

Strikes by Greek doctors and ferry workers, UK's London underground rail drivers' strike vote, South African health workers continue protests over pay and COVID-19 safety measures

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

25 September 2020

Strike and rally by Greek doctors

Greek doctors staged a 24-hour strike on Thursday. The Federation of Hospital Doctor Associations of Greece (OENGE) members held a rally outside the Ministry of Health in Athens at noon. They are protesting staff shortages and lack of infrastructure in the health system. Doctors point out that 67 percent of intensive care unit beds are being used by COVID-19 patients and this is likely to increase.

The doctors say the overwhelming impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, together with the lack of health staff and resources, has meant the Greek health system has become a "one-illness system." Other health problems are being neglected.

Greece has had 16,627 coronavirus cases with 366 fatalities.

Ferry workers' stoppage at Greek port

Greek seafarers on ferries out of the Port of Piraeus held a 24-hour strike Thursday. The seafarers represented by five unions are seeking a new collective bargaining contract and pay increase.

They are also protesting a recent regulation brought in by the Shipping Ministry, which would allow merchant ships over 3,000 tons to sign international agreements covering junior crew, second lieutenants and third engineers. Such agreements would undermine current conditions.

UK's London Underground rail drivers vote for industrial action

UK drivers working for London's underground rail system voted last by a 95 percent majority on a 70 percent turnout to take industrial action. The ASLEF union members are opposed to moves by their employer, Transport for London, to change their terms and conditions.

The union has not set a date for any industrial action.

Irish secondary school teachers to be balloted for strike

Irish Secondary school teachers will ballot for strike action in opposition to the unsafe conditions since the reopening of schools.

On September 19, the central executive committee of the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) agreed to ballot around 15,000 teachers.

Their concerns include lack of physical distancing, provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), inadequate testing procedures and the threat to staff with health problems. Other issues include implementation of new work practices without consultation and the insecurity of teachers on temporary contracts.

Strike threat by Irish medical staff

Public health doctors in Ireland in the frontline fight against the COVID-19 pandemic are threatening to ballot for industrial action including strikes. The Irish Medical Organisation (IMO) members want the Irish government to resolve their longstanding pay dispute.

A report issued in December 2018 recommended public health doctors be awarded consultant status with commensurate pay.

The doctors are calling for a ballot before Christmas if the government does not implement their demands.

French hotel cleaning staff strike enters 15th month

Around 25 hotel housekeepers at the Ibis Batignolles hotel in Paris have been on strike since July 2019. The hotel is part of the Accor group, but the housekeepers are employed by cleaning contractors SAS-STN. The mainly immigrant workers, CGT-HPE union members, are seeking parity of working conditions with staff directly employed by Accor.

Underground protest by Ukrainian miners continues

Monday marked the 18th day of an underground protest by 29 iron ore

miners at the Oktyabrskaya mine in the Ukraine. They began their protest on September 3 and were followed a few days later by over 350 miners at other mines in the same group.

Among their demands are a pay rise, improved pension and safety measures to be enforced. They are also demanding a change of management. Since last week supporters of the miners have been protesting outside state authority buildings in Kiev.

Unofficial picket by sacked catering staff in Irish capital

Around 10 Irish catering staff at the former Allied Irish Bank (AIB) HQ in Dublin set up an unofficial picket line following notice that their jobs no longer existed. On September 4, they were notified their last day of employment would be September 11.

The catering staff at AIB were outsourced to Aramark in 2018. The staff had originally been expecting to be made redundant when the kitchens closed at the end of November this year, but the date was brought forward.

The SIPTU trade union members are demanding redundancy terms of two weeks' pay per year of service plus four weeks' pay rather than the statutory two weeks' pay per year plus three weeks' pay.

Threatened strike by Irish construction workers called off

A strike threat by Irish construction workers in the mechanical construction sector was called off after employers agreed a 2.7 percent pay rise. The Unite and Connect trade union members had threatened to walk out if their employers' body, the Mechanical Engineering Building Services Contractors Association, failed to honour the agreed rise.

