

Strike wave in Finland; police attack firefighters demonstrating in Paris

## Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

31 January 2020

### Wave of strikes in Finland

On Monday around 9,000 Finnish workers at paper mills went on strike, joining around 6,000 striking employees in forestry, plywood mills and sawmills. The paper mill workers' strike is scheduled to last three weeks, while the strike by forestry and Industrial Union timber mill members is to run for two weeks.

The workers are calling for new collective agreements with pay increases and the ending of "kiky" hours. Under the kiky hours initiative, workers work an extra 24 hours a year, brought in by a previous government to increase productivity in the Finnish economy.

The Finnish forestry industry plays a major role in the economy with exports of €13 billion a year. It faces competition from Swedish and German forestry industries, with lower production costs.

Two other strikes were also due to start the same day, but were delayed for two weeks by the Social Democratic Employment Minister. Delays have been imposed on strikes in the chemical industry and by clerical workers in the technology sector, represented by the Pro union.

The latest strikes and strike threats are part of a wave of industrial action that has hit Finland over the last few months. In December, following his mishandling of a widespread postal strike, prime minister Anttti Rinne was forced to resign, to be replaced by Sanna Marin.

### Firefighters' demonstration in Paris attacked by police

Police CRS units viciously attacked a demonstration of thousands of firefighters in Paris on Tuesday, with social media footage by the police going viral. The firefighters were marching as part of their ongoing campaign for improved pay and conditions and an increase in their bonus paid for attending hazardous situations.

The police attacked using teargas and violent tactics. French lawyers describe current tactics as the most heavy-handed since the riot police attacks on the May 1968 protests.

### Irish workers protest job losses at peat burning power station

A protest is planned for Saturday in Shannonbridge in the Irish

midlands. It has been organised by the Bord na Mona Workers and Pensioners Movement.

The Bord na Mona is the partly government-owned peat cutting company. The protest is against plans by the ESB (Electricity Supply Board) to demolish the West Offaly power station, which burns peat to produce electricity.

The protesters oppose the loss of jobs resulting from the power station's destruction as well as the threat to pensions for former Bord na Mona staff as the company contracts.

### Rail workers in southwest England vote for further strike

Railworkers belonging to the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union have voted by over 80 percent on a near 60 percent turnout to hold a further strike. They are opposing the use of driver only operated (DOO) trains.

The RMT has not announced the dates of any proposed stoppage. Should it go ahead, it will be the sixth tranche of action over the last two and a half years. The last action was in December when RMT members were on strike for 27 days.

The strike is part of a long-running dispute against DOO trains, which threatens passenger safety and 6,000 guards' jobs. Action against DOO has taken place nationally by rail guards over the last three years at several private train operating companies. The RMT has isolated the disputes, with token stoppages on a regional basis, while accepting various forms of DOO on several franchises.

### Strike by train meal preparation staff at UK station

UK workers at Rail Gourmet based at Paddington Railway station in London planned a two-day strike for Thursday. The RMT union members prepare food served on trains. The issues include working rotas, underpayment of allowances and bonuses, and having to use faulty equipment.

### Workers at UK tax office walk out

Workers at International House, the HMRC (tax) office in Ealing in west London, held a half-day strike Wednesday. The Public and Commercial Services union members were to hold a further half-day strike on Thursday plus a rally for their supporters. A full-day strike was due to take place Friday.

They are opposing plans by HMRC to close the office. Workers held two half-day strikes already this year. This follows several walkouts over the same issue last year.

### **Further strike by security guards at London hospital**

Around 25 security staff at St George's University Hospital Trust in southwest London began a three-day strike on Monday. This was the second tranche of a 15-day programme of strikes.

The United Voices of the World union members are seeking parity of working conditions with directly employed National Health Service staff, including being paid sick pay from day one rather than after three days. They also want 25-30 days leave rather than the current 20.

Police attended and warned strikers not to picket on NHS property, but no arrests were made.

The first strike took place two weeks ago. The hospital trust called the police to the picket line. They arrested a UVW legal representative but later let him go, having no legal basis to hold him.

### **Protest by Iranian oil workers over unpaid wages**

Hundreds of workers at the Bandar Imam Khomeini petrochemical complex in Iran began a protest on January 21, which lasted several days.

Among the issues were non-payment of wages, cuts in bonuses and the cancelling of overtime payments. Most of the jobs are subcontracted out. Workers can be employed by a range of nested subcontractors, each of which takes a 10-15 percent cut of the worker's pay, meaning they end up with around 50 percent of their nominal wage.

### **Zimbabwe hospital union working to end five-month doctors' strike**

The Zimbabwe Hospital Doctors Association is encouraging all doctors to accept a strike-breaking temporary deal offered by Econet billionaire Strive Masiyiwa's Higherlife Foundation.

The doctors walked out to demand payment in US dollars because their wages were eroded by inflation hitting 600 percent. They could not afford to travel to work.

The six-month deal costing US \$6.5 million is to break the five-month old strike by junior doctors and the month-long strike by middle and senior doctors.

The Higherlife Foundation (run by Masiyiwa's family residing in London) provided funding for free travel to work for nurses and doctors during the strike—mostly not taken up—and will extend the subsidy for the next six months for 2,000 doctors. Senior doctors will get Z\$10,000 a month wage top-ups and juniors doctors Z\$5000 plus other inducements.

The BBC reported a union spokesman saying, "[T]he ZHDA wants to extend its gratitude to the Higherlife Foundation for extending its offer once again to all government doctors."

The BBC concluded the piece saying it did not know what follows the six-month deal.

