

Greek public sector 24-hour strike; Amazon workers in Germany walk out; Nigerian workers in Kwara state resume wage strikes

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

15 October 2020

Europe

24-hour strike by Greek public sector workers

Greek public sector workers walked out Thursday in a 24-hour strike, bringing public transport and ports to a halt. Members of the public hospital personnel workers' union POEDIN and teachers' union OLME were joined by air traffic controllers, causing Olympic Air and Aegean airlines to cancel flights.

The strikers are demanding wage increases, improved pensions and improved safety measures to protect against COVID-19. Other demands include recruitment of teachers to enable a maximum 15 pupils per class and the hiring of cleaners to maintain hygienic conditions, the same demands as school students.

Greek school students recently protested against the unsafe reopening of schools, occupying up to 700 schools across 35 towns and cities. The New Democracy government sent in police to arrest some students, who are demanding safer class sizes and more teaching staff to limit the spread of the virus.

Workers are also demanding no further privatisation of health, pensions and other public services. They want the hiring of additional workers in the health, education, social services, public transport and local government bodies.

Greece has 23,947 coronavirus cases confirmed and 482 deaths.

Strike by Amazon workers in Germany

Workers at seven Amazon fulfilment centres in Germany began a two-day strike Tuesday. The strike coincided with Prime Day, when Amazon generates a massive boost in sales and profits.

The Verdi union members at warehouses in Bad Hersfeld, Graben, Koblenz, Leipzig, Rheinberg and Werne are seeking a pay rise and improved conditions. Other issues include the withdrawal of a COVID-19 bonus in May, and the company's intention to appoint security analysts to spy on employees.

Amazon workers have taken various industrial action since 2013. The latest, in June, was over safety fears after staff at some centres tested positive for COVID-19. Amazon announced it expected most employees

to work as normal with production unaffected.

Healthcare workers protest in France and Spain

Healthcare workers joined masked protests in Paris and across France, Thursday to demand wages rises, more hospital beds and resources to fight the pandemic. Doctors and nurses have protested in strikes and demonstrations in France and Spain all this week.

France, Spain and the UK are now at the epicentre of the steep rise in Covid cases in Europe, due to the herd immunity policies of governments, and anger is growing. Since lockdown ended and schools and economies reopened, hospitals filled up quickly. The healthcare systems, in no shape to fight the pandemic after decades of budget cuts, are reaching capacity, and staff are burned-out after the last spike.

The trade unions in each country have supported the rush to reopen the schools and businesses before the virus was suppressed and adequate testing and contact tracing in place.

France has 809,684 coronavirus cases confirmed, with 33,125 deaths and Spain 972,958 cases and 33,553 fatalities.

Academic staff in northern England to teach online following strike ballot threat

Academic staff at Northumbria University in northern England demanded the University and College Union (UCU) hold a ballot for strike action in opposition to having to undertake face to face teaching.

The university responded by moving all learning online, from Wednesday this week for at least three weeks. Newcastle University also began online-only teaching the same day.

Northumbria and Newcastle universities have suffered very high levels of COVID-19 infections since reopening in the last few weeks.

Day of action scheduled by UK academic staff and students

UK academics and university students are to hold a day of action today

to defend jobs and to call for safety measures to protect against COVID-19. A national online meeting is planned, along with socially distanced protests at various locations.

Second 48-hour strike by UK overnight rail sleeper staff

UK rail staff at the Serco-run Caledonian sleeper service began a second 48-hour strike on Sunday. The service runs overnight from London to various destinations in Scotland. The Rail, Maritime and Transport union members are protesting Serco's failure to provide sufficient berths for onboard staff to take rest breaks.

They held a previous 48-hour strike beginning October 4 and are also taking action short of a strike.

Industrial action by workers at bus manufacturer in northern England

UK workers at the Optare bus manufacturing plant near Leeds began an overtime ban on Wednesday after the company failed to implement a pay rise agreed in November last year.

The Unite union members planned a 48-hour strike Thursday, to be repeated on a weekly basis for three weeks. Around 100 workers are taking part, agreed by a more than 70 percent majority. Optare is owned by the billionaire Hinduja brothers.

