

British Gas strike vote; Nigerian unions sabotage struggle against price hikes; South African textile workers vote for national strike

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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Strike campaign by German public sector workers

Last week, German public sector workers began a series of short strikes in a campaign to win a 4.8 percent pay rise. Those taking part include hospital, childcare and drainage workers. A further round of talks between employers and the Verdi union are scheduled for October 23 and 24.

Strike of bus drivers in Norway ends

A bus drivers in Norway ended at noon on Thursday after being called off by the four transport unions. On September 21, 3,800 bus drivers in the Oslo and Viken areas walked out. They were joined on September 26 by an additional 4,500 drivers covering most of the country.

The drivers were protesting split shift arrangements and safety provision, as well as demanding a wage increase. According to the *lifeinnorway* news website the employers offered a one krone (\$0.11) an hour increase on the original pay offer for this year, and 2.5 kroner (\$.27) next year.

Former Irish Debenhams staff occupy closed store

Six former staff at the Waterford branch of Debenhams in southeast Ireland occupied the closed store and asked for their picket line to be honoured. The Mandate union members called on liquidator KPMG not to employ non-union staff to work as packers to box up and remove goods from the store. They are seeking enhanced redundancy terms.

The UK-based retail chain Debenhams employed around 1,000 staff throughout its 11 stores in Ireland. The former employees are protesting against 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. They are seeking an additional €10–11 million. They have rejected an additional €1 million offer put forward by the liquidator KPMG.

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. There have been protests every Saturday by USDAW members and supporters outside

the Manchester store.

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 or better redundancy terms and pleas for talks with the company.

Irish health staff to be balloted for industrial action

Irish health workers at state-funded voluntary bodies will be balloted for possible industrial action. The Section 39 workers are seeking restoration of their pay and conditions in line with staff working directly for the Irish Health Service Executive (HSE).

Following the 2008 financial crisis, cuts were imposed on health workers' pay and conditions. Those working for the HSE directly subsequently had some of their pay restored.

The Forasa and SIPTU trade unions have not decided which sectors will be involved, though it is likely action will be based in the Cork area. The Irish Taoiseach (prime minister) represents a Cork constituency.

Strike vote by postal workers in, Peterborough, eastern England

UK postal workers at Peterborough sorting office voted by a near 90 percent majority to strike. The Communication Workers Union (CWU) members are calling for the reinstatement of a colleague sacked in July.

March of theatre staff in UK capital

UK performers and theatre staff held a march through London on Wednesday, ending in Parliament Square.

The march, led by six actors dressed as pantomime dames, was organised to highlight the plight of performing workers caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was organised by the BECTU and Equity unions and the Excluded UK campaign group, who are calling for financial help for those currently not entitled to state aid.

The pantomime theme was to emphasise the importance of pantomimes to the finances of theatre, especially regional ones. Normal theatre productions are not allowed to take place because of COVID-19 restrictions. Equity general secretary-elect, Paul Fleming told *ITV Television News* that 40 percent of Equity union members have not received any financial support under COVID-19 measures. He said the industry was at the point of collapse, adding, “There’s only one pantomime villain performing this year and that’s [Chancellor of the Exchequer] Rishi Sunak.”

British Gas workers’ strike vote

British Gas workers have voted overwhelmingly for action against redundancies.

Centrica, the owner of UK energy supplier British Gas, posted a £1 billion loss in 2019. To overcome its financial difficulties the company plans a massive restructuring, cutting 5,000 out of its 20,000 workforce. It also plans to simplify the range of work contracts across the industry. Centrica announced it would be prepared to use a section 188 notice if negotiations fail—sacking and reinstating employees on different terms and conditions.

The GMB union, which has 10,000 members at British Gas, organised a consultative ballot. The result, announced August 19, was a 95 percent vote for industrial action on a two-thirds turnout of employees at British Gas and PH Jones, a heating installation subsidiary of British Gas.

The GMB notice of the ballot result called on the Centrica Board to “wake up and smell the gas,” adding, “British Gas was an historically proud British institution—but Centrica’s beleaguered management are betraying a once great brand—and their entire workforce.”

Other British Gas workers are represented by the Unison and Unite. In a press release dated September 21, Unison announced its intention to ballot its members over the fire and rehire plans. The press release also stated British Gas had served notice to end union recognition.

UK delivery drivers threaten strike action

Around 1,000 UK drivers working for delivery firm Yodel voted by 84 percent to reject a 1.6 percent pay offer this year, followed by a 1.5 percent rise from next July.

No industrial action has been announced by the GMB union, who have appealed to Yodel to come back with a better offer to avoid action in the build up to Christmas. Yodel along with other delivery companies has seen a massive increase in business due to COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions.

