government registration record of trade unions. Further, votes on strike action would be carried out by electronic means, undermining the tradition of holding meetings.

The strike hit the Athens metro, local rail and bus services as well as the national rail network. A march took place of protesting workers from central Athens and ended outside the Greek parliament. Among those involved in the strike were ferry workers and journalists. Athens metro and local rail workers were also due to hold a three-hour stoppage Thursday in addition to Wednesday's action.

The previous week, civil servants and transport workers walked out against the labour legislation and privatisation.

In July, Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) lost the elections to ND after four years in government, after betraying its electoral promises to end European Union austerity measures imposed following the 2008 banking crisis.

## Protests following fire at French chemical works

On Tuesday night around 2,000 people marched through the French city of Rouen following last week's fire at the Lubrizol chemical plant.

Owned by US billionaire Warren Buffett, the plant produces toxic chemicals used in the oil and lubricants industry. Local people are concerned that the 5,000 tonnes of burning chemicals released harmful residues into the atmosphere. Some teachers have stayed away from school saying all schools should be shut and pupils stay home.

On Monday, local authorities banned the harvesting of crops in a large area adjacent to the fire and dairy farmers have been ordered to destroy milk from cows grazing in the affected area. An ongoing investigation is seeking the causes of the fire.

## Strike by Scottish pharmacy workers enters seventh week

The strike by pharmacy staff employed by the Tayside NHS Trust in Scotland is now in its seventh week.

The Unite union members are protesting a job revaluation exercise, which left many in lower pay grades. The Scottish government terms and conditions committee (Stac) has become involved in the resolution of the dispute, which had become deadlocked. Tayside NHS management asked for 11 of the 39 striking pharmacy workers to return to work while Stac carried out its investigation. The strikers, however, are determined to stay out until the dispute has been resolved in their favour.

## Postal workers at UK midlands depot oppose sacking of colleague

UK postal workers at the Glaisdale delivery office in Nottingham will be balloted for possible strike action over a colleague sacked in August.

A postman for 15 years, Ian Green was accused of "aggressive" behaviour when lodging a complaint over working conditions. Green's colleagues suspect his sacking was because he challenged management.

The UK's 120,000 postmen are currently being balloted over the four pillars agreement signed last year. The agreement covers pay rises, pension contributions and a cut in working hours from 39 to 35 dependent on productivity increases. The ballot result is expected in November.

The Communication Workers' Union (CWU) members also oppose plans by Royal Mail to split the company into a parcel delivery firm and letter delivery service, involving 20,000 job losses.

Before Royal Mail was privatised in 2013, the CWU ended strikes and agreed to closures under the guise of modernisation.

## UK postal workers on Merseyside walk out over racist remark by manager

UK postal workers walked out on Wednesday after a manager made a racist remark to a worker. Around 50 CWU members then picketed outside the Bootle and Seaforth delivery office, refusing to return to work while the manager was in the building.

Management declared the action illegitimate because it was unballoted.

## **Protests by UK supermarket staff**

Workers at 75 Asda supermarkets across the UK are protesting this week over “flexible” contracts to be introduced in November.

The new contracts abolish paid rest breaks and enforce flexible working. Asda is issuing leaflets urging staff to sign the new contract, but also advising those who do not to apply for new jobs.

The GMB union at Asda has organised protests in opposition, but no industrial action. A national protest in August held in Leeds included a march past Asda headquarters in the city. Hundreds of Asda workers from across the country joined the demonstration.

## **Rail staff on UK sleeper service strike**

UK staff working on the Caledonian sleeper service went on strike Sunday and Monday.

The Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members were protesting levels of stress brought on by heavy workloads. Picket lines were mounted in London, Aberdeen and other stations in Scotland.

The service runs from London to Aberdeen in the north of Scotland, with passengers sleeping overnight on the journey north. Recent talks between employer Serco and the RMT broke down.

## **Teachers at UK sixth form colleges to strike**

UK teachers in sixth-form colleges (age 16-18) have voted by an 84 percent majority to strike. They will hold a one-day strike on October 17 with a rally in London. Further strikes are planned for November.

As only 25 colleges met the 50 percent participation rule stipulated by anti-trade union legislation, further ballots will be held at 15 colleges that fell just below the 50 percent threshold.

The National Education Union members are protesting cuts in funding that have led to low pay and poor conditions. Funding between 2010-11 and 2016-17 fell by 22 percent in real terms. Over the same period, the number of teachers fell by 15 percent while student numbers rose 6 percent.

## **Georgian miners end strike over wage arrears**

Coal miners in the Georgian town of Tkibuli ended their strike that began September 24. Thirty miners occupied the Mindeli and Dzidziguri mines while other miners picketed outside. They took the action after work at the two mines was suspended in July and the miners were forced to take involuntary leave without pay.

Operations at the mines were suspended following accidents and other problems. The miners ended their strike following the intervention of the Georgian prime minister. It was agreed that another company will take over and pay the wage arrears. When production recommences in November, miners are being expected to increase productivity.

## **Dutch farmers protest**

Around 2,000 Dutch farmers protested on Tuesday by slowly driving their tractors towards the Dutch city of The Hague, which houses the Dutch seat of government. They were protesting the negative image of farmers and farming, with farmers accused of pollution through nitrogen run-off. Holland has over 50,000 farms. The slow caravan of tractors led to traffic hold-ups.

## **Strike at Italian prestige opera house announced**

Workers at Italy’s prestigious opera house La Scala in Milan are to strike from October 18, coinciding with the premier production of Handel’s opera *Julius Caesar*. They are protesting the company’s failure to comply with an agreement reached in May on touring allowances.

## **Jordanian teachers defy court order to suspend strike**

Jordanian teachers have been on strike since September 8. A court decreed they had to return to work on Monday of this week. The Jordan Teachers Association members, however, continued their stoppage.

