Strike ballots across UK in education, health care, transport, local government and British Airways; 24-hour strike by power workers in France; local government strike in Niger state threatens to spread

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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

Europe

24-hour strike by French power generator workers

Power workers employed by the French-state-owned EDF held a 24-hour strike Wednesday. The workers are opposed to EDF plans to restructure, in which the nuclear-powered generating sector would be separated from the renewable sector. Workers fear this would lead to the break-up of EDF and its privatisation.

Greek media workers extend strike against job cuts

A 24-hour strike by Greek journalists, producers and technical staff has been extended for a further 24 hours. The strike led to a blackout of all state and private media outlet reports except those concerning COVID-19.

The workers were protesting planned changes to press law being considered by the right-wing New Democracy government. This would see a reduction in required employee numbers at TV channels from 400 to 280, and increased flexibility in journalists' contracts.

Rolls Royce workers in northwest England continue fight in defence of jobs

Striking Rolls Royce workers at the Trent jet engine blade manufacturing facility in Barnoldswick northwest England, along with supporters, held a car convoy parade in the town on Saturday, including a drive past the Rolls Royce facility. The workers are continuing their stoppage begun November 6 until after December 24.

Management hit back by announcing it would enforce an extended Christmas break at the factory from November 30 until after Christmas.

Five hundred Unite union members voted by a 94 percent majority to strike against company plans to move 350 jobs involved in making blades overseas. The strikers include finish inspectors, machinists, electricians and instrumentation staff.

Management announced it would immediately transfer work undertaken in the blade manufacturing unit to facilities in Japan, Singapore and Spain, and furlough workers not involved in the dispute from November 30. Unite announced it will consider further action after Christmas until December 18, with strike pay at 80 percent of wages.

On December 3, Rolls Royce summoned staff to a meeting and announced an additional 140 jobs could be lost. The company said it proposed to transfer the structure facility currently at Barnoldswick to ITP Aero in Spain.

Unite is pushing a nationalist campaign for a reversal of the company 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. Rolls Royce began production at the Barnoldswick site in 1943.

Strike by teachers at special school in London

UK teachers at the Leaways School in the inner London borough of Hackney held a strike December 3. The National Education Union (NEU) members are calling for parity of pay and conditions with local authority teachers. Leaways is a special school run by the Kedleston group, providing support to children with emotional, social and mental health problems.

The teachers are calling for a 2.75 percent parity pay rise as given to local authority teachers, as opposed to the 1 percent offered. They are also calling for additional teaching staff with specialist knowledge to meet the needs of the students. Further strikes are planned.

Further strikes by teachers at east London school

Teachers at Little Ilford School in Manor Park, London held a seventh

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day of strike action on Tuesday.

The NEU members are protesting plans to increase the secondary school's intake from 1,470 to 1,800. They first walked out November 12. Teachers fear the expansion would adversely affect their ability to provide for the pupils, a quarter of whom have special educational needs. Teachers voted almost unanimously on a turnout of over 70 percent to strike.

March by university students in Manchester UK

On December 4, around 100 Manchester University students marched from Owens Park in the student area to St Peters Square in the city centre. The peaceful march attracted a heavy police presence.

The students were protesting the response of university authorities to the threat of COVID-19. Student accommodation blocks were fenced in and heavy-handed security measures imposed, until students forced their removal. Students have carried out a rent strike, which reduced rents by 30 percent this term. They also demand a reduction in student fees and improved mental health support.

Staff at London college strike in support of sacked colleague

Staff at the London Design and Engineering College walked out last week in support of sacked colleague, Sharon Morgan. The NEU members called for Morgan, an NEU representative, to be reinstated.

She had raised COVID-19 health and safety concerns at the overcrowded college. A judge ordered her reinstatement. The college management agreed but later reneged on this.

Strike by IT staff at Brighton University in England

IT staff at Brighton University in southeast England held a one-day strike on December 2.

The University and College Union members were protesting plans by the university to make a third of the IT staff redundant. A further strike took place on Monday, with a further strike and rally set to take place on Thursday. A two-day strike is planned beginning Tuesday next week.

British Gas engineers vote to reject pay cut proposals

Gas and electric engineers have voted by an 86 percent majority to reject proposals by British Gas's parent company Centrica to cut pay. The result of the ballot of the 7,500 GMB members was announced Tuesday. On Wednesday, the GMB organised a protest outside Centrica's headquarters in Windsor.

GMB members are currently being balloted for strike action against the proposed pay cuts. The ballot is set to close on December 17.

British Airways staff vote overwhelmingly to strike

Around 850 workers at British Airways (BA) cargo handling company have voted almost unanimously to take strike action over the airlines plans to fire and rehire the entire workforce on inferior terms.

