

National stoppage planned in France over job losses; Nigeria's doctors resume strike for PPE; South African protests for PPE met with police brutality

## Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

11 September 2020

### Nationwide strike planned by workers across France

Workers in different sectors of French industry are planning a nationwide strike on September 17. The call made by the Stalinist CGT union is expected to include the rail sector and public sector workers in the FSU union, including teachers in opposition to French government social policy. In all, seven trade unions are involved.

Around 600,000 jobs have been lost in France since the pandemic hit Europe. Workers are demanding a reversal of job losses, wage increases, more public services and the scrapping of pension reforms.

### Strike plans by Spanish plane makers

Spanish aerospace workers are to strike on September 22. The Spanish aerospace industry employs over 100,000 workers. The UGT and CCOO members are opposing the utilisation of the COVID-19 pandemic to cut jobs.

European-wide Airbus said it intends to lay off 900 of its Spanish-based employees. Spain has recorded over half a million COVID-19 cases, and in April to June its economy shrank by over 18 percent.

### Bus drivers strike in two Cypriot cities

Over 200 bus drivers at Cyprus Public Transport Ltd (CPT) in Nicosia and Larnaca walked out on September 1. Among other issues, the PEO union members took action because following CPT's takeover of the two bus services in July they have not been paid for overtime.

The Larnaca drivers returned to work on September 2, and those in Nicosia on September 3, after the company reimbursed some of the outstanding arrears. A committee of drivers' representatives has been set up to monitor the outstanding payments.

### Protests by German care workers in Berlin

German workers employed by the Humanist Association (HVD), which runs nurseries and hospices, rallied outside an HVD meeting in Berlin on Monday. The Verdi and GEW union members were protesting HVD's decision to end collective pay bargaining.

### Underground protest by Ukrainian iron ore miners

On Tuesday, nearly 400 iron miners at four separate mines held underground protests. The iron ore mines are in the central Ukrainian city of Kryvyi Rih. Their demands include a wage increase and improved working conditions.

### Protests by Debenhams redundant retail staff in Ireland and Manchester, England continue

Former staff of the retail chain Debenhams have maintained pickets and protests outside the company's 11 Irish sites for over 150 days. The pickets are preventing the company from removing contents from the closed stores.

Debenhams employed around 1,000 staff throughout its 11 stores. Workers are protesting the redundancy terms, set at the statutory minimum of two weeks' pay per year of service with a €600 a week cap. This amounts to around €10–11 million for the entire workforce. The SIPTU and Mandate union members are seeking an additional €10–11 million. They have rejected an additional €1 million offer put forward by the liquidator KPMG.

Debenhams is also carrying out cuts among its workforce in England. USDAW trade union members at the Debenhams store in Manchester have held weekly protests calling for enhanced redundancy payments. A further protest will take place on Saturday outside the store on Market Street in Manchester city centre, beginning at 3 p.m.

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 in the UK with the closure of department stores and distribution centres.

The unions have organised no industrial action, limiting their demands to no compulsory redundancies and to be included in talks to facilitate

restructuring.

### **Further protest at northwest England bus company depot**

This week the results of a consultative ballot by the Unite trade union of drivers employed by bus company Go North West saw a vote of 94 percent in favour of industrial action.

The company is seeking to fire the entire the workforce and reemploy them on inferior conditions. Workers oppose attempts to increase productivity, attacks on sick pay and a £2,000 cut in annual salary at the depot. The company tried to impose the attacks during lockdown, when 80 percent of the workforce was furloughed.

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

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

Around 50 protesters held a demonstration outside the Go North West bus depot in Queen's Road in Manchester on Wednesday. The protest, beginning at 5 a.m., led to delays in buses leaving the depot and disrupted the timetable. The protest was not called by the Unite trade union, who represent the Go North West drivers. The protest included members of Momentum, who are supporters of former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Unite is opposed to industrial action, and instead appealed to top executives of the Go North West's group nationally to resolve the dispute. Prior to the strike vote being announced General Secretary Len McCluskey wrote to CEO David Brown, saying the union would expose "your company's behaviour to all of your stakeholders, partners and associates. This will include mobilising all of our allies and contacting our significant political network in the Nordic countries, Germany and Australasia." Go Ahead is one of the UK's largest bus and train operators and is seeking to expand operations into Scandinavia.

He concluded with an appeal for the firm to "get around the negotiating table."

### **Strike by housing repair staff in Brighton and Hove, southeast England**

Workers at Brighton and Hove City Council (BHCC) Housing Repairs team began a five-day strike on Monday. They are protesting against BHCC's reneging on a promise to implement a pay raise the workers were awarded under their previous employer Mears.

The workers were transferred back in house to BHCC under Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) regulations on the understanding they would receive the increased pay and improved sickness and holiday schemes previously negotiated.

### **Shop workers at The Range store in Bristol, England walk out over coronavirus fears**

Some workers at the Stoke Gifford, Bristol branch of home and leisure

chain The Range have walked out after a colleague contracted COVID-19. The infected worker was working recently but is now self-isolating.

One worker, speaking anonymously, told press that the company had not allowed them time off, even as holiday leave, for testing. "We have been told that if we leave work or do not turn up because of the COVID scare then we will be in disciplinary."

Stores are not required to close if employees test positive, and the branch remains open. The worker said the company is "refusing to close the store for a deep clean even though the infected member of staff was in store for a week."

With workers "being asked to choose between our health or the job," several had walked out.

The chain has claimed that its shops are safe. The worker said, "We feel like we have no power or say and that the business is putting their profits first. ... They are putting money before [staff] and they should be held accountable."

### **Staff vote to strike at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies**

Staff at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) voted by a nearly three-quarter majority on a turnout of over 70 percent to take strike action.

The Unison members are opposed to SOAS's plans to implement compulsory redundancies as part of its Transformation and Change restructure plans.

### **Strike of Iranian sugar production continues**

Iranian workers at the Haft Tappeh sugar production facility marked their 85th day of strike action Monday. They held a rally outside the office of the governor in Shush. Workers are demanding immediate payment of all wage arrears, the reinstatement of sacked employees, for an independent workers committee and for the company to be brought back under public ownership.

Omid Asadbeigi, former CEO and Mehrdad Rostami, former chair of the Haft Tappeh board are currently on trial for fraud. The complex built more than 50 years ago was privatised in 2015.

US sanctions reimposed 21 months ago have slashed exports of Iran's crude oil by 80 percent, leading to price hikes in basic necessities and medicines.

### **Israeli laboratory workers end strike**

The strike by 2,000 Israeli laboratory technicians based at around 400 facilities ended on Sunday, after an eight-day stoppage. Following talks between the Histadrut trade union federation and health and finance ministry representatives, an agreement was reached to increase laboratory workers' pay. According to press reports, the workers were seeking a minimum wage of \$15 an hour. Details of the settlement were not immediately available.

Technicians in public laboratories continued to provide emergency cover, including COVID-19 testing, throughout the dispute. They earn

much less than those in the private sector, leading to recruitment and retention problems.

### **South African health care workers face police violence in national protest over unsafe work conditions**

Police used stun grenades and water cannons to disperse health care workers demonstrating at the South African parliament in Cape Town on September 3 as part of a nationwide day of action.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union members tried to present a statement of demands to parliament as demonstrations took place simultaneously in all nine provinces. The workers want the government to provide adequate personal protective equipment and other measures to ensure that workplaces comply with health and safety legislation. These include proper risk assessments and infection control, the right to quarantine with pay and the immediate establishment of health committees in all workplaces.

If the president does not meet their demands, the workers will hold an all-out national strike on September 10. “We will withdraw the services of all our nurses, cleaners and porters,” they say. “Only the patients will remain in hospitals.”

South Africa has had 642,431 cases of COVID-19 and 15,168 deaths.

### **Airline employees in South Africa refuse to bear burden of economic collapse**

Workers at stricken South African airline Comair forced the company to agree payment of outstanding health insurance contributions before they accept a proposed business rescue plan.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa members threatened to take the airline to the Labour Court in Johannesburg and may still do so if a waiver of unpaid salaries is part of company proposals.

At the state-owned SA Express, 691 former employees have sought representation from the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC). The commission said their human rights have been infringed because of a failure to pay them and provide redundancy packages before the company went into liquidation.

The SAHRC wrote to the government requesting that the violation of their human rights be addressed before the final liquidation order is implemented this week.

### **Nigerian doctors resume strike against poor conditions and lack of safety equipment**

On September 7, doctors in Nigeria began strike action two months after they resumed work as none of the issues have been addressed.

National Association of Resident Doctors of Nigeria members are demanding personal protective equipment, life insurance, residency and payment of basic salaries.

Other health workers in the Joint Health Sector Unions and Assembly of Health Care Professionals are preparing for a nationwide strike September 13. Demands include immediate payment of the shortfall in COVID-19 allowances for non-clinical staff in federal health institutions from its

current limit of 10 percent to the agreed level of 50 percent of basic salaries.

Nigeria has 55,632 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 1,070 deaths.

### **Rivers State government in Nigeria bans workers from demonstrating**

The government of Rivers State, Nigeria won an injunction at the National Industrial Court in Lagos to ban a protest scheduled for September 8.

The demonstration was called by the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) to protest the state government’s non-payment of salaries for a year to workers including teachers and health care workers, non-payment of arrears due to promotions, and non-payment of pensions and gratuities to its retired workers since 2015.

Professor Zacchaeus Adangor, the state attorney general and commissioner for Justice of Rivers State, claimed the government “will not engage in any act of illegality in confronting the monster of lawlessness which the organised labour now appears to epitomise.”

The NLC has avoided calling any action in Rivers State. Trade union leaders have gone underground for fear of harassment by the authorities.

On August 27, more than 110 local government workers stormed the State Government House and House of Assembly Complex in Port Harcourt, the state capital.

### **Zimbabwe: Mineworkers blockade mine entrance to oppose slave-labour conditions**

Miners at a Chinese-owned coal mine in Hwange, Zimbabwe blockaded the entrance to the company premises on Friday September 4, to protest low pay and super-exploitation.

Zimberly Investment employs over 200 people supplying coal to the Zimbabwe Power Company.

Previous attempts to raise grievances led to the dismissal of the leaders of their workers’ committee, Lovemore Mwinde and Calym Phiri.

Workers are demanding that a part of their salaries is paid in US dollars as the Zimbabwean dollar is losing its value every month due to runaway inflation over 800 percent.

They have to work up to 18 hours a day—starting at 7 a.m. and finishing at midnight, even on weekends—without being paid extra for overtime. An employee said they were worked so hard, it felt “like they want us to die at work.”

The workers are also demanding provision of personal protective equipment. A worker, Godfrey Ganagana, died at Jena Mine in Zimbabwe due to carbon monoxide poisoning.

It is believed he died from carbon monoxide after he entered a zone with broken pipes containing compressed air and water,” according to Zimbabwe Diamond and Allied Minerals Workers Union General Secretary Justice Chinhema, condemning the company for negligence.



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