

Union sells out forestry strike in Finland; South African telecom workers' strike threat against redundancies; London bus drivers move to strike vote

## Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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

### **Finnish paper workers union ends strike, clerical staff in technological industries announce further strike**

The Paperilitto union called off the strike begun January 27 by 15,000 Finnish paper mill and forestry workers. The Finnish Forest Industries (FFI) association offered a 3.3 percent pay offer over 25 months, but workers will have to work a further 24 hours cutting midsummer stoppages in late June with no extra pay.

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

Commenting on the deal an FFI spokesperson in a *Timber Trades Journal* article February 11 said, "The changes are a step in the right direction but are inadequate for ensuring the international competitiveness of Finnish factories."

White-collar staff in the technology industry who struck had rejected a 3.3 percent pay offer over two years. Part of the pay rise in the second year is workplace specific, allowing employers to pick and choose who gets a rise. The Pro trade union members are to strike from February 24 until March 1.

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 Antti Rinne was forced to resign, to be replaced by Sanna Marin.

### **Unite union moves to shut down strike by carpet manufacturing workers in northern England**

The Unite union is preparing to sell out the 12-week strike by 75 workers at the two Westex carpet manufacturing sites, in Dewsbury and Cleckheaton in northern England. Under current laws the strikers have protection from dismissal from the strike ballot date for six months. This

runs out on Monday for the Westex workers.

Unite has refused to call another ballot, which if successful would give the workers protection for another period of action. A re-ballot was ruled out following a meeting between shop stewards and Unite legal representatives.

At talks under the auspices of the government mediation service, Acas, the employer came back with a slightly improved pay offer of 2.4 percent. Unite has not recommended rejection of the offer but instead in a letter to its members implied they could be sacked if they did not accept.

The UK government website on industrial disputes notes, "After 12 weeks, you can be dismissed if you take industrial action and your employer has tried to settle the dispute. For example, your employer may bring in advisers from Acas to help find a solution."

The workers began their stoppage on November 20, protesting the firm's pay offer. Westex offered a 2.25 percent pay rise but wanted to incorporate bonus pay into their hourly rate. Workers relied on bonus payments for their wage to meet the minimum wage. After the workers rejected the offer, the company withdrew it and imposed a wage freeze until April.

Westex Carpets made profits of over £5 million last year.

### **London bus drivers indicate willingness to strike over work fatigue**

Around 20,000 London bus drivers have voted by a 97 percent majority in a consultative ballot to take part in full postal ballot, which could lead to a stoppage in the spring.

The Unite union members are concerned about fatigue at work, with a recent report showing 17 percent of drivers falling asleep at the wheel on at least one occasion last year.

The union has a list of seven demands to prevent fatigue, including full rest breaks, rescheduling timetables for safer working and longer rest breaks.

### **Further strikes by UK sixth-form college staff**

Teaching staff at 34 sixth-form colleges across the UK held a one-day

strike Wednesday. It follows previous action, and further strikes are scheduled for February 27 and March 10. The staff, who teach 16- to 19-year-olds, are seeking a pay rise and increased funding to overcome staff shortages, over-large class sizes and staff retention problems.

The UK government pledged £400 million in additional funding in August last year. The National Education Union says an extra £700 million is required to overcome the underfunding crisis.

Among the colleges taking part on Wednesday were Longley Park Sixth Form College in Sheffield, Newham Sixth Form College in London, Varndean College in Brighton and Xaverian College in Manchester.

### **Traffic wardens in London borough of Hackney strike**

Around 40 traffic wardens in the inner London borough of Hackney began a two-week strike on Monday. The Unite union members are employed by outsourcing company Apcoa, which provides traffic warden services to Hackney borough council.

The workers are currently paid the London Living Wage figure of £10.75 an hour. The workers want £15 an hour in line with local government staff and improved sick pay. They are also protesting attacks on staff including two recent attacks by dogs.

### **London underground rail workers set to strike**

London underground rail workers on the Bakerloo line are to strike on February 21 until February 24. The Rail, Maritime and Transport union members voted by a 95 percent majority for action against timetable changes, which lead to increased stress levels.

### **Airport workers at Spanish airport demand protection against coronavirus**

Workers at Majorca airport are demanding protective masks and gloves along with disinfectant gels to provide protection against the coronavirus infection. A British man in the Balearic Islands served by Majorca airport recently tested positive for the infection.

### **Dispute declared in Israel as telecom companies merge**

Last week the Israeli trade union federation Histadrut declared a dispute over the merger of Israeli telecoms company ECI and American telecoms company Ribbon Communications. Ribbon Communications launched its \$486 million takeover of ECI in November last year.

Talks took place between the companies and the workers' committee at ECI. An agreement including the number of job losses seemed to have been agreed, but the companies have refused to sign up to the agreement and so Histadrut declared a dispute.

### **Toyota South Africa workers wildcat strike ends**

A wildcat strike by production workers at Toyota South Africa over bonus payment ended without resolution.

Nearly 3,000 workers walked out at Toyota South African Motors two weeks ago over an unpaid quality bonus from December. Workers returned to work last week after 2,895 employees, sacked for taking the unofficial action, were reinstated.

The strike was not sanctioned by the union, NUMSA.