Strike of Swiss public sector staff in opposition to pay cut

The 50,000 Swiss public sector workers employed by the Geneva canton held a half-day strike from 3pm-6pm on October 15, to be followed by a strike on October 29.

The Cartel Syndical trade union members are opposing the canton's announcement last month to cut pay by one percent and adjust pension contributions. According to the Geneva canton the proposed cuts will last four years to overcome the shortfall in revenue resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Strike vote by Icelandic aluminium workers

Workers at the Rio Tinto-owned aluminium Straumsvik smelter plant near Reykjavik, Iceland voted for strike action. The workers in five unions are pushing for a pay rise in line with an agreement signed by the Icelandic Confederation of Enterprises last year.

The stoppage due to begin October 16 will take the form of rolling one-day strikes throughout different departments in the plant, to last until the end of November. From December 1, all-out strike action at the plant is planned if no agreement is reached.

Aer Lingus workers at Shannon airport in Ireland to hold strike

ballot, Ryanair threatens to pull out

Aer Lingus staff at Shannon airport in southwest Ireland will be balloted for strike action over pay cuts. Passenger use at the airport fell by around 90 percent due to the pandemic. The airport authority has cut pay by 20 percent, claiming it is a temporary measure to offset the fall in revenues.

The entire workforce was laid off due to the pandemic, then reinstated with a 40 percent cut in pay and hours.

Ryanair, with bases at Shannon and Cork, is threatening to pull out if the Irish government does not change its stance over travel restrictions, involving self-isolation of travellers entering Ireland. Threatened are 130 roles, including 35 pilots and 95 cabin crew.

Irish health staff to ballot for strike action

Irish health workers in around a dozen state-funded voluntary agencies, known as Section 39 bodies, will be balloted for industrial action by the Forasa trade union. The agencies include the National Council of the Blind and the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Ireland.

At issue is the long-standing fight for the restoration of pay and conditions in line with staff directly employed by the Irish state. Directly employed health staff had their pay--reduced following the 2008 financial crisis--restored. Pay and conditions for Section 39 staff have not been restored.

Around 1,000 Section 39 staff held a 24-hour stoppage in February over the issue, but further action was suspended with the pandemic.

Liquidator granted injunction against former staff at closed Debenhams stores in Ireland

Former staff at the UK based Debenhams in Ireland have been protesting for the last six months, following the closure of Ireland's 11 stores, for enhanced redundancy terms.

The Mandate union members picketed the stores to prevent removal of goods and equipment as part of their campaign. The workers were demanding two weeks' pay for each year of service on top of the statutory two weeks redundancy pay. An agreement was signed in 2016 between Mandate and Debenhams for the enhanced redundancy terms to be paid.

On Tuesday, liquidators KPMG and Kieran Wallace were granted an injunction to prevent picketing workers stopping the removal of goods and equipment from the closed stores. Three former Debenhams' employees were named in the injunction and had to give an undertaking to abide by the injunction.

Debenhams is also culling jobs in England, including closures and 4,000 job losses announced earlier this year, and a further 2,500 job losses across the UK.

The USDAW union has organised protests outside Debenhams in Manchester, limiting its demands to calls for no compulsory redundancies or better redundancy terms and pleas for talks with the company.

Transport workers union in Northern Ireland register formal dispute over redundancies

Translink in Northern Ireland, which runs Metro buses, NI Railways and Ulsterbus, is seeking around 50 redundancies, according to the Unite union. The company wants to make £20 million in savings due to a drop in revenues because of COVID-19.

Last week, the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA), which represents managerial staff, issued Translink with a formal letter of dispute. TSSA is calling for no compulsory redundancies, leaving the door open for voluntary redundancies.

Care workers at north London care home ballot to strike

Care workers and cleaners at a privately run care home in north London are being balloted for strike action. The United Voices of the World members are demanding to be paid £12 an hour by Sage, who run the home and are opposed to plans to cut their hours.

Norwegian oil strike ends

The strike that cut oil production in Norway's oil and gas output by around eight percent has ended. The Norwegian Organisation of Managers and Executives members wanted agreements for its offshore members to apply when they were transferred to onshore roles. The new agreement accepts this, coming into effect in April 2021.

