

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

4 September 2020

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

Strikes in Belarus suppressed but action continues

Workers in Belarus are continuing opposition to the fraudulent re-election of President Alexander Lukashenko with go-slow action.

The threat of dismissals and legal action have temporarily suppressed recent mass strikes, including one of 15,000 workers at the Minsk Tractor Works. Miners in state-run mines, however, have reduced production by 90 percent through work to rule measures.

According to a Euronews website article of August 28, 7,000 people have been arrested for protesting the outcome of the election.

The imperialist powers, who are backing opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, fear that Lukashenko's violent crackdown will only further ignite the anger of substantial sections of the working class.

Underground protest by Ukrainian miners

On Monday, miners at the Nadiya coal mine in western Ukraine remained underground in a protest over wages arrears. They began their sit-in on August 28. Wage arrears at the mine amount to more than \$2 million.

Strikes by journalists in Midlands, UK

Journalists working for the Bullivant media group held two days of strikes Tuesday and Wednesday this week, following two days of strike action last week. The Bullivant media group publishes 18 newspaper titles in the West Midlands area including Warwickshire and Worcestershire.

The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) members are protesting the group's plans to make redundancies, introduce new working practices and its underpayment of journalists for several months. NUJ chapel members at the newspaper group voted unanimously for the stoppages. Picketing took place outside Bullivant's offices in Redditch.

Protest by redundant UK retail workers in Manchester

Workers made redundant by high street retail chain store Debenhams held a protest in Manchester in northwest England on Saturday. They are demanding enhanced redundancy terms.

On top of closures and 4,000 job losses announced earlier in the year, the company announced a further 2,500 job losses last month with the closure of department stores and distribution centres. Former employees at Debenhams in Ireland have also recently held protests, as the company pulled out of Ireland.

About 30 workers and supporters took part in the Manchester protest. It was addressed by an official of the shop workers' union USDAW and a Manchester trades council member. Workers held home-made banners, one with "Debenhams Don't make us redundant extend the scheme," and another, "Debenhams give us what we're owed £now!£."

Chris Winwood, USDAW Executive Committee member, appealed to the company, saying, "Consult with the staff, consult with a trade union—it makes no sense to me why this company has never recognised a trade union ever."

A further protest is planned Saturday at 3 p.m. outside the Debenhams store on Market Street in Manchester.

High street stores, which began shedding jobs before the pandemic due to competition from online retailers, have been particularly hard hit since lockdown. The unions have organised no effective action, limiting their demands to no compulsory redundancies, and, as at Debenhams, to be included in talks to facilitate restructuring.

Further protests in support of bus workers in northwest England

A further protest started at 4 a.m. Wednesday outside the Go North West bus depot at Queens Road in Manchester, England.

Drivers are balloting on industrial action to oppose increased productivity, attacks on sick pay and a £2,000 cut in annual salary at the Queen's Road depot. The company tried to impose the attacks during lockdown, when 80 percent of the workforce was furloughed.

Protesters, including Unite union members, walked up and down the exit road to the depot, slowing the departure of buses. Eventually police moved in to stop the protest, manhandling protesters according to one tweet.

Later in the day, protesters lobbied the Greater Manchester Combined Chief Executive in support of the bus workers. They also went to Manchester Town Hall to call on Labour's Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham to intervene in support of the bus workers. The mayoral office is responsible for transport in Manchester.

Earlier action took place on August 27, when Unite trade union members protested outside Manchester's Shudehill Interchange bus station.

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.

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

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

Drug and alcohol support workers in northwest England in further strike action

Drug, alcohol and mental health support staff working for the charity We Are With You, in Wigan and Leigh, northwest England, voted for further strike action. The 29 Unison members are to strike this month. The vote for action was unanimous on an 87 percent turnout.

The workers have so far taken 16 days of strike action in a fight to bring their pay and work conditions in line with those of National Health Service staff. The rehab workers previously worked for the NHS and were promised their previous terms of employment would remain when they transferred to the charity. According to the Unison union, the workers could each lose an average of £9,500 over the next five years.

Protest by Hungarian drama students

On Monday, drama students at Budapest Theatre and Film University occupied the building and held a press conference. They are opposed to the appointment of a new supervisory board at the institution and a new funding mechanism.

The students are calling for the resignation of the board and the resumption of state funding. The leadership and senate body at the university resigned on Monday in opposition to the changes.

Strike vote by Irish construction-related workers

Around 4,000 plumbers, fitters, welders and construction workers in Ireland have voted unanimously to strike. The Unite union members have threatened to walk out if employers attempt to cut pay and impose inferior conditions. They are also demanding a 2.7 percent pay rise, due this week.

The threat by some employers to reduce their terms and conditions follows a recent high court ruling. The ruling stated legally binding Sectoral Employment Orders (SEO) made between unions and employers relating to pay and conditions across a whole sector were unconstitutional. The challenge was initiated by electrical contractors. The result of a Unite ballot covering non-mechanical construction employees is expected September 14.

A ballot of Connect union members, representing over 23,000 workers, over the same issue is expected mid-September. The Services, Industrial and Professional Trade Union (SIPTU) is also balloting for possible strike action if the construction SEO is broken.

Irish airport staff to be balloted over pay cuts

Workers at Shannon airport, Ireland, are to be balloted over airport plans to impose 20 percent pay cuts. SIPTU represents around 75 percent of Shannon airport's 245 staff.

COVID-19 has had a huge impact on flights from the airport. Flight activity is still down almost 90 percent compared to last year.

Shannon airport opened a voluntary redundancy scheme, which closed on August 28.