Scottish lecturers prepare to defend conditions

Lecturers at Forth Valley College in Falkirk, Scotland voted in a consultative ballot by more than 90 percent to reject plans by the college to downgrade their role from lecturers to trainers/assessors. The IES-FELA union members would lose thousands of pounds in salary in the regrading.

University staff in Scottish capital to be balloted for industrial action

Scottish academic staff at Edinburgh Heriot-Watt university will be balloted for industrial action. The University and College Union (UCU) members are opposed to plans by the university to make 130 staff redundant. The job cuts would mean increased workloads and less student contact time. The ballot closes October 20.

Textile workers in South Africa set for national strike

Workers in the South African carpet and textile industry have voted by 91 percent in favour of strike action over pay.

The South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union’s 100,000 members have voted for industrial action to demand a living wage. The employers’ association want a wage freeze, a reduction in night shift allowances and the cancellation of bonuses.

Power station workers in South Africa strike for better pay and conditions

Hundreds of contract workers with Eskom, South Africa’s state-owned electricity utility, went on strike Tuesday to protest non-payment of wages and poor working conditions.

The workers want permanent employment. The company generates around 95 percent of South Africa’s electricity.

South African ICT distribution workers defy legal threats in ongoing strike

South African production, transport, sales and packing workers at Johannesburg ICT firm Mustek are continuing their strike to demand a 20 percent wage increase, a housing subsidy, a provident fund and a 50 percent contribution towards health insurance.

The Communication Workers Union members had a meeting with the company’s CEO on September 22 but were not satisfied with the outcome and will continue to fight despite further threats of legal action from the firm.

Cape Town bus drivers threaten to strike over pay reduction

Bus workers at Golden Arrow Bus Services, the main bus service provider in Cape Town, South Africa, will picket outside depots over pay changes.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa members intend to take further strike action if the company goes ahead with plans to halve overtime pay.

South African Airways maintenance workers protest non-payment of wages

Employees at South Africa Airways Technical picketed Monday outside the airline's headquarters in Johannesburg after the company paid them 25 percent towards their salary instead of an agreed 50 percent.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa members have been paid 50 percent of their wages from the government's Temporary Employee Relief Scheme during the COVID-19 crisis and employers are supposed to pay the rest.

Nigerian unions sabotage struggle against government-imposed price hikes

In a monumental betrayal of millions of workers, the Nigerian trade unions sabotaged the strike and nationwide rally planned for September 28 to protest petrol and electricity price hikes.

The umbrella Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) agreed to call off the strike and rally at a late-night meeting with the federal government at the Presidential Villa in the capital Abuja.

The Minister of Labour and Employment, Chris Ngige, announced the sell-out, referring to a communiqué signed by the NLC, TUC and government ministers.

The unions agreed to the integration of their organisations into management structures responsible for privatising the oil, gas and electricity services. The national leadership of the oil unions, the Nigeria Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers and Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association, will join the Steering Committee responsible for privatisation.

The government told the unions their help was needed to rescue Nigerian capitalism, saying rescinding price cuts would be opposed by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and other lenders to whom they are indebted.

Kenyan Embu County doctors' strike called off by union

The doctors' strike in Embu County, Kenya, begun September 19, was called off on September 28. The doctors were protesting delays with payment of salaries and non-payment of their COVID-19 hazard allowances. The strike brought services to a standstill the services at Embu County Referral Hospital and other health facilities.

Kenya National Union of Nurses chair, Joseph Ngwasi claimed union members were glad the government had agreed to address grievances but gave no further details.

Kenya has had 38,529 COVID-19 cases and 711 deaths.

Public health workers' stoppage in Liberia

Health workers in Liberia are continuing their strike despite government threats to replace them with strike-breakers. The strike began on September 16.

The National Health Workers Union of Liberia members are demanding hazard allowances, benefits for health worker victims of COVID-19, personal protective equipment (PPE), medication at all public health facilities and salary increases.

Health workers describe conditions at work as "appalling" due to lack of basic medical equipment, including drugs. One worker said, "We don't even have gloves or drugs... Patients will buy drip and all other medicines... Our pay cannot even... pay two children[s] school fees. When we come to work, there is no tool to work with." The government's reneging on pay increases is an act of "modern day slavery."

The health unions petitioned the United States government, the European Union and the United Nations.

Liberia, which has a population 4.819 million, has confirmed 1,343 coronavirus cases and 82 deaths.

Gambian bank workers hold sit-down strike

Staff at the Guaranty Trust Bank, Gambia held a two-day sit-down strike September 28 and 29 to protest the managers' refusal to address their complaints. These include the loss of appraisal bonuses, promotions, 15 percent performance-based payments and the lack of medical insurance, of particular concern due to COVID-19.

Gambia has 3,579 reported cases of COVID-19 and 112 deaths.



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