Mechanical construction workers are responsible for installing heating, ventilation and air conditioning infrastructure in buildings. The employers initially threatened to break the construction industry Sectional Employment Order (SEO), which included the promised pay rise.

In the summer, the Irish High Court ruled SEOs unconstitutional following a legal challenge by employers in the electrical contracting sector. The court also ruled that SEOs covering the mechanical construction and general construction sectors were unconstitutional. However, following an appeal the court put a stay on that decision, leaving two SEOs still legal.

General construction workers are threatening to strike if the SEO covering their sector is not implemented on October 1, or if their terms and conditions worsen. Under the agreement the workers are due a 2.7 percent pay increase from October 1. BATU, Connect, OPATSI, SIPTU and Unite members working in the general construction sector previously agreed to strike if the SEO was not honoured.

Rehabilitation staff strike in Wigan and Leigh, northwest England

Drug and alcohol rehabilitation staff, who provide mental health support in northwest England, began a 10-day strike on Monday, after a 100 percent majority vote in favour. They are staging socially distanced picket lines and are to hold a virtual rally.

They work for the We Are With You charity based in Wigan and Leigh. Around 30 Unison union members are fighting 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.

The workers estimate they are likely to lose around a quarter of a million pounds between them under the new contract. They have already taken 16 days of strike action.

Third 24-hour strike by biscuit workers in Scottish capital

Scottish workers at the Burton's biscuit factory in Edinburgh held their third 24-hour strike on Wednesday. The GMB union members are working to rule and have imposed an overtime ban. They voted by a 91 percent majority to take the action after the company only offered a 1.6 percent pay rise. Burton's make well-known favourites such as Jammie Dodgers and Wagon Wheels.

Housing repair staff in Brighton, southeast England plan further strike

Workers at Brighton and Hove City Council (BHCC) Housing Repairs team are to begin a 10-day strike on September 28. They are protesting against minority Green Party-led 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.

Dispute at Go North West in Manchester, UK continues as driver representative returns to work

Sacked Unite trade union representative Colin Hayden at the Go North West bus company in Manchester in northwest England was due to return to work September 24. The dispute, however, continues. The drivers voted by a 94 percent majority for industrial action in a recent "consultative" ballot. They are opposing moves by Go North West to attack their pay, terms, and conditions.

Go North West is part of the multi-billion-pound Go Ahead group. It intends to fire the whole workforce of 477 workers and then rehire them, forcing them to accept inferior job contracts, including an increase in hours worked that will be unpaid, and reduced sick pay.

Go North West have offered a one-off payment of £5,000 to compensate for a cut in drivers pay by an average of £3,500 a year. Last year, Go North West purchased the Queens Road depot from another bus company, First Manchester, along with its fleet of 163 buses.

Unite is opposed to industrial action and is appealing 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.

Unite is calling for the firm to “get around the negotiating table.”

Journalists in the Midlands, England withdraw strike threat

UK journalists working for the Bullivant media group have withdrawn the threat of a further three days of strike action after concessions from the company. The Bullivant media group publishes 18 newspaper titles in the West Midlands area, including Warwickshire and Worcestershire.

After a vote in July, the National Union of Journalist (NUJ) members took two days of strike action in August and two in September.

They were protesting unauthorised deductions from wages at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, non-editorial staff being directed to carry out editorial roles and the threat to make five journalists redundant.

The Bullivant group agreed to repay the deductions from wages and the number of redundancies was reduced from five to three. Two workers have taken voluntary redundancy while one journalist, the father of the NUJ chapel (branch head), was made compulsorily redundant.

South African health workers continue protests over COVID-19 danger and pay

Frontline health workers demonstrated Monday outside the Union Buildings, Pretoria, seat of the South African government and the office of ANC President Cyril Ramaphosa. They are still waiting for a response to their petition submitted to parliament earlier in the month, despite police attempts to disperse them with water cannon and stun grenades.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) members plan to strike nationally alongside other public sector workers if their demands for greater COVID-19 safety and an increase in salary, including risk allowances, are not met.

