

Funeral workers strike in Spain; Secondary school teachers in Ireland strike vote; Zimbabwe health authority sacks over 1,000 striking nurses

## Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

5 November 2020

*The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.*

Europe

### Strike by Spanish funeral workers in Madrid demanding more staff

Spanish workers at the Madrid municipal funeral company held a 24-hour strike on Sunday. Dozens of strikers protested outside the Carabanchel cemetery, demanding the company take on around 20 extra workers to cope with the increased demand for funerals due to the escalating COVID-19 crisis.

The municipal funeral company, which employs 478 workers, operates 14 cemeteries, two morgues and two crematoriums. The workers held a 24-hour strike in September over the same issue. At the start of the pandemic the funeral company was overwhelmed and had to resort to the use of cemeteries many miles from Madrid.

Spain recorded 1,365,895 coronavirus cases with 38,486 fatalities.

### Protest by Swiss health workers

Around 1,000 Swiss health care workers protested in the capital Bern on Saturday. It was the culmination of a week of protests by health care staff demanding higher pay and improved conditions as they are confronted with the worsening COVID-19 pandemic.

Switzerland registered 192,376 coronavirus cases and 2,555 deaths.

### Strike vote by Irish secondary school teachers

Irish secondary school teachers have voted by a near 80 percent majority to take industrial action. The Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI) members are protesting the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic relating to schools.

They demand a comprehensive testing programme with a rapid response

and result turnaround. They want more resources dedicated to online learning for self-isolating staff and pupils, or in the case of school closures.

Other issues concern opposition to individual schools changing working conditions without consultation. In a separate ballot, ASTI members voted to take industrial action along with other teaching unions for increased pay for teachers employed from 2010 onwards, to bring them in line with teachers pay prior to 2010.

ASTI has not set a date for any action and is engaged in talks with the Education Department.

Ireland has recorded 63,483 coronavirus cases and 1,930 deaths.

### Aircraft engine makers in northwest England to strike

UK workers at Rolls Royce's Trent jet engine blade factory in Barnoldswick, Lancashire are to strike today after a 94 percent majority ballot. The strike, which will impact five departments, is to last until November 27.

The company plans to move the 350 jobs involved in making the blades to a facility in Singapore. The factory currently employs around 500 workers.

The Unite union is calling for a reversal of the decision, or for alternative work employing the same number of workers to be carried out at the Barnoldswick factory. Rolls Royce is the major employer in the town, where the jet engine was developed.

### Further strikes planned by bus manufacture workers in northern England

Workers at bus manufacturer Optare factory near Leeds began a third 48-hour strike on Thursday. The strikes are in addition to an ongoing overtime ban.

The Unite union members are taking action after the company failed to implement a pay rise agreed November last year. Around 100 workers are taking part, agreed by a more than 70 percent majority.

Optare is owned by the billionaire Hinduja brothers.

## **Yodel delivery workers balloted for strike in UK**

Around 1,000 UK delivery drivers and warehouse staff at delivery firm Yodel are being balloted for possible strike action.

In a consultative ballot, the GMB union members rejected by an 84 percent majority a pay offer by Yodel of two percent this year and 1.5 percent next year. The two percent offer is only worth 1.6 percent, as it will not be backdated to April.

Yodel drivers earn 11p above the minimum wage of £8.72 an hour, while warehouse staff are on the minimum wage. Yodel has benefitted from the surge in home delivery driven by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yodel also had a government contract to deliver COVID-19 test samples. Yodel plans to expand its business, taking on an extra 3,000 staff and opening a distribution hub in northern England.

## **Academic staff at Scottish university to strike**

Scottish staff at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh will walk out November 10, followed by a further five days. On a 66 percent turnout, they voted by a 77 percent majority to take action over plans by the university to cut 130 jobs. The university cut 70 posts in 2017.

The University and College Union (UCU) is not opposed to job losses and are seeking voluntary redundancies. *Union News* reported UCU official Mary Senior saying, "The employer has made good progress on seeking volunteers and should now take compulsory redundancies off the table, to give staff some job security and stability, and students the reassurances they need on the learning environment. It's not too late for the university to avoid strike action but they need to act now."

