

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

28 August 2020

Journalists join protests in Belarus against censorship; strikes continue in Iran across many industries; South African health workers' national action over pay and safety

Europe

Journalists join mass anti-government protests in Belarus

Three hundred journalists employed at state television in Minsk, Belarus have joined the mass protests to oust President Lukashenko. Journalists from the leading daily *Zvyazda* also walked out.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists members are demanding an end to government censorship of the state crackdown against demonstrators. Seventy-two Belarusian journalists from independent media and foreign correspondents were detained by police, beaten and had their equipment damaged.

Police used rubber bullets, stun grenades and clubs against the biggest demonstrations ever seen in the country, arresting around 7,000.

Workers in Belarus have next to no labour rights. Companies are permitted to sack their workforce with just seven days' notice, and the vast majority of workers are on temporary contracts. In 2019, average monthly pay was \$500.

UK National Health Service workers protest low wages

Thousands of National Health Service (NHS) workers across the UK protested Wednesday as part of the "NHS Pay 15" movement, demanding a 15 percent pay rise.

Staff from Guys' and St Thomas's hospitals in London marched to Downing Street, holding pictures of Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Health Secretary Matt Hancock with blood on their hands. Their banners demanded "Pay justice now."

One senior nurse told media he earns roughly the same as he did 10 years ago. Some workers report being unable to afford tube fares to travel to and from work on their current wages.

Nurses and junior doctors were excluded from the government's 3.1 percent public sector pay rise announced in June. Under a three-year deal agreed in 2018, nurses will receive a 4.4 percent increase this year.

Unions are calling on the government to bring forward next year's negotiation as an appreciation of nurses' work during the pandemic. The fact is that their pay is so low because of the rotten sell-out deal agreed by unions in 2018.

This is the latest protest by NHS staff over wages. Last week, health workers engaged in socially distanced protests outside Glasgow's city

hospitals, from the Queen Elizabeth Hospital to Glasgow Royal Infirmary.

The Unison union members, including domestics, porters and cleaners, are demanding a pay rise for all health care workers in recognition of their invaluable work during the pandemic.

Committing to nothing, Scottish National Party Health Secretary Jeane Freeman said the government would "take into account the efforts of NHS staff during the pandemic, and have not ruled out reopening the final year of the current three-year pay deal as part of that 2021-22 deal."

Greek teachers in Athens and Thessalonika protest march against reopening of schools

Teachers in Greek state schools demonstrated Tuesday in Athens and Thessalonika against government plans to reopen schools beginning September 7.

The high school unions agree in principle with the unsafe school reopening before the coronavirus is suppressed in Greece and globally. They called on the New Democracy government to provide more teachers for smaller class sizes, free repeated tests for school staff, "all necessary measures to ensure the safety of pupils and teachers," increased funding, and live links to lessons for pupils unable to attend class.

In order to pursue its back-to-school plan, the government agreed to provide masks, disinfectant, more staff and COVID-19 health seminars.

Greece has confirmed 9,531 coronavirus cases and 254 deaths.

UK bus drivers at Metrolink London to ballot for strike action

UK bus drivers working for Metrolink in London are to be balloted for strike action against remote signing on. Drivers would not sign on at a depot with toilet and canteen facilities, but meet their bus and start their shift at a bus stop.

The 4,000 Unite union members, representing 16 percent of London's bus drivers, say the new measures could adversely affect their health, as waiting for the bus in all weathers and greater travelling could increase the risk of COVID-19.

In a consultative ballot, Unite members at Metrolink West and Metrolink Travel voted 99.2 percent and 97.8 percent in favour of industrial action.

At least 43 transport workers have died from COVID-19, including 29 drivers. Transport for London (TfL) neglected to implement safety measures, including the use of face masks, with the backing of Unite. They only implemented measures after workers had taken the initiative themselves. A joint letter from TfL, Metrolink and Unite to drivers said they were not collecting data on infections and deaths.

Metroline is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Singapore-based ComfortDelGro Group, one of the largest passenger transport companies in the world, with a net profit of \$303 million in 2019.

Go North West drivers protest outside bus station in Manchester, UK

Unite trade union members protested outside Manchester's Shudehill Interchange bus station Thursday to oppose attacks by Go North West Limited at the nearby Queens Road bus depot.

