

Retail workers continue protests in Ireland and UK; South African and Nigerian health workers walk out; union sells out Zimbabwe nurses' strike

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

18 September 2020

Ongoing protests by redundant Debenhams staff in Ireland and Manchester, UK

Staff made redundant at the Cork branch of Debenhams in Ireland occupied the store for two days last week. The occupation was part of a campaign by former Debenhams staff to win improved redundancy terms.

The UK-based retailer shut down its 11 stores in Ireland earlier this year, making over 1,000 staff redundant. Since the closure, the Mandate and SIPTU union members have picketed outside the closed store. The action has been taking place over 160 days.

The pickets are demanding liquidators KPMG agree to pay redundant staff four week's pay for each year of service, rather than the statutory two weeks. The offer of an extra day's pay for each year of service has been rejected. Since the stores closed, pickets have prevented the liquidators from removing stock from the closed stores.

On Saturday, around 20 demonstrated outside the UK's Debenhams store in Manchester. The USDAW trade union members have held weekly protests demanding enhanced redundancy payments or to be furloughed.

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.

High street stores began shedding jobs before the pandemic due to competition from online retailers. They have been particularly hard hit since lockdown. The unions have limited action to protests, calls for no compulsory redundancies and pleas for talks with the company.

Protest by taxi drivers in Irish capital

Around 1,000 taxi drivers held a protest in Dublin on Tuesday to demand financial support from the Irish government. The taxi drivers from all over Ireland, including Cork, Galway, Kerry and Kilkenny, gathered outside Phoenix Park before processing in convoy to government buildings.

The National Private Hire & Taxi Association, the Irish Taxi Drivers Federation, and the Taxi Alliance of Ireland and Tiománaí Tacaí na hÉireann members are calling for additional support to help them resume their trade. They currently get €203 or €350 a week from the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), depending on their previous earnings.

Demand for taxi services dropped by 70 percent during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Demand is still low, and if all taxi drivers currently in receipt of PUP returned to work demand would be even lower.

Gerard Macken of the Taxi Alliance of Ireland told the *Irish Times* several drivers had committed suicide in recent months because of financial hardship.

Strike threat by Irish building workers

Around 13,000 building workers in Ireland members have given 14 days' notice of possible industrial action. This follows the refusal of some construction firms to implement a previously agreed pay rise of 2.7 percent, due from September 1.

The Unite and Connect unions announced the possible action on Tuesday following a meeting between the unions and the employer's representatives, the Mechanical Engineering Building Services Contractors Association (MEBSCA) and the Construction Industry Federation (CIF).

The workers involved are in the mechanical contracting sector, which includes fitting air conditioning, heating and ventilation equipment in buildings under construction. Those employers who have not implemented the increase are wanting to defer, citing financial strictures associated with the pandemic.

Separately, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions has announced that workers in five member unions, BATU, Connect, OPATSI, SIPTU and Unite, voted overwhelmingly to take industrial action should employers fail to pay an agreed increase due on October 1 under a construction Sectional Employment Order (SEO). SEOs cover pay and conditions of employment.

In the summer, the Irish High Court ruled SEOs unconstitutional following a legal challenge by employers in the electrical contracting sector. The Connect union has 25,000 members covered by three separate SEOs.

The court also ruled that SEOs covering the mechanical construction and construction sectors were unconstitutional. However, following an appeal, the court put a stay on that decision, leaving two SEOs still legal.

The SEO covering general construction should lead to a pay increase of 2.7 percent on October 1. If the terms of the SEO are ignored, industrial

action could begin. The employers organisations MEBSCA and CIF want the terms of the SEO to be deferred until March 2021, or until a new SEO is negotiated. The employers argue their costs have grown due to COVID-19 and they cannot afford the proposed rise.

Redundant Irish health care staff protest

Around 65 Irish care staff were made redundant by the Sisters of Charity when it closed its St. Monica's and St. Mary's nursing homes after liquidity problems. On September 9, they held a protest outside St. Mary's and the Caritas centre on Merrion Road in Dublin.

The Forsa, INMO and SIPTU union members are seeking fair redundancy terms. The Health Service Executive and Sisters of Charity organisation were ordered by the Labour Court to resolve the issue but have so far failed to do so.

Protest marches by UK health workers

Hundreds of UK health workers marched through London on Saturday demanding a 15 percent pay rise. While Boris Johnson's Tory government announced a measly pay rise for 900,000 public sector workers to supposedly thank them for their contribution during the pandemic, this did not include nurses or doctors.

Following a minute's silence for the 640 health care staff who have died of the disease, they marched through central London.

Around 50 attended the National Health Service (NHS) protest in Piccadilly gardens, Manchester.

Attacks on pay and conditions, austerity cuts and privatisation of the National Health Service have proceeded with the tacit support of the health unions and Labour Party.

