

French oil refinery workers join strikes; nurses walk out in Northern Ireland

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

10 January 2020

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

Strike and blockade by French oil refinery workers

French oil refinery workers began a four-day strike Tuesday. The strike hit Exxon Mobil's Fos and Port Jerome refineries. The CGT union members were aiming to blockade the refineries and cut the flow of fuel supplies to French filling stations.

The stoppage was part of the ongoing series of strikes in opposition to the Macron government's attack on pensions. Nationwide demonstrations by trade unions were planned for Thursday as French workers continue to fight the attacks, in spite of the unions' efforts to reach a pro-austerity deal with Macron.

Further strike by nurses in Northern Ireland

Around 9,000 nurses in Northern Ireland began a 12-hour strike on Wednesday. The Royal College of Nurses members are demanding a pay rise in line with pay levels on the UK mainland.

The nurses took part in a strike in mid-December last year when 20,000 health workers, including the 9,000 RCN members, walked out for the first time in the organisation's history. 6,500 Unison members joined them, as did around 5,000 members of the public services union, NIPSA.

Nurses in the RCN and Unison are due to strike today. Talks held after the December strike broke down when the workers rejected a 3.1 percent pay offer.

Postal workers in Bootle, England to strike

UK Royal Mail staff at the Bootle delivery depot on Merseyside are to strike on January 18 and 20. The Communication Workers Union (CWU) members held an unofficial walkout in October last year alleging a manager had made racist comments.

Following the unofficial walkout, management charged nine of the

workers, including a CWU representative, with gross misconduct. The proposed strike is in opposition to the charges.

In October, 110,000 CWU members voted by a 97 percent majority on a 76 percent turnout to mobilise against attacks by the Royal Mail Group on their job security, terms and conditions. The CWU capitulated when the High Court ruled the strike illegal, in an attack on democratic rights.

Planned protest by Irish childcare workers

A meeting was to have taken place Thursday of unions covering around 1,000 Irish childcare providers along with the representatives of the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU). The meeting was to discuss plans to hold a one-day protest later this month or February.

Workers are protesting the underfunding of childcare provision by the Irish government. SIPTU has around 5,000 childcare staff members. The protest will lead to the closure of the childcare sites. According to press reports, parents are in support of the planned protest, as childcare fees in Ireland are the highest in Europe.

Scandinavian airline cabin crew strike threat

The contract covering cabin crew working for Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) will expire March 31, raising the possibility of industrial action. SAS is headquartered in Sweden and operates flights from Sweden, Denmark and Norway.

Under the current contract, cabin crew are only given 15 days' notice of the next month's work schedules and must work three out of four weekends each month. They are seeking a fixed work rota to achieve a better work-life balance.

Talks are under way between SAS management and cabin crew unions, and are scheduled to finish in late April. This means any strike threat will be after the Easter holiday period.

Cabin crew working for Norwegian airlines, Norwegian Air and Wideroe are also facing new contracts. Among the contentious issues are cuts to pension provisions and the outsourcing to cut wages and impose worse working conditions.

In April last year, around 1,400 pilots working for SAS took strike

action. They were demanding a wage increase and greater protection against variable scheduling rotas.

“The strike was called by trade unions in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark,” commented the WSWS. “The unions, organised in the cross-border SAS Pilot Group, have done everything in their power to avoid taking strike action, and are continuing to fruitlessly beg management for a return to negotiations.”

Strike by bus workers in Cyprus called off

Drivers working for the Zenon bus company, which serves the city of Larnaca in southern Cyprus, were set to strike on Wednesday. The drivers were protesting non-payment of December’s wages and bonus payments dating back to April last year.

Following intervention by the Transport Minister promising the wages would be paid, the union called off the strike.

Four bus companies serving the cities of Nicosia, Limassol and Paphos, along with Larnaca, have been hit by strikes over non-payment of wages since the end of 2018. The companies pleaded shortage of funds after the Cypriot government cut grants to the companies, saying the subsidy level based on kilometres travelled had been set too high.

Workers’ protests continue over New Year period in Iran

Groups of workers in Iran have continued their protests over working and economic conditions into the New Year.

On December 31, bakers in the northwest province of Qazvin held protests against the sharp increases in prices such as petrol, while the price of bread has remained the same. The same day in the southeast province of Kerman, employees of the Zarand Minerals Company demonstrated against temporary work and demanded to be made permanent employees.

On New Year’s Day, students at Shiraz Industrial University protested against economic stringency which has left them living in dire poverty.

The same day nurses in the city of Mashhad demonstrated in front of the governor’s office because they have not been paid for 14 months.

In 2015, the US abrogated the 2015 Iran nuclear accord, reimposed sanctions lifted under that agreement, and waged economic war aimed at reducing Iran’s oil exports to zero, freezing it out of global financial markets and ending its foreign trade. The Iranian people have suffered nearly 50 percent inflation, rising unemployment and poverty.

Zimbabwe teachers threaten stoppage

Zimbabwean teachers campaigning for a liveable wage are threatening to boycott a return to work in the new teaching year, despite threats of being sacked.

A Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe spokesperson said teachers will not return to work from January 14 until the government pays them in US dollars. Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe members will join the stoppage.

Teachers are demanding a wage of between US \$450 to US \$550 a month, equivalent to wages paid in 2018. The value of wages paid in Zimbabwe’s currency fell to around US \$50 because of inflation,

estimated at a runaway 600 percent.

As teachers threaten a walkout, the unions may be calling off the five-month-long hospital strike. Like teachers, the Zimbabwe Hospital Doctors Association (ZHDA) members are demanding to be paid in US dollars. Their wages have declined fifteen-fold over the last year. They are also protesting the lack of basic equipment in hospitals, such as drugs, bandages, gloves and syringes, which has compromised patient safety.

President Emerson Mnangagwa approached Cuba and China to provide Zimbabwe with doctors, who will only be paid expenses.

At the time of writing, an anonymous ZHDA official said junior doctors have returned to work, though this has not been confirmed. Senior doctors who walked out to support their junior colleagues and to protest the lack of resources are still on strike.

A Total Consumption Poverty Line report says the working class is in deep poverty. The price of a loaf of bread has increased twenty-fold in the last six months and the United Nations has requested \$2.8 billion for “hunger-stricken Zimbabweans.”

Museum workers on South Africa’s Robben Island walk out

South African Robben Island museum workers went on strike Tuesday for a pay increase and other demands.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers’ Union members picketed the prison island-turned World Heritage listed museum where Nelson Mandela was incarcerated for almost 27 years.

Two hundred and fifty workers, out of a workforce of 500, are demanding a nine percent wage increase, insourcing of casual work and a long service bonus. The union indicated it will settle for 7.5 percent.

Robben Island Museum management offered 6.5 percent without reference to the other claims.

The strikers include ticket sellers, marketers, tour guides and boat crews. Management intimidated workers to cross picket lines by refusing to provide boats for workers to leave the island.

Unions’ strike threat delayed over non-implementation of Nigerian minimum wage

The unions in Nigeria are delaying strike action over non-implementation of the agreed N30,000 minimum wage (MW).

More than half the states in Nigeria failed to implement the agreed N30,000 minimum wage (MW) after the deadline expired on December 31.

The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) proposed a warning strike from January 6. The Niger State Trade Union Congress and NLC have now given the state governor until February 4 to implement the minimum wage or they will call strike action, though they have not specified a date.

The Niger State governor in Central Nigeria said the wage increase has been budgeted for 2020. The minimum was agreed over a year ago. Workers did not get the previous wage of N18,000, if they were paid at all, or only received partial wages.



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