

Thousands of Iranian sugarcane workers strike for second week; clothing workers' stoppage in Lethoso; Zimbabwe nurses and doctors protests and strike

## Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

26 June 2020

### Middle East

#### Iranian sugar production workers' strike in second week

Iranian workers at the Haft Tappeh sugarcane factory entered the second week of strike action on Monday. The Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Workers' Union members are demanding three months' arrears of wages owed to them along with social welfare and medical insurance payments. They are also calling for the sugarcane complex to be brought back into public ownership. The complex built more than 50 years ago was privatised in 2015.

The workers held protests outside the factory and the local governor's office. Thousands of workers at the plant have been involved in various forms of industrial action since 2018. During their prolonged fight, there have been attacks by security forces and arrests.

One of the factory owners is currently being investigated for foreign currency violations. He was given bail on condition he paid the wage arrears but is yet to do so.

US sanctions re-imposed 18 months ago have slashed exports of Iran's crude oil by 80 percent, leading to price increases in basic necessities and medicines.

### Europe

#### Unions call off strike by bus drivers in Cyprus

At the last minute, unions called off a planned bus drivers' strike due Thursday at the Zenon bus company in Larnaca, Cyprus. The Peo, Sek and Deok trade union federation members are protesting the failure of the company to pass on pay deductions—provident funds, provident loan funds, medical insurance, welfare and holiday fund payments—since February. The drivers raised the issue with the company and the transport ministry several times to no avail.

According to the union federations, in return for cancelling the stoppage the transport ministry would make the payment of the various monies by noon on Thursday.

Zenon is due to lose its contract for Larnaca on July 5 when the running

of the company is due to be handed over to the newly created Cyprus Public Transport company.

#### Union calls off strike by Icelandic nurses

A strike by around 2,000 Icelandic nurses, due to begin Monday, was called off by the union. The members of the Icelandic Nursing Association had voted by an 85 percent majority to strike after negotiations over a new contract stalled. They have been working 15 months without one.

The State Mediation Officer came up with a contract that included a new arrangement for day working and shift patterns. However, the main issue for nurses, the raising of the starting wage for new nurses, was not resolved.

To address this longstanding issue, the union and mediation officer proposed setting up a special arbitration committee. The nurses have until June 27 to vote on whether to accept the new contract and proposed committee.

#### UK airport workers in consultative ballot

Around 4,500 UK workers employed at London's Heathrow Airport Limited (HAL) are to take part in a consultative ballot for possible strike action. HAL wants to use the COVID-19 crisis to impose major attacks on its workforce.

HAL provides security, firefighting, airside and passenger services.

HAL intends to impose a 37 percent cut in pay, close its final pension scheme and abolish paid breaks. It also wants to weaken redundancy conditions and stop sickness payments for the first three days. All cuts would be on a permanent basis and HAL has threatened to sack the whole workforce and rehire them on inferior terms and conditions. In May, HAL announced it has a £3.2 billion war chest. In March, it paid out £100 million in dividends.

The Unite union proposed savings of around £48 million but HAL wants more.

Also, at Heathrow, Menzies, which offers baggage handling and other

airport services, has sent a letter to its 2,500 staff threatening redundancies. Unite complained the company sent it without consulting them and without stating how many redundancies it is seeking to make.

### **Strike ballot at UK rail company**

UK rail workers at Heathrow Express are being balloted for strike action. Heathrow Express is seeking to reorganise job grades and make 123 redundancies among Mobile Sales Advisors and Customer Concierge roles. The workers being considered for redundancy are currently on furlough under the COVID-19 job retention scheme.

### **Protest by renters union in Irish capital**

Dublin Renters Union members protested outside the headquarters of the Green Party in Dublin on Tuesday. They are calling for the ban on evictions brought in as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic to be extended until next year. They fear the ending of the ban will result in a tsunami of evictions.

The Green Party is currently considering whether or not to go into a coalition with Fianna Fail and Fine Gael after a recent Irish general election.

### **Africa**

### **Doctors and nurses strike in Zimbabwe**

Doctors and nurses walked out across Zimbabwe on June 19 to demand payment in foreign currency.