The 146,000 teachers are protesting poverty level pay and are demanding a 50 percent wage increase promised by a previous government five years ago. The government led by Prime Minister Omar al-Razzaz says it does not have the finances to meet the claim.

Unemployment is 20 percent in Jordan and inflation is rising due to a 3.7 percent tax on basic commodities. The streets of Amman saw mass protests last year because of IMF-dictated austerity.

## **Further strike by Iranian sugar workers**

Workers at the Haft Tappeh sugar factory in the city of Shush began their latest strike on September 23. They have undertaken a series of walkouts over the last three years. They are opposing job losses and are calling for the privatisation of the facility to be reversed. They are also demanding the reinstatement of 20 colleagues and protesting the jailing of seven colleagues, arrested in previous protests at the facility.

## **South African bank workers strike banned**

A South African court ruled September 26 the imminent national strike by bank workers illegal.

The 24-hour strike by Sasbo members due September 27 was called to oppose large-scale redundancies, as the banking industry adapts to the digitalisation of banking systems.

The 73,000 workers were also demanding their employers, Business Unity South Africa (BUSA), provide retraining within and outside the industry. It would have been the first national strike by bank workers in 100 years.

New labour legislation introduced in January stipulates that strike votes go through a secret ballot to be legitimate. Sasbo is appealing the decision. The union has been sitting on a strike vote since 2017.

The Confederation of South African Trade Unions has called a mass demonstration against job losses throughout South Africa on Monday October 7.

### **South African fire fighters on overtime ban sent home**

Firefighters on an overtime ban in Cape Town South Africa have been sent home.

The workers began working to contract from 8 a.m. till 4.30 p.m. on October 1 to demand that overtime is paid as contractually agreed. The following day, they were sent home with the police on standby after “riots” had been reported at the Belhar fire station.

The South African Municipal Workers Union, representing 60 percent of the 900 Cape Town firefighters, said workers are not asking for a pay increase or refusing to work, only that they be paid what they are due.

Firefighters marched to Cape Town city hall on September 30, but just like last year, the city manager refused to accept their memorandum of unresolved demands.

Firefighters in Johannesburg came out recently over health and safety rules.

### **South African Unions respond to sacking of strikers by ending stoppage**

South African service workers employed by Rand West municipality have been dismissed after a month-long pay strike.

Around 700 South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) and the Independent Municipal Trade Union members were informed that they “are dismissed with immediate effect. Management will be issuing individual letters from the 30th of September 2019.”

The unions responded by calling off the strike and the SAMWU regional secretary said he would be back at his desk on Tuesday.

### **Union takes South African platinum miners’ dispute to arbitration**

The Association of Miners and Construction Union (AMCU) have brought in the Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration to resolve a new contract dispute with Sibanye Stillwater Platinum.

Sibanye is using the threat of massive job losses at its Marikana Platinum operations, newly acquired from Lonmin, to force a company deal on the miners. Around 5,270 jobs out of 20,000 are under threat at the two mines that make up Marikana.

Sibanye claims the Marikana mines were making a loss, but the AMCU claims prior to the acquisition, Lonmin made R1 billion.

A five-week strike by gold miners ended at Sibanye Stillwater Gold when the AMCU accepted the company’s “slave labour” wage deal previously agreed with the National Union of Miners (NUM).

Meanwhile, the AMCU and NUM are in separate negotiations with Impala Platinum and Anglo-American Platinum.

### **South African health workers demonstrate over staff shortages and outstanding overtime pay**

Hundreds of health workers marched to South Africa’s Polokwane health authority headquarters in Limpopo September 27.

The demonstration of National Public Service Workers Union (NPSWU) and the Health and Other Service Personnel Trade Union of South Africa members called for payments for outstanding overtime in 2007, for managers to take ambulances unfit for service off the road and for staff shortages to be addressed. A director eventually accepted their memorandum, promising to reply by October 9.

### **South African airline pilots’ strike threat over poor management**

South African airline pilots have threatened to strike over incompetent management at South African Airways (SAA).

The South African Airways Pilots Association members say they are concerned that appointees to the board of directors may repeat the corrupt practices of Dudu Myeni, an ex-director of SAA. She gave airline contracts to another company where she was also a director.

The strike would be the first in the 80-year history of SAA.

### **Liberian nurses walk out while union calls off go-slow**

Liberian nurses at Monrovia’s flagship hospital the John F. Kennedy (JFK) Medical Center on go-slow stepped up their action and walked out September 26.

The National Health Workers Association of Liberia (NAHWAL) members are demanding a pay increase. Their wages are delayed for months and conditions in the hospitals are poor, with lack of drugs and other resources.

One worker said, “We are tired, but today is the day to change our story ... I am taking my salary by force.”

On the same day, NAHWAL signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Minister of Health to retrieve four years’ pay for the previously dismissed union leadership and called off the go-slow action.

The MOH includes IMF-dictated pay “harmonisation” for public sector workers, a euphemism for pay cuts.

Patients, including pregnant women, joined nurses in solidarity, blocking the main roads and calling on the government to meet the nurses’ demands.

### **Ugandan interns demonstrate to demand payment in wages and oppose training changes**

Ugandan hospital interns demonstrating on Monday in several parts of the country were attacked by police firing tear gas and live ammunition.

The Federation for Medical Interns members are opposing a change in their training from three clinical subjects, Surgery, Internal Medicine, Paediatrics and Obstetrics, in three-month blocks, to two subjects, medical and surgical, in two six-month periods. They are also demanding the government pay them wages of 3 million shillings a month rather than an

allowance for food and accommodation.

The interns do the bulk of the work in hospitals. The government plans to recruit 1,170 new interns this year.



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