Some of the Unite union members face losing a quarter of their incomes under the new terms. Unlike BA's passenger sector, the cargo handling company has not suffered any real reduction in business as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the vote, Unite has set no strike dates. The union is seeking to come to an agreement with management, as it has done in other sectors of BA. Unite assistant general secretary Howard Beckett said, "Unite is delaying the announcement of strike dates to allow Shaun Doyle, British Airways' new chief executive, to do the right thing. He needs to withdraw the threats of firing and rehiring its cargo workers and hammer out a fair deal for this loyal workforce."

Irish public health doctors set date for strikes

Public health doctors in Ireland are to hold a one-day strike on January 14, followed by a two-day strike beginning January 21. The Irish Medical Organisation (IMO) members voted by more than 90 percent for the action, as part of a near two-decade campaign to be graded on a par with hospital consultants with enhanced pay and conditions.

The doctors may take further action if there is no resolution following the strikes.

London council vote to strike

Staff working for the Greenwich Council housing maintenance department in London have voted by a 98 percent majority to strike. The 120 Unite union members are opposed to the Labour-controlled council's plans to restructure the pay system, which could see some housing maintenance staff lose up to £20,000 a year in wages.

No date has been set. The Unite union website said it, "is now allowing a breathing space for last-ditch talks to avert the announcement of strike dates."

Vote to strike by bus drivers in Bradford, England

A vote of 350 UK bus drivers at the First Bus Bowling Back Lane in Bradford produced an 85 percent majority in favour of a strike.

The Unite union members are opposed to First Bus continuing to use a work schedule introduced when passenger numbers fell drastically as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The drivers say the extended working times are leading to drivers' exhaustion now that passenger numbers have returned to near normal. The drivers are calling for the pre-pandemic work schedule to be restored.

The Unite union said no dates for strike action will be announced until the new year, if any were to go ahead.

Pharmaceutical workers' strike vote in Beeston, England

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Pharmaceutical manufacturing workers at Boots Contracts Manufacturing (BCM) in Beeston, Nottinghamshire are to strike against a more than year-long pay freeze. The USDAW union members "voted decisively in favour of industrial action, with [a] turnout well above the 50 percent legislative threshold," said a union national officer.

BCM is owned by French billionaire Bernard Fraisse, who bought the plant in 2017. A previous consultative ballot of workers indicated a willingness to take industrial action. However, a ballot for industrial action was postponed by USDAW, on the outbreak of the pandemic.

Strike vote by DHL delivery and warehouse staff in Liverpool, England

Around 120 UK delivery and warehouse staff employed by DHL Supply Chain in Liverpool have voted to strike. The Unite union members are pushing for a wage increase and accuse DHL of using bullying intimidatory tactics.

The workers are responsible for contracts supplying such famous brands as Wagon Wheels and Jamie Dodger biscuits. Mediation attempts by the government mediation service ACAS failed to resolve the dispute.

The workers have rejected a pay offer, due to come into effect in April next year, which would leave them only just above the minimum wage rate of £8.91. Instead, they are seeking a 50p an hour increase. Eight days of strike action are planned between December 19 and January 5.

Security staff at hospital in Reading, England to strike

Twenty security staff working for Kingdom Services Group Ltd at the Royal Berkshire Hospital in Reading are to hold a five-day strike beginning Monday next week. The Unite union members are seeking a pay rise.

Teaching support staff at two London schools to be balloted

Teaching support staff at the Colvestone primary school and the Thomas Fairchild community school in East London begin balloting against attacks on pay and conditions. The two schools are run by the Hackney-based Soaring Skies Federation.

The 30 Unite union members are opposed to restructuring plans by the federation that will result in a detriment to pay and conditions, as well as the potential loss of 18 of the current 30 support staff posts.

UK higher education admin workers reject pay freeze

UK higher education workers overwhelmingly rejected a pay freeze proposed by the employers' body. With inflation, it effectively means a pay cut.

The Unison union members are responsible for administrative roles in universities and colleges. A Unison spokesman stated, "To be told that they are not getting any pay rise is an insult. We are urging the higher education employers to reconsider their position and get back around the table and make a meaningful offer."

Unite union calls of refuse workers strike in Doncaster, England as worker reinstated

The strike by refuse and recycling workers employed by outsourcing company Suez Recycling and Recovery Ltd under contract to Doncaster Council has ended.

The Unite union members voted to strike beginning December 15, protesting the suspension and sacking of union representative Damien Nota. They also accused Suez management of bullying and harassment. They say the company trawls historic CCTV video tapes to build a case against workers.

Suez agreed to reinstate Nota without sanction. The company also agreed to lift all other suspensions and introduce a new CCTV monitoring policy for which training would be provided.