The Irish airline Aer Lingus is rumoured to be considering pulling out of its Shannon base and transferring its bases to the UK. This would leave only American Airlines offering transatlantic flight to America.

Protest by former Irish nursing home staff

Former Irish care staff who worked at nursing homes run by the Sisters of Charity in Dublin protested on Wednesday outside St Monica's nursing home. The Sisters of Charity announced in July its intention to close St Monica's and St Mary's homes due to a financial shortfall.

At a hearing at the beginning of August, the Labour Court ruled the 64 Forsa, SIPTU and INMO trade union members made redundant by the charity were entitled to redundancy terms in line with public sector employees. The protest is to demand the charity pay the redundancy terms in line with the Labour Court ruling.

German public sector workers lodge pay claim

Around 2.3 million German public sector workers in federal government and municipalities have lodged a 4.8 percent pay rise claim for the next 12-month period.

Initial talks between the Verdi and Deutsche Beamte Bund trade unions and employers' representatives took place in Potsdam on Tuesday. Further talks are scheduled for later in the month and in October.

Public sector workers, particularly in health care, play a leading role in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and are demanding a fully funded pay rise. However, the financial impact of the pandemic has heavily hit municipalities.

Israeli public sector workers' dispute

On Tuesday, the Israeli trade union confederation Histadrut declared a labour dispute involving public sector workers.

The Israeli government is intending to impose pay cuts on the 700,000 public sector workers. Under Israeli law union bodies must give two weeks notice of a dispute before taking action.

Strike of Israeli lab staff

Around 2,000 Israeli laboratory staff based at around 400 public medical

laboratory facilities began an all-out strike on Sunday.

The staff, who want higher pay, are continuing to process COVID-19 tests but only notifying positive results so further epidemiological tests can be completed. They are also carrying out other emergency diagnostic procedures.

On Tuesday, hundreds of striking lab workers picketed the home of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. They demanded he intervene to resolve the dispute. Some held slogans reading, “No medicine without labs!”

South African workers plan general strike

South African workers are planning a general strike on October 7 in protest against corruption in the country and the government’s failure to protect workers in the COVID-19 crisis.

Congress of South African trade unions members oppose government plans to cut \$10 billion from public sector wages over the next three years.

South Africa has 630,595 cases of COVID-19 and 14,389 deaths.

Health workers in South Africa set for national strike

South African health care workers are planning a national walkout on September 10, unless the government agrees to provide greater protection from COVID-19 and an increase in salaries that should have been awarded in April.

Workers at South Africa’s National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS) had planned to strike nationally on August 28 over low pay and lack of PPE but were prohibited by a Labour Court order, which deemed them essential workers.

The order means that the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) members will be breaking the law if they promote or encourage any strike action or other conduct in pursuit of their demands. The NHLS can then call on the South African Police Service to force them back to work.

Despite this, the workers still plan to join the national strike in September.

South African Ivanplats miners in Limpopo protest over jobs and pay

Miners at Ivanplats mine in Limpopo province, South Africa, marched through the town of Mokopane on August 27, to protest against 313 planned redundancies.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) members appealed to the country’s Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). The firm is blaming job losses on the COVID-19 situation even though they have not applied to the government for COVID-19 relief funding. They have also not consulted the government’s Department of Mineral Resources, which administers mining rights.

At another mine, Kumba Iron Ore, the largest iron ore mining operation in South Africa and the fourth largest in the world, the NUM went to the CCMA to dispute the failure of the employer to honour a previously agreed wage increase. The firm says it will only implement the salary rise if workers agree to forgo up to 120 days’ sick leave. The miners say they

have already made enough compromises.

Nigerian doctors’ stoppage in capital city

Doctors in Abuja, the capital city of Nigeria, began indefinite strike action starting on September 1. The strike will continue until payment of the COVID-19 hazard and inducement allowance and the implementation of promised promotions.

The Nigerian government promised a special COVID-19 hazard and inducement allowance of 50 percent of Consolidated Basic Salary to health workers in Nigerian Teaching Hospitals and other medical centres.

The doctors say they are in financial hardship and their complaints are ignored.

Nigeria has 54,463 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 1,027 fatalities.

Nigerian industrial court issues order banning strike

On August 24, the industrial court in Enugu State, Nigeria, issued a ruling banning the planned strike action by the state’s health workers. No details are yet available how far the court ruling has stopped the strike.

Doctors are angry that the hazard allowance being paid by the state government is half that recommended by the Federal Government.

Local government workers protest non-payment in Rivers State, Nigeria

On August 27, more than 110 local government workers in Rivers State, Nigeria, stormed the State Government House and House of Assembly Complex in Port Harcourt, the state capital. The workers have not been paid their wages for more than a year.

Diamond miners in Letšeng mine in Lesotho demand payment for overtime

Diamond miners at Letšeng mine in Lesotho are demanding closure of a government loophole allowing employers not to pay for overtime.

Most employers in Lesotho are legally bound to pay for overtime, but the government issued an exemption for the mining companies.

In October 2019, the government renewed Gem Diamond’s lease to work Letšeng mine for another 10 years and gave it exclusive rights for further renewals.

Letšeng mine is 70 percent owned by Gem Diamonds with the rest owned by the Lesotho government. Since Gem Diamonds took it over in 2006, it has extracted more than 60 white gem-quality diamonds over 100 carats each, making Letšeng the highest dollar-per-carat diamond mine in the world.

Judiciary staff members hold protest in Liberia against nonpayment

of salaries

Employees of the judiciary in Liberia demonstrated at the Temple of Justice in Monrovia on August 26 in protest at 11 months without payment of their salaries. The employees complained that they had not been paid since October 2019.

The amount owed to each member of staff is about 250,000 Liberian dollars.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact