

French transport workers stoppage in Paris as UK transport workers in London ballot for strike action; UK airport workers strike at London Heathrow; South African healthcare workers walk out at six hospitals

## 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

#### French transport workers' strike in Paris

French transport workers on the Paris public transport network held a one-day strike Thursday. The Unsa, CGT, SAT, Solidaires and SUD union members are protesting plans to privatise the transport network by 2024, which will lead to attacks on jobs and conditions.

#### Strike by London Heathrow airport workers

Airport workers including baggage handlers, engineers, firefighters and other operatives at Heathrow Airport Ltd (HAL) in London held a 24-hour strike Monday, and a further two-day strike from Thursday. They held a one-day strike on November 30. On Monday, the striking workers held a car rally at Heathrow to promote their protest.

The Unite union members voted by an 84 percent majority to strike in opposition to HAL's plans to fire and rehire employees on reduced pay and conditions. Some workers could lose up to £8,000 a year, a quarter of their salaries.

A further one-day strike is planned for December 14, and a two-day strike beginning December 17.

#### British Airways staff strike dates

Around 850 workers at British Airways (BA) cargo handling company voted almost unanimously to