The Senior Hospital Doctors Association has so far not commented on a return to work. It previously stated that their members' services are useless without facilities such as drugs and functioning machinery being provided.

According to the *Herald*, a government source said 1,864 doctors have signed up for the deal.

### **Zimbabwe Harare council workers demand a 500 percent pay increase**

Council workers in Harare, Zimbabwe, are demanding a 500 percent pay increase from the council run by Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), in response to city managers being awarded a 300 percent increase.

The MDC was formed in 1999 through funding from the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), ostensibly to oppose the Mugabe government. The ZCTU is floating the idea of a general strike but providing no details.

Workers throughout Zimbabwe's public services are demanding an inflation-proof living wage tied to the US dollar.

Meanwhile, the Apex Council union federation agreed a government wage offer giving civil servants around a 140 percent cushioning allowance increase on Monday.

The Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (ARTUZ) have agreed to give pupils approaching exams free tuition when its striking members, who have stayed away from work since January 14, return. The ARTUZ has also agreed extra work to make up for students' lost education.

### **South African auto union agrees sell-out wage deal**

Long drawn out wage negotiations in South Africa's car components industry have come to an end with a sell-out deal.

Negotiations began in June with the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and three employers' organisations representing three sections of the industry in the Motor Industry Bargaining Council.

NUMSA originally asked for a 12 percent annual pay rise for all workers.

The union agreed a three-year settlement for its 306,000 members—7.5, 7, and 7 percent per year for the AC sector, 8 percent, 5.5, and 5.5 percent for petrol station workers, with those in car sales etc. receiving 6 percent in the first year and 5.5 percent in the second and third year.

An earlier offer in June was based on NUMSA abandoning claims for a R600 monthly travel allowance, with separate allowances for night shifts, which forms part of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA). No reference to allowances or the industrial regulation-busting proposal was made in the new deal.

### **Workers and students demonstrate at University of South Africa**

Staff at the University of South Africa (UNISA) demonstrated Monday

at the Florida entrance, turning away staff and pupils.

The National Education Health and Allied Workers Union and the Academic Professional Staff Association members are demanding a nine percent wage increase, permanent employment for casuals, promotions, and are complaining that UNISA buildings do not meet safety regulations.

UNISA is the largest university in Africa with 420,000 students.

The South Africa University Students at UNISA's North West University's Mahikeng Campus are calling for a seven-day shutdown of all South African universities. They are demanding the elimination of student debt, free entrance for poor students and a different method for distributing accommodation.

Students picketed entrances to the university on Monday blocking staff from entering.

### **South African Ugu district municipality workers take wildcat action**

Workers at the South African Ugu district municipality have gone on unprotected strike in support of sacked union officials.

Nine South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) shop stewards were suspended September 11 for staging a protest regarding insurance policy payments during a council disciplinary meeting.

Five workers have also been suspended for using municipal vehicles in unauthorised areas.

The municipal leadership is blaming strikes by workers for the continuous water shortages caused by the collapsing water supply infrastructure.

### **South African nurses strike threat dangerous conditions in Limpopo hospitals**

Nurses are threatening to walk out at South Africa's Limpopo hospitals in protest over security and staff shortages.

Staff and patients are in increased danger from murder, shootings and robberies in the hospitals. The Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA) is calling on municipal government to give a written guarantee to ensure hospital security.

The DENOSA and Young Nurses Indaba Trade Union members are also complaining about severe staff shortages and dangerous overcrowding—the shortage of cleaners means the hospital cannot be cleaned thoroughly.

This has led to an outbreak of a drug-resistant bacterium, carbapenem-resistant enterobacteriaceae (CRE), which has killed ten babies. The nurses are holding the authorities responsible.

The hospital has sixty beds but often has to care for more than 90 babies. Some have to double up in the same cot, with their mothers sleeping on benches or on the floor.

### **Striking South African electrical goods workers get support from local community/**

South African Cape Town production workers are striking for a 15 percent wage increase and agreed bonuses. The 13-day strike at Hisense Atlantis was made indefinite Monday.

On Tuesday workers demonstrated outside the factory, which produces

televisions and white electrical goods, supported by the local community.

The 300 NUMSA members have not had a pay rise since 2017.

### **South African security guards strike over unpaid wages**

Around 3,000 security guards in South Africa's Mpumalanga province walked out January 22 over unpaid wages for December.

Mpumalanga's provincial government informed 15 companies supplying guards they will not receive funding until April 2020.

The South African Transport and Allied Workers Union called in the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration over breach of contract.

### **Liberian rubber plant workers go-slow over wage demand**

Liberian rubber plant workers have gone on a go-slow to demand a pay increase from US \$5.50 to around US \$10 a day.

Workers feel overworked as previously they brought their children to work as free labour, which assisted their level of earnings.

Workers at the Liberian Agriculture Company (LAC), the second largest rubber company in Liberia, do not get medical cover even after more than ten years employment at the company.

When the company banned child labour, the union did not negotiate a wage rise to compensate. Workers are paid below survival level and wages are topped up by a rice concession. When rice is not available the LAC provides loans, which are recouped from wages.

A new Collective Bargaining Agreement outstanding since July 2019 provoked one worker, quoted in the online *FPA*, to say, "the leadership of the workers union is their [workers'] problem."

### **Malian council employees strike to demand a 20 percent wage increase**

Malian council workers on strike for a 20 percent pay increase protested in Lilongwe.

The workers blocked a main thoroughfare between the Central Bank and Parliament with stones and logs and burning tyres.

The week-long strike has affected money gathering from market traders, cleaning services and refuse collection.



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