Ballot of staff at Greenwich University in London

Around 30 UK cleaners, porters and security staff at Greenwich University are being balloted for industrial action. The Independent Workers of Great Britain members are employed by outsourcing company Sodexo. They are seeking parity of terms and conditions for pay, sick pay, pensions and parental leave with staff directly employed by the university.

The ballot results are expected December 23.

UK ambulance workers in south London balloted for industrial action

UK ambulance workers at St George's Hospital in south London are being balloted for possible industrial action, to take place in the new year.

The GMB union members are opposing plans by private employer Healthcare & Transport Services to change shift patterns, which workers say will worsen their pay and conditions and adversely affect work/life balance. The GMB is also calling for the Hospital Trust to take back the ambulance service back inhouse when it comes up for renewal in the near future.

Middle East

Protests against wage arrears in northern Iraq met with deadly force

Protests took place this week by public sector workers in the Kurdish-controlled area of northern Iraq around the city of Sulaimanyla. Workers were protesting deteriorating working conditions and non-payment of wages.

During demonstrations against the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, protestors set fire to the parties' headquarters. At least four protestors were killed, and others injured by

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security forces.

Africa

Local government workers strike in Niger state, Nigeria as oil and port workers threaten stoppage

Local government workers in Niger State, Nigeria are on an indefinite strike begun more than a week ago over pay and sackings.

The Nigeria Labour Congress and Trade Union Congress members want payment of October salaries and the reinstatement of 80 civil servants previously dismissed. They also want the 30 percent salary deductions made earlier in the year reversed. The state government asked the unions to be “patient,” and said the withheld amounts would be paid “when the economy improves.”

Nigerian oil workers are also threatening to walk out against the Pan Ocean Oil Company.

Port workers throughout Nigeria are to hold a three-day “warning strike” over the gridlock on roads accessing the ports. This has been blamed for many deaths—more than 16, although some reports triple that figure.

Protests against police brutality have recently swept over Nigeria.

Nurses at hospital in Zimbabwe vote with their feet against union

Most of the nurses at Zimbabwe's Sally Mugabe Central Hospital have gone against the instructions of the Zimbabwe Nurses Association (Zina) and are working normal hours.

In September, Zina negotiated a “flexi-hours” arrangement to force 1,200 nurses to end a strike begun in June this year against low pay. This meant many nurses working two 12 hour-long shifts per week, but lowered transport costs so nurses could live on low salaries. The Health Services Board (HSB) rejected the arrangement, leading Zina to turn to the courts.

Despite a court ruling in favour of the nurses, the government and HSB have refused to budge.

Nurses in Zimbabwe have faced the COVID-19 pandemic with inadequate personal protective equipment (PPE) causing health workers’ deaths, hyper-inflation of more than 800 percent cutting the value of their salaries, and a months-long strike that brought no improvements.

Zimbabwe has recorded 11,007 COVID-19 cases and 304 deaths, although both figures are likely to be underestimates due to lack of testing.

Kenyan health unions suspend strike for two weeks to allow “dialogue”

Dentists expecting to walk out December 7 were told by their union the strike has been delayed by two weeks and will now start December 21.

The Kenya Medical Practitioners and Dentist Union members are opposing inadequate PPE, high-risk workers being forced to work on frontline duty, and the lack of medical cover and promotions.

More than 3,000 healthcare workers have contracted COVID-19 and 33 have died according to the government figures. Kenya has reported 89,661 cases and 1,552 deaths.

Miners strike at South African company for pension payments

Striking mineworkers at the Village Main Reef mining company in Matlosana, North West Province, South Africa are continuing their stoppage begun with an underground sit-in on December 1 after the firm stopped pension contributions.

The strike spread amongst surface workers when the 850 miners underground were suspended over alleged misconduct, and all work has now stopped. The National Union of Mineworkers members are protesting over the company’s failure to pay deductions into the mineworkers’ pension fund, provide redundancy payments or cover funeral costs for deceased employees.

Workers picket South African defence firm to demand unpaid wages and benefits

Workers at the South African state-owned arms manufacturer Denel picketed the failing company’s offices in Pretoria on December 4 over unpaid salaries, redundancy payments and bonuses.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) members threaten further action if Denel do not meet their demands and also halt redundancies. The union blames management corruption, encouraging workers to believe a change would come with different management.

South African airline workers demonstrate over pay and conditions

South African Airways workers picketed at Johannesburg International Airport on December 3 to protest outstanding wages and threats of dismissal.

The NUMSA members say they have not been paid for eight months, even though the African National Congress government allocated funds as part of a business rescue plan to bailout the bankrupt state-owned company. Workers were threatened with the sack if they do not accept contract changes designed to appeal to investors.

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