

Iranian sugar workers' dispute continues; health workers continue strike in Zimbabwe; doctors continue month-long strike in Nigerian state

## Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

14 August 2020

### Protests by Iranian sugar plant workers continues

Daily protests by Iranian Haft Tappeh sugar workers, begun in June, are continuing outside the governor's office in Shush. The 5,000 workers have not been paid since March.

Sugar cane is harvested in the fields, but no production has taken place in the factory complex since June.

The Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane Workers' union members are demanding the complex be brought back into public ownership. Built more than 50 years ago, it was privatised in 2015.

One of the owners is currently on trial for fraud in Tehran. He is accused of obtaining \$1.4 billion in hard currency from the government. Claiming the money was to invest in the company, he instead allegedly sold on the hard currency at three times its face value.

The workers have undertaken a series of walkouts and mass protests in the thousands over the last three years over job losses, pay and conditions.

Some workers and their families, who have caught COVID-19, have been left with no access to health care as social security payments have not been made by the company.

Iran has 336,324 coronavirus cases confirmed and 19,162 deaths. Its economy has been ravaged by US sanctions, reimposed 18 months ago, slashing exports of crude oil by 80 percent, leading to price increases in basic necessities and medicines.

### Unions sell out strikes, agree closure of Nissan plants in Spain

After 100 days of strikes by Spanish auto workers since lockdown ended, the unions last week accepted the closure of three Nissan factories in Barcelona by the end of 2021.

Nissan originally proposed axing the 2,500 jobs at its Barcelona factories by the end of this year. Approximately 20,000 other jobs are dependent on the Nissan jobs.

### Further strike by council staff in UK capital

Around 1,500 UK council workers at Tower Hamlets council in London began three days of strikes on Thursday. The Unison members have already taken six days of strike action in June and July.

The workers include social workers, housing and homelessness support workers, library staff, youth services, drug and alcohol services, teaching assistants, special educational needs teachers, refuse collectors and street cleaners. They are opposed to the new contract imposed on July 2 by the Labour-controlled council. Under the "Tower Rewards" contract, pay will be cut for new employees, with reductions in night-working supplements and promotion-linked pay increments. Redundancy pay will be cut by 80 percent. Workers fear the changes are a precursor to job cuts.

The workers voted by a near 90 percent majority to strike in February with action planned for March, which was cancelled due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Pickets were planned at the town hall in Blackwall, the Idea Store in Whitechapel and the housing office in Bethnal Green. Unison is pushing for negotiations with the council, stalled for 18 months, to be restarted.

### Protest by sacked retail workers at UK store

On Tuesday, Debenhams' staff held an impromptu protest outside its major UK store in Manchester, with a further one planned for Saturday.

The retail company announced a further 2,500 job losses as it proposes closing distribution centres on top of closures announced earlier in the year. Sixty-five staff were given notice of dismissal via a group phone call with three days' notice.

The workers are calling for enhanced redundancy packages.

Former workers of Debenhams in Ireland have held several protests over the last few weeks after the company liquidated all its Irish outlets in April.

### UK art gallery staff to strike over job cuts

Over 100 UK workers at Tate galleries in London are to walk out on August 18/19 and again August 21/22 over plans to make 200 staff redundant. The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members

voted by an 88 percent majority on a near 90 percent turnout for the action.

The workers had previously protested outside the gallery on July 27, when it reopened following the COVID-19 lockdown. The PCS called on the gallery to use some of the government's promised £7 million COVID-19 bailout to protect jobs.

### **Protest by dismissed Turkish food workers**

Workers protested outside the Cargill starch production factory in Orhangazi, Turkey, on Monday against their dismissal over two years ago for trade union activities. The workers vowed to maintain their protest, and to widen it by demonstrating outside the company's headquarters in Istanbul.

### **Italian workers demand extension of ban on dismissals in COVID-19 pandemic**

Italian workers are demanding the Italian government extend the ban on dismissals due to the COVID-19 pandemic until the end of the year. The government's "August decree" would extend the ban but with important exemptions. After October 15, companies not using public funds would be exempt from the ban, as would firms going bankrupt or changing hands.

The CGIL, CISL and UIL union federations have set a day of protest, but not until September 18.

### **Irish meat processing plants hit by COVID-19**

Four meat processing plants in the Irish midlands closed due to COVID-19 infections. It was reported that 150 workers tested positive at Kildare Chilling, 86 at O'Brien Fine Foods in Timahoe, nine at Carroll Cuisine in Tullamore and nine at the Irish Dog Food Factory in Naas. The factories will remain closed while testing is carried out.

According to the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union, over 10 percent of food processing workers contracted COVID-19 over the last five months. As 90 percent of meat processing workers are not entitled to sick pay, they are under financial pressure to report for work despite coronavirus symptoms.