After a decade of using the US dollar, Zimbabwe reintroduced its own currency last year, but inflation has surged since. The exchange rate is officially fixed at USD1.25, but on the day of the strike the Zimbabwean currency was trading at up to Z\$80 to the US dollar. The free fall of the currency has meant that basics are now out of reach for many, with inflation above 785 percent in May.

At least 15 striking nurses from Victoria Chitepo Hospital (formerly Mutare Provincial Hospital) were arrested.

Nurses told the media they intended to stay out until the government met their demands.

Mass protests against falling living standards were expected on June 22 in Zimbabwe in spite of rules making protests illegal due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There have been 526 confirmed coronavirus cases, and six fatalities.

### **South African health workers demand permanent jobs**

Community health workers protested June 18 at a hospital in Khayelitsha, South Africa, over “outsourcing” of their work. Further demonstrations are planned nationally, with 28,000 threatening strike action.

The National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers members

have contracts with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and are demanding to be integrated into the Western Cape Health Department. This would mean an increase in salary, greater job security and the right to claim compensation for injuries at work.

Health workers are also expected to trace sick residents, who may be infected with COVID-19, but due to being employed by NGOs they are without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) or training to do the job.

### **Bus drivers in South African city refuse to work in unsafe conditions**

Bus drivers in the city of George, Western Cape, South Africa, walked out June 18 over health and safety concerns after three drivers tested positive for COVID-19.

The National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa members want the buses of the afflicted drivers sanitised and all those who had contact with them traced. Workers say the canteen is too small to effectively distance themselves and they want every worker to be tested.

South Africa has 106,108 confirmed coronavirus cases, with 2,102 fatalities.

### **Hospital staff in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, protest after worker’s COVID-19 related death**

Nurses, cleaners and porters marched and sang songs at Uitenhage Hospital, Port Elizabeth, South Africa on June 18 to protest the death of Mbulelo Maneli.

Maneli, a driver at the hospital, was diagnosed COVID-19 positive and yet expected by management to continue working despite having existing health problems.

He was at the forefront of previous protests by staff over the lack of PPE and the right to stay at home with pay when waiting for test results.

One worker said, “Staff risk their lives every day by coming to work because they are not protected.”

### **South African nurses picket hospital over staff shortages**

On June 19, nurses and health workers protested over staffing levels and the lack of PPE. The Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa members picketed outside False Bay Hospital, Cape Town, holding up signs saying, “Protect us so we can protect patients,” and “The workload is killing us.”

Workers vow to strike if the health department does not resolve the situation within two weeks.

### **Municipal workers in South Africa confront local government over pay**

Municipal workers intend to strike if 257 municipalities in South Africa do not honour the last part of a three-year agreement. The South African

Municipal Workers Union members are also demanding an annual salary increase on July 1.

The government's National Treasury has encouraged the municipalities to apply for exemption from the agreement.

### **Clothing workers on strike in Lesotho**

Tens of thousands of clothing workers in Lesotho walked out for one day on June 17 to demand payment of unpaid wages.

They decided to return to work after the government agreed to honour an agreement made in April to pay workers during the lockdown due to COVID-19. Only one instalment was paid after the agreement. Around 50,000 workers will receive the USD47 pay they were promised in April.

The government deployed special forces to the capital city, Maseru, and nearby areas. Police shot one worker three times with rubber bullets. Others were beaten and arrested.

Nurses are threatening "drastic measures" including a go-slow unless the government responds to their seven-day ultimatum to address their grievances on pay and other issues.

### **Labour court issues order to striking health workers in Kenya**

The Employment and Labour Relations Court in Kisumu, Kenya issued an order to over 3,000 striking health workers to return to work, while instructing employers to carry out the promotions of staff as promised and backdate unpaid salary increases.

The county administration went to court to sue the Kenya National Union of Clinical Officers, Kenya National Union of Nurses, Kenya National Medical Laboratory Officers and the Union of Kenya Civil Servants.

On June 11, Governor Nyong'o threatened to sack the striking staff unless the strike was ended.



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