The workers are balloting on industrial action, with the result at the end of the month, to oppose increased productivity, attacks on sick pay and a £2,000 cut in annual salary. The company tried to introduce the adverse changes during lockdown, when 80 percent of the workforce was furloughed.

During the dispute, a senior Unite trade union representative was suspended and is now facing a disciplinary hearing.

Bus drivers have already taken on extra cleaning duties, as well as risking their health as essential workers during the pandemic without adequate safety measures.

One worker said on Facebook, "How dare you attempt to take away Manchester key workers' sick pay and conditions."

Workers report bullying and harassment by management, as well as homophobic comments.

Unite is seeking to avoid industrial action and is instead appealing to top executives of the Go Ahead group nationally to resolve the dispute.

Government tax office cleaners' strike on Merseyside spreads to Birmingham

A stoppage begun August 3 by cleaners working at Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) in Bootle and Liverpool, UK was joined by workers at the tax office in Birmingham August 21. The dispute is planned until August 28.

The Public and Civil Servants (PCS) union members, who worked as essential workers during lockdown, are demanding £10-an-hour living wage, full occupational sick pay, and the same holidays as the civil servants in the offices they clean.

Cleaning at HMRC in Merseyside and Birmingham is outsourced to private contractor ISS.

UK easyJet workers protest closure at Newcastle airport

UK easyJet employees held a protest August 21 at Newcastle airport in opposition to the closure of easyJet's base there.

The Unite members are opposing the loss of 105 cabin crew jobs. Pilots and engineers will also lose their jobs.

On August 20, 1,000 British Airways staff undertook a socially distanced protest near Heathrow Airport. The company plans 10,000 redundancies, with the remaining workforce on inferior pay and conditions.

Pilots' union BALPA recently accepted a sell-out deal including 270 redundancies and an immediate 20 percent pay cut.

British Airways recently paid out £174 million to shareholders.

Journalists' stoppage at local newspapers in the Midlands, UK

Journalists at Bullivant Media Limited in the UK Midlands region walked out on Tuesday and Wednesday in opposition to redundancy plans, new working practices and journalists being underpaid for months.

The company publishes free weekly newspapers and websites across the Midlands, including the *Coventry Observer*, *Leamington Observer*, *Rugby Observer*, *Stratford Observer* and *Worcester Observer*.

The National Union of Journalists members are also concerned that non-editorial staff are working as journalists. On August 21, the company confirmed three editorial job losses.

Debenhams' retail workers further protest against job losses

On Saturday, workers at the retail high street chain Debenhams are to protest job losses outside the company's store in Manchester, England. Similar protests were held on August 11 and 15.

The company has announced a further 2,500 job losses, as it will close distribution centres on top of closures announced earlier in the year. The workers are demanding enhanced redundancy packages.

Former employees at Debenhams in Ireland have held recent protests, as all its stores folded in April.

UK gas workers vote for industrial action

UK workers at British Gas and PH Jones, owned by Centrica, voted by 95 percent on a 67.5 percent turnout to hold a ballot for strike action. The 10,000 GMB union members are facing 5,000 redundancies and changes in pay and conditions to their detriment, announced June.

The company have threatened to sack the 20,000 workforce if the offer is not accepted.

Workers at Northern Gas Networks have voted by 98 percent to hold a ballot for industrial action over pay.

The GMB members rejected the last company pay offer as inadequate, and pay packets have declined the last years.

The company delivers gas to homes and businesses across Yorkshire, Northern Cumbria and the North East.

UK job centre workers to ballot over plans to extend working day

Around 25,000 UK workers at the Department for Work and Pension (DWP) are voting in a consultative ballot. The government plans to extend working hours in Jobcentres and Universal Credit services due to rising unemployment—until 8pm, Monday to Friday, from November 30.

The PCS union members are being instructed to end home working and come face to face with the public, under conditions where the coronavirus is spreading.

Hungarian local government workers to walk out on three-day strike

Hungarian local government workers are planning a stoppage from September 2-4. The Trade Union of Hungarian Civil Servants and Public Service Workers members fear redundancies due to government cuts.

Irish nurses' ballot at Limerick hospital over jobs and safety

Nurses at Ireland's University Hospital in Limerick began balloting over five weeks for industrial action.