## **Union suspends strike by Irish school secretaries and caretakers**

Strike action by Irish school secretaries and caretakers has been suspended by the Forsa trade union after intervention by the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC). The workers were to strike October 23, November 2 and 16, followed by an indefinite strike, to protest the two-tier wage structure.

Secretaries and caretakers employed directly by Education and Training Boards are classed as public servants with corresponding pay and conditions, but some are employed by school boards on inferior terms. Many do not receive sick or holiday pay and are not paid in school holidays, and have to resort to claiming welfare support.

The WRC is brokering talks between the union and employers, scheduled to last until February next year, to be followed by a ballot on any new negotiated pay structure. If agreed, it would come into effect for the start of the 2021 new school year.

## **Irish retail staff continue fight for enhanced redundancy pay**

Staff at the UK-based retailer Debenhams in Ireland have been picketing

outside the 11 shuttered stores for over 200 days. They are fighting for improved redundancy terms.

The workers are demanding the liquidators KPMG adhere to an agreement signed between the Mandate union and Debenhams under which redundant workers would be entitled to four weeks' pay per year of service. Picketing the stores means the liquidator is unable to remove stock and equipment.

Talks at the WRC on October 30 to resolve the dispute failed. According to the Irish broadcaster RTE, KPMG made a revised offer of between €500,000 and €750,000, less than a previous offer of €1 million plus a third of net profit from stock sale that workers rejected earlier.

Mandate called on the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Michael Martin to intervene to resolve the issue. Mandate argues that without a settlement soon, money raised from the liquidation would diminish and both the Irish state and the redundant workers would lose out. The former Debenhams workers have vowed to keep up their fight.

Debenhams is also carrying out cuts among its workforce in England. USDAW union members at the Debenhams store in Manchester have held protests calling for enhanced redundancy payments.

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.

## **Strike ballot of Northern Irish local authority workers**

Northern Irish council staff at Newry, Mourne and Down district councils are being balloted for industrial action. The ballot is due to close November 11. The GMB, NIPSA, SIPTU and Unite union members are demanding the levelling up of pay and condition disparities between workers in the former separate authorities.

The three former separate authorities combined in April 2016, and workers have been calling for the disparities to be eliminated since then.

## **UK London Underground rail system canteen staff to be balloted for strike action**

UK canteen staff working for private contractor Sodexo are to be balloted for strike action against threatened job losses of around a third of the workforce of 100.

Sodexo provides canteen services at London Underground rail depots, providing onsite cooked food. It wants to replace this with microwaved frozen food meals. Many of those slated for redundancy have 20 years' service with the company.

## **Scottish ferry staff reject miserly pay offer**

Scottish ferry workers at CalMac ferries rejected a miserly 0.5 percent pay offer. CalMac operates ferry services to the Scottish islands and made a £7.1 million profit last year.

Talks between the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association and CalMac

broke down on Tuesday, and TSSA warned strike action could result.

### **Strike by Cypriot taxi drivers**

Taxi drivers across Cyprus walked out Tuesday. The Association of Taxi Owners and Drivers members are calling on the Cypriot government to offer financial support to taxi owners and drivers. They have been severely affected by the economic impact of the pandemic.

Middle East

### **Arrested Iranian workers' representatives hunger strike**

Four workers from the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Company who were arrested on October 29 have begun a hunger strike. The Haft Tappeh plant is based in the southwestern city of Shush in Khuzestan province.

The four were arranging protests at the company. Hundreds of Haft Tappeh workers rallied inside and outside the plant on Saturday and Sunday in protest.

Haft Tappeh workers have undertaken a series of walkouts and mass protests in the thousands over the last three years, over wage arrears, job losses, pay and conditions. They are also calling for the plant to be taken back into public ownership.

One of the owners was put on trial in the summer for fraud in Tehran, accused of obtaining \$1.4 billion in hard currency from the government. Claiming the money was to invest in the company, he instead allegedly sold on the hard currency at three times its face value.