While the bonus was being denied the company still demanded workers do overtime.

### **Union sells out South African electronic production workers pay strike at Hisense, Cape Town**

Employees of the South Africa-based electronics company Hisense near Cape Town returned to work last week after NUMSA negotiated a sell-out deal.

Three hundred workers came out January 16 for a 15 percent across-the-board increase or a R49.5 per hour based on the Metal and Engineering Industries Bargaining Council (MEIBC) agreement. The Chinese-owned multinational company maintained it was not a member of the MEIBC and negotiated independently.

NUMSA settled for a 7 percent increase over two years in stages, and the introduction of a third shift.

Management praised how the union conducted the strike.

### **South Africa Telecom workers threaten industrial action over massive job cull**

South Africa's Telecom workers are threatening industrial action against the 3,000 job cuts from a workforce of 9,000. A demonstration will take place Saturday morning at Telecom's Luthuli House in Johannesburg.

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) and the South African Workers Union (SAWU) said the company has not made the case for "so many" sackings. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), Solidarity and the Information Communications and Technology Union, not included in the negotiations, said the same.

The CWU and SAWU began a 60-day negotiation process with the company on Tuesday under the auspices of the arbitration services, CCMA.

Telecom is 40 percent state-owned and cites increasing debt and tough market conditions for the retrenchments.

### **South African cheap labour scheme workers demonstrate over unpaid stipends**

Workers employed in South Africa's cheap labour Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) demonstrated in Johannesburg last Friday over unpaid stipends.

The workers were co-opted by the Pickup waste company to clear up

an accumulation of waste. Workers protested outside the Pickitup site depot gates, restricting employees and traffic from going in and out.

The company claims EPWP workers did not fill out documentation in time.

### **South African mental health nurses strike at Komani hospital over dire hospital conditions**

Nurses walked out Monday at the Komani Hospital, Queenstown Eastern Cape, demanding the removal of the hospital administration and improvements to hospital conditions.

Overcrowding means patients are bedded on the floor. The hospital has no hot water, and staff boil water for washing and general duties while water floods through the roof when it rains.

Komani cares for violent psychotic patients. Nurses are concerned female security staff are unable to contain some patients.

Police used bolt cutters to the locks and chains with which nurses secured the gates to prevent staff coming and going.

The provincial health minister visited the hospital in the middle of last year and witnessed the dire conditions, promising to respond in September.

A nurse who remained anonymous threatened to inform the Human Rights Commission saying, "This cannot happen, patients have rights, [and] this is ill treatment."

### **South African water workers' stoppage in Ugu district over sackings**

Striking water workers in South African Ugu district are being held responsible for water shortages by municipal management.

About 70 workers have been sacked for illegal industrial action begun a month ago, protesting the suspension of nine shop stewards said to have interrupted a disciplinary meeting, with others striking for their reinstatement.

South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) members deny their action is the reason for water shortages in the district.

District councillor Simphiwe Mthethwa admitted that "Ugu has long had issues with ageing infrastructure, lack of funds and continual pipe bursts."

The severest water shortages are borne by the most impoverished in the communities, who cannot afford to pay for water.

### **Niger workers in Nigeria force minimum wage agreement**

Nigerian Niger state workers went on strike on February 4 to force the administration to pay the federally agreed minimum wage N33,000.

The state governor reneged on a commitment to abide by the new minimum wage last year alongside other states holding out.

Public sector workers paralysed hospitals, water provision and other public service functions at enormous cost to the state, forcing the state government to agree to implement the minimum wage increase.

According the Nigerian Labour Congress the agreement includes back pay, and other benefits previously unpaid to workers will also be resolved.

### **Nigerian oil and gas workers protest over unpaid severance payments**

Nigerian oil and gas workers picketed the Lagos premises of General Electric over unpaid severance payments owed by contractor ARCO. While waiting, five workers have died.

A mass picket by Nigeria Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers and Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria members assembled from 4 a.m. on February 8 to demand unpaid dues.

The pickets want the Minister of Employment to intervene. General Electric overtaxed contractor ARCO over the years and refused to refund the overpayment. ARCO owes termination payments to workers outstanding since they were made redundant in 2016.

The protest ended after a meeting was called for February 10 between GE, ARCO and the unions.

### **Zimbabwe Bulawayo council workers' union accepts poverty pay deal**

According to the Bulawayo city council, a strike by its employees demanding a speed-up of a salary review has been avoided.

The city said the union had informed them that council employees were preparing to picket the Large City Hall on February 9. The Zimbabwe Urban Councils Workers Union (ZUCWU) members planned a sit-in if the local government did not set up meetings of the Permanent Negotiating Councils. According to ZUCWU, management conceded to head off an inevitable strike.

While the union asked for housing and transport allowances and cost-of-living allowance (COLA) to be included in a bonus payment, they agreed that only COLA be included in a payment of Z\$600.

Last October, unions put in a demand for a Z\$500 bonus and 80 percent COLA increase, which the council rejected. The unions accepted a collective bargaining agreement for 2019 of Z\$100 basic salary increase and COLA increase of 33 percent while inflation was running at 600 percent per annum.

Basic salaries stand at just above Z\$2,000 a month since the federal government passed a 140 percent general COLA increase last month.



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