The 1,000 Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation members are protesting staff vacancies of 17-20 percent. On Wednesday last week, there were 26 patients waiting on trolleys.

Staff are still not being tested for COVID-19, despite a recent small outbreak at the hospital.

Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) members are also being balloted over the same issues. A recent dispute by workers at Leo Pharma ended with the reinstatement of five laid-off temporary workers.

Workers at meat processing plant in Ireland walk out over COVID-19 fears

Workers at Rosderra Meats at Clara, County Offaly, walked out for a day last week over safety concerns. The company docked the pay of the 60 SIPTU union members.

In breach of its own safety procedures during the pandemic, the company moved staff from its Edenderry plant to complete the job.

Workers at Kildare Chilling beef and lamb processing plant, closed after an outbreak, report they had to wait up to 10 days for COVID test results. Sometimes the results for the second test came back before the first.

Middle East

Continuing strikes and protests in Iran

Iranian oil, gas and petrochemical workers have been on strike for four weeks over wage arrears. The strike encompasses 55 facilities, with protests in 24 cities across 12 Iranian provinces. While some contractors have agreed to pay wages weekly and back pay, workers say they will stay out until their full demands are met.

Workers at the Haft Tappeh sugar cane complex walked out ten weeks ago. They are seeking wage arrears and demanding the renationalisation of the company.

Varamin railway workers began a stoppage on August 23 to protest unpaid wages. They prevented trains moving out of railway stations.

On August 22, workers at railway companies in Karaj, Kordan, Hashtgerd, Abyek and Ziyaran walked out over unpaid salaries, overdue insurance and inflation over 40 percent. Most railway workers have not been paid for a long time.

Iran's economy and infrastructure 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. It has

367,796 confirmed cases of coronavirus and 21,137 fatalities.
Africa

South African laboratory workers join health workers in national strike action over pay and safety

Healthcare workers at South Africa's National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS) are escalating action after picketing on August 21 along with other public sector health workers. They have joined a national programme of strikes over pay, lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and staff shortages.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) members undertook further pickets and strikes this week, while the NHLS asked the government's labour court to classify them as essential workers, making any prospective strikes unlawful.

The laboratory workers intend to continue striking alongside other NEHAWU members national strikes this Friday and September 3rd and 10th.

South Africa has 615,701 COVID-19 cases and 13,502 deaths.

Workers in Standerton, South African continue fight over unsafe working conditions

Municipal workers in Standerton, South Africa are continuing their strike over unsafe working conditions during the pandemic and unpaid wages, insisting their fight is for the whole community.

The South African Municipal Workers Union members are being blamed for problems in the town, which they say are the product of corruption within the Lekwa municipality and a long-term failure to invest in the infrastructure.

Doctors strike at Zimbabwe hospital after outbreak of COVID-19

Specialist doctors at Parirenyatwa Hospital in Zimbabwe decided to strike due to an outbreak of COVID-19 among themselves. The doctors include obstetricians and gynaecologists.

Some doctors tested positive, while others have symptoms without confirmation of the diagnosis.

Zimbabwe has 6,251 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 179 deaths.

Kenyan doctors strike over poor conditions of service and lack of PPE

Kenyan health workers have been on strike since August 21, protesting poor terms of service and lack of promotion. The workers are angry over low pay, lack of PPE and the stress and anxiety caused by the deaths of colleagues.

The health workers' union is now in the final stages of a settlement preparing to accept the "bare minimums."

Kenya has 33,389 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 567 deaths.

Sudanese bank workers to strike as sit-ins continue

Workers at government-owned banks are to strike on August 25, to demand banking system reform. Staff at the Family Bank were already on strike from August 23.

Bank workers in South Kordofan, West Kordofan and South Darfur are continuing with sit-in protests over lack of provisions and services.

Sudan has 13,045 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 823 deaths.

Oil workers at Chevron Nigeria ready to strike after sackings

Nigerian oil workers are ready to walk out following 175 redundancies at Chevron Nigeria Limited (CNL), the Nigerian offshoot of the transnational oil company.

The union NUPENG says it has not met with employers, but a CNL report says they have. NUPENG issued a statement calling on its members to “ignore the report ... and mobilise for the impending strike at the expiration of the ultimatum.”

Nigeria has 53,021 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 1,010 deaths.



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