Africa

### **Zimbabwe sacks over 1,000 striking nurses after union betrayal**

The Health Services Board (HSB) in Zimbabwe has stopped paying wages to 1,032 nurses who began a stoppage four months ago for personal protective equipment (PPE) and a living wage.

The nurses are threatened with fixed-term contracts, on the pretext of "raising standards" and "improving efficiency." The HSB has also started disciplinary procedures against 1,280 nurses.

The unions isolated the more militant nurses in urban areas, advising a return to work for those with access to PPE.

Zimbabwe has 8,427 reported COVID-19 cases and 248 deaths. Both are likely to be gross underestimates with public health in collapse. With inflation around 800 percent, workers cannot afford basic necessities.

### **Zimbabwe cement workers treated like slaves at cement company**

One hundred and fifty workers suffered inhumane treatment during a five-month period at the Diamond Cement Company near Central Zimbabwe's Kwekwe City.

Workers were told if they failed to comply with company instructions to live in squalid conditions on site, they would lose their jobs during the coronavirus pandemic. One worker explained, "We are not getting enough

food and we sleep in cargo containers. Above all, we miss our children and spouses dearly."

Zimbabwe's economy contracted by around 6.5 percent in 2019 and is expected to contract more this year.

### **South African municipal workers protest for improved wages and conditions**

Eighty municipal workers in Port Elizabeth, South Africa demonstrated outside the city hall October 27, demanding the Nelson Mandela Bay municipality take them on permanently.

The Democratic Municipal and Allied Workers Union of South Africa members are part of the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), a discredited African National Congress government scheme in which unemployed people are given temporary work in the public sector but without the wages or benefits afforded to direct employees.

The workers, including plumbers, meter readers, and security guards, will step up protests if their demands are not met.

### **South African distribution workers continue national strike over pay and conditions**

The strike by workers at South African dairy distribution firm, Clover Industries is in its third week.

The General Industries Union of South Africa members walked out after Clover refused to meet demands for a 16 percent wage increase, now reduced to 10 percent. They also want an end to conditions where they must work overtime or face dismissal. The union called for a boycott of Clover goods and other brands they distribute.

Clover failed to get the Johannesburg labour court to prohibit workers picketing their factories.

### **Nigerian doctors at hospital in Ondo state strike for four months unpaid salaries**

Doctors at the University Medical Sciences Teaching Hospital in Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria began a three-day warning strike on November 3, over four months of unpaid salaries. They are threatening indefinite action unless the government responds to their demands by November 9.

Their union said the doctors had been subjected to mental torture due to the delay in the payment of their salaries.

Nigeria is being convulsed by protests against police brutality, fuelled by poverty, mass unemployment and inequality. Nigeria has 63,328 reported cases of COVID-19 and 1,155 deaths.

### **Ugandan health workers' stoppage over salary delays, bad conditions and no PPE**

Health workers in Uganda walked out on October 29, to protest poor working conditions and delays to salary payments. The workers' action

began the day after one worker died from COVID-19.

Angry medics resolved not to work without PPE to reduce risk of infection. They need their salaries to buy PPE, so the salary delays left them no alternative but to stop work.

Uganda has 13,351 reported cases of coronavirus and 117 deaths.

### **Liberian judicial workers' spokesman sets himself alight after suspension**

On November 2, during an ongoing dispute over unpaid salaries, Leroy Archie Ponpon, a member of the judicial staff at the Liberian Temple of Justice, set himself on fire. He was rushed to the John F. Kennedy Referral Hospital.

Ponpon was protesting against the employers' refusal to pay outstanding salary and benefits owed to over 100 staff. Chief Justice Francis Korkpor previously suspended him after he led a protest over the issue, lying under the Chief Justice's car and forcing him to leave in an escort vehicle. Korkpor was jeered at by angry protestors as he made his escape.

Later some workers assembled where Ponpon set himself alight, demanding justice and the resignation of Korkpor. Riot police were called but no violence was reported.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**