Middle East

Nationwide protests by Lebanese workers

Workers across Lebanon took part in protests Wednesday, blockading main roads in major population centres including Beirut, Saida, Tripoli and Tyre. Transport workers in large numbers took part.

The Lebanon's General Labour Union members are protesting against the dire economic and social conditions, in particular the plan by the Central Bank of Lebanon to end subsidies on various essential commodities including food, fuel, medicines and wheat.

The enormous financial crisis in the country, exacerbated by the explosion in the port of Tripoli in August, has left the majority of the population in desperate straits. According to a recent World Bank report, Lebanon's poverty rate is over 55 percent, and workers with jobs have seen an 80 percent reduction in the value of their wages.

Africa

South African Post Office workers strike over non-payment of medical insurance and pension contributions

Workers at the state-owned South African Post Office (SAPO) walked out Wednesday, in protest over unpaid statutory medical contributions which could mean their insurance cover is stopped.

The Communication Workers Union members say that SAPO also deducted pension contributions from their wages but did not pay them into the retirement fund. The workers are also demanding a 6.5 percent wage

rise agreed in April. SAPO say they are unable to make any payments because of a decrease in income during the COVID-19 lockdown.

South Africa has recorded 696,414 coronavirus cases and 18,151 deaths.

Rail workers in South Africa continue strike over wages

South African rail workers at Gautrain, the 80-km-long rapid transit rail system between Johannesburg and Pretoria, continued their strike into a second week on Monday.

Talks between the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa and employer Bombela will be mediated by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration. Workers are demanding an eight percent wage increase, as against management's 4.1 percent.

Public service employees threaten to occupy South African government offices in fight for wage increase

More than 500 public service, community health and other government workers marched from Johannesburg to Pretoria, South Africa, on Monday, in protest after being told they will not get pay rises until 2024.

The National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers members are threatening to occupy government departments if their demands for wage increases this year are not met. They are also protesting for more permanent staff and against using workers from the government's Expanded Public Works Programme, which gives temporary low-paid work to the unemployed.

South African police use rubber bullets against protesting taxi drivers

Drivers in three South African provinces went on strike Monday, in protest at exploitation by their employers, taxi app firms Uber and Bolt, and demanding the industry is regulated.

When the drivers brought their grievances to the office of the Bolt company and blocked the main entrance, the police used rubber bullets to disperse them.

Nigerian workers in Kwara State resume ongoing struggle for minimum wage

On October 13, workers in Kwara State, Nigeria embarked on indefinite strike to demand a minimum wage of N30,000.

The state government declared the action illegal by taking out an injunction at the National Industrial Court to force the Nigeria Labour Congress, Trade Union Congress and Joint Negotiation Committee to drive strikers back to work. In 2018, the unions sold out a national two-day strike for a minimum wage, when workers initially demanded N56,000 to 60,000.

The strike went ahead as planned in defiance of the court ruling.

Liberian school teachers strike over non-payment

Since October 9, over 1,000 schoolteachers and support staff from Catholic schools around Monrovia, Liberia have been on strike to demand payment of two and a half months of wage arrears and unpaid benefits.

The strike is also over job security, with the demand to reduce the probation period from three years to three months—in line with usual practice.

Liberian health union ends strike

The almost month-long stoppage by health workers for better work conditions was called off by the National Health Workers Union of Liberia (NAHWUL) on October 8, after the government threatened to replace strikers with new recruits.

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

Admitting that the government reneged on its commitments to health workers, NAHWUL said it was “suspending” the strike “while we wait for the solution to come forth.”

Liberian health care expenditure per capita has declined in recent years. The country has only a few hundred resident medical doctors. In 2016, the doctor to patient ratio was 1:15,000. Liberia, population 4.819 million, has confirmed 1,372 coronavirus cases and 82 deaths.

Solidarity strike by government workers in Ghana made illegal

Workers employed by the Ghana Community Network Service Limited (GCNet) who walked out in the last week of September in solidarity with sacked colleagues were told they are breaking the law. The Ghana Labour Commission, on behalf of the government, denounced the workers for violating the Labour Act and told them to return to work.

GCNet made about 100 workers redundant, without paying their rightful severance payments. Around 50 remaining workers walked out in solidarity with their sacked colleagues, campaigning for their payments.



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