### **Major COVID-19 outbreak at Danish slaughterhouse**

On August 8, the Danish meat producer, Danish Crown, announced the closure of its slaughterhouse at Ringsted, 30 miles from Copenhagen, for at least a week. Nearly 150 of its 900 employees have COVID-19. An original testing found 120 cases and a re-testing of all the negative results came up with an additional 22 positive cases.

Danish Crown is one of Europe's biggest meat-producing companies. Denmark has witnessed a spike in COVID-19 since easing lockdown restrictions. There have been 15,070 confirmed cases, and 621 deaths.

### **Zimbabwe: Nurses continue strike over PPE and pay, defy intimidation**

Nurses in Zimbabwe are continuing their strike, now in its seventh week, after being removed from the payroll for July in defiance of state repression.

The ZANU-PF government of President Emmerson Mnangagwa deployed the police and military to shut down the capital, Harare, banned rallies, and arrested and tortured opponents of the regime. Resistance has grown, with junior and senior doctors joining the nurses.

Nurses are demanding personal protective equipment (PPE) and salaries in US dollars due to the declining value of the Zimbabwean dollar.

The cost of living in Zimbabwe went up by a third in June as inflation rages at 800 percent, but nurses' salaries have not increased, leaving them unable to pay bills.

Zimbabwe has 4,893 total confirmed coronavirus cases and 122 deaths.

### **South African health workers plan national strike for safer working conditions**

Health workers across South Africa are planning a countrywide strike on Friday to protest working conditions and lack of safety amidst the pandemic. As of August 2, 24,104 health workers had contracted the virus, with 181 recorded fatalities. Further strikes and demonstrations will take place over the next two months.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union members say they have been overworked during the pandemic due to staff shortages and left without adequate supplies of PPE. Management have not tested workers in order to avoid infected staff isolating.

In Eastern Cape, workers will use the stoppage to agitate for the removal of the province's executive member responsible for health and to force his department to employ more staff.

South Africa has 568,919 coronavirus cases and 11,010 deaths.

### **South African municipal workers demonstrate for improved wages and working conditions**

Municipal workers stopped work and took to the streets of Standerton, South Africa on August 4, demanding the municipality pay back ongoing salary and allowance shortfalls and address the lack of safety provision in their workplaces.

The South African Municipal Workers Union members burned tyres in front of the municipal building, and their work stoppage caused the interruption of power supplies and other services in the town.

### **Doctors strike in Ekiti State, Nigeria against rundown of health service**

Doctors on a month-long strike in Ekiti State, Nigeria, denounced the state government for its rundown of the health service and years of neglect.

The National Association of Government General and Medical Dental

Practitioners told the media that "...at the primary health care level, there are a total of seven doctors working in 131 health centres."

The union made no call for any wider action by other workers, instead issuing a vague call for "respected Ekiti sons and daughters as well as other stakeholders to intervene" in an unspecified way.

Nigeria has 47,743 coronavirus cases with 956 fatalities.

### **Workers at Bristow Helicopters in Nigeria on strike**

Pilots and engineers at Bristow Helicopters in Nigeria began an indefinite strike at midnight on August 10.

The National Association of Aircraft Pilots and Engineers (NAAPE) members are angry about "discriminatory policies and consistent victimisation of Nigerians working for the carrier."

NAAPE criticised the "odious laying off of young cadet and trainee engineers after several years of tearful sacrificial toiling..." The union also stated that in view of the company having "operated throughout the lockdown, supporting oil and gas operations with government approval," Bristow Helicopters had used the pandemic as an excuse to make 100 redundancies.

The union called off picketing of the company after the intervention of "the honourable minister of Aviation Hadi Sirika," sowing illusions that the government is on the side of workers and handing the initiative back to the employers.

NAAPE has given employers a two-week "ultimatum," saying it would be forced to "withdraw our guarantee of industrial peace within the industry" and call a strike against airlines that have sacked or plan to sack pilots and engineers.

### **Nigerian tanker drivers in Lagos begin strike action against state harassment**

Tanker drivers in Lagos State, Nigeria walked out on August 10, in opposition to harassment and extortion by police and other security agents.

The drivers are in the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers.

### **Kenyan nurses to strike over PPE and unpaid risk allowances**

Nurses in Kenya are to strike over lack of PPE and isolation facilities for infected health workers, as well as unpaid salaries and risk allowances. The lack of pay has left nurses unable to pay for their food and rent. Many have not been paid for June or July.

The Kenya National Union of Nurses threatened to call a strike from August 10, but at the time of writing there were no reports that the union had kept to its word.

Kenya has 28,104 confirmed coronavirus cases and 456 deaths.





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