As of September 11, 32,429 health workers had contracted the virus with 257 deaths. There have been 16,206 deaths and 665,188 cases in the country.

South African youth in Port Elizabeth shut down mall demanding jobs

Young unemployed men and women shut down a renovated shopping centre in Port Elizabeth, South Africa on September 17, demanding employment in the newly opened shops.

Over 80 young people protested, preventing shoppers entering the mall until they presented their petition to management. They say they had been promised jobs by a local councillor and if they do not get a positive response will shut down the shopping centre indefinitely.

Workers at South African student welfare scheme to strike over pay

Office workers at South Africa’s National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) will strike next week after the government funded body refused to award a pay increase.

The NSFAS, which runs a support programme for marginalised students, says it cannot afford to pay more because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the NEHAWU members say this is an excuse as its budget was awarded before the onset of lockdown.

Communications workers in Johannesburg face intimidation in fight for wage increase

Workers at South African ICT distributors Mustek are striking to force their demand for a 20 percent wage increase and housing subsidy.

The Communication Workers Union members have been picketing the firm’s head office in Johannesburg since September 15, despite Mustek using legislation to limit the workers’ action and security guards in riot gear to intimidate them. Mustek recently posted profits up 9 percent from the previous year.

Nigerian unions sell out health workers’ strike

Nigerian health workers, who began striking just as doctors were returning to work, were ordered by the Joint Health Sector Unions (JOHESU) to end their strike on September 21.

The strike had begun at midnight on September 13. The demands included payment of hazard allowances and were similar to those of the doctors.

While calling for a “suspension” of the action, JOHESU accused the Federal Government of having “resorted to intimidation and blackmail of JOHESU leaders using all forms of instruments and faceless organisations.”

Nigeria has recorded 57,724 coronavirus cases and 1,102 deaths.

Nigerian bakers strike to protest hike in flour price

Nigerian bakers in Lagos and Abuja went on strike on September 18 to protest increases in the price of flour and other bread ingredients.

Newspapers reported that flour millers had increased the price of flour several times between March and August 2020 during the pandemic.

Most bakers returned to work on September 21, but with prices increased.

Nurses and midwives in Ghana strike plans declared illegal

As over 80,000 Ghanaian nurses and midwives were preparing to take strike action on September 21, the National Labour Commission (NLC) obtained a court injunction to stop the strike from going ahead on the grounds that nurses are essential workers.

The nurses are demanding clothing allowances, increased call credit and risk allowances.

The Ghana Registered Nurses and Midwives Association and Physician Assistants and Certified Registered Anaesthetics called for action only after a series of negotiation meetings had failed to lead to agreement.

Kenyan health workers to strike for pay rise

Around 5,000 Kenyan health workers at the Kenyatta National Hospital in Nairobi will strike next Monday if they are not paid expected salary increases and extra allowances.

The members of three different health workers unions, comprising doctors, nurses, dentists, pharmacists and general hospital workers, are demanding the implementation of a resolution made by Kenya's State Corporations Advisory Committee that upgraded the status of the hospital in 2012 and should have resulted in pay rises.

Sacked retail workers in Kenya hold demonstration over unpaid wages

Retail staff recently sacked by Tuskys—Kenya's largest retailer—held a demonstration on September 18, to demand unpaid wages.

Over 45 former workers, who had been employed as contractors, said the company refused to honour its commitments since terminating their employment three months ago. Some were given post-dated cheques, others unsigned cheques.

Liberian government to replace striking health workers with new hires

The Liberian government plans to hire strike-breakers against a strike by health workers,

The strike began at midnight on September 16 and their demands include salary increases, reclassification of their roles and payment of hazard allowances.

The nurses and medical officers of the Armed Forces of Liberia whom the government has called in “will be given first preference as the government hires to fill the gaps.”

The National Health Workers Union of Liberia (NAHWUL) said the strike will continue until the government gives it certification as a union, with the demands that motivated the health workers to strike mentioned only later.



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