Striking Tate London art gallery staff hold protest march

Around 150 gallery staff at the UK's Tate gallery in London held a protest march to Parliament Square on Saturday. They have been on indefinite strike for over three weeks.

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members are employed in retail, catering and publishing services across Tate Enterprises.

In June, the museum announced plans to cut 313 jobs from its commercial arm. The workers voted by a near 90 percent majority on a large turnout to strike. On August 12, the Tate confirmed the job cuts.

The strikers' demands include that the Tate use 10 percent of a government £7 million grant to defend jobs, that no redundancies take place while senior staff are in receipt of six-figure salaries, and that the gallery join the union in demanding a bigger bailout from the government.

An open letter in support of the striking Tate gallery workers was signed by 300 artists, supporting the call for the Tate to use 10 percent of the £7 million government bailout money to save jobs. Signatories included 2008 Turner prize winner, Mark Leckey, as well as four of last year's winners. Renowned filmmaker Ken Loach also signed.

Strike vote by Moroccan pilots

On August 25, the Moroccan national airline Royal Air Maroc (RAM) laid off 140 employees, including 65 pilots. On September 2, the pilot's association AMPL announced that 308 out of 469 members balloted had voted in favour of striking if RAM does not reinstate the sacked workers.

South African health workers in further strike action

One hundred striking health workers picketed outside Livingstone Hospital in Port Elizabeth, South Africa on Monday.

This followed a day of action by health workers nationally September 3, during which police used stun grenades and water cannons to disperse demonstrators at the South African parliament in Cape Town.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union members are demanding adequate COVID-19 protection in the workplace, quarantine with pay, health committees in all workplaces and a salary increase. More action is planned next month, with support expected from other government employees including the South African Revenue Service and the South African Social Security Agency.

South Africa has 653,444 cases of COVID-19 and 15,705 deaths.

Health professionals in Lesotho to strike for better pay and conditions

Health professionals will strike nationally on Monday for the third time this year if the Lesotho government does not honour promised COVID-19 risk allowances and provide adequate personal protective equipment.

The workers first struck in April. The government agreed to their demands, but by July had not fulfilled them. This prompted further action, resulting in further promises. The allowances have still not been paid.

Lesotho has 1,327 cases of COVID-19 and 33 deaths.

Zimbabwe health union sells out nurses' three-month pay strike

The Zimbabwe Nurses Association (ZINA) ordered its 16,000 members end their stoppage, begun in June, without any firm pay rise. The union claimed that it would give the Health Minister and Vice President Constantino Chiwenga "a chance to resolve grievances" based on a promise to improve salaries and working conditions.

Chiwenga was previously responsible for sacking all striking nurses at public health centres, before rehiring them on worse conditions.

With inflation at over 800 percent, workers cannot afford the basic essentials or even travel costs to work. ZINA members also demanded President Emmerson Mnangagwa's government pay them in US dollars.

Nigerian doctors' union calls off strike as other health workers walk out

The National Association of Resident Doctors called off the national

strike on September 10, four days after it began. The union advised doctors at a regional level to stay on strike where their demands had not been met.

The doctors walked out in response to the lack of life insurance for those treating COVID-19 patients, the underfunding of the residency programme, substandard hazard allowances and unpaid arrears. Resident doctors make up a large proportion of doctors in Nigeria's tertiary hospitals.

The strike ended as other health workers decided to strike from midnight on September 13. The health workers' demands are similar to those of the doctors, including payment of hazard and inducement allowances.

The Joint Health Sector Unions met with the government the same day the doctors' strike was ended. The union said its 15-day ultimatum had expired without significant progress.

The government denounced the strike as "illegal," citing rules set down by the International Labour Organisation.

Kenyan lecturers lambast union failures

Lecturers in Egerton University, Kenya, accused the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) of staying "silent as the university management continues to slash our salaries." Salaries have been cut by 40 percent since March.

Spokesman Professor Mwaniki Ngare, at a meeting in Nakuru on September 12, stated, "UASU has failed on its duties, it no longer represents the interest of its members."

The lecturers are demanding immediate payment of their full salaries. They believe the university's financial crisis is not due to COVID-19 but is the result of corruption.

"We demand a thorough forensic audit of the overall management of the university in the last four years," said Ngare.

Kenya has 36,393 confirmed coronavirus cases and 637 deaths.

Liberian health workers begin indefinite strike

Auxiliary health workers in Liberia began an indefinite stoppage at midnight on Wednesday despite being told that strikers would be dismissed.

The National Health Workers' Union of Liberia members said the government reneged on a Memorandum of Understanding. They are demanding a clear salary base for each grade corresponding with the health worker's qualifications, that health care workers who have upgraded their professional status be reclassified, and that the policy document on redeployment and transfer be suspended until the union have had a say.

Liberia has had 1,332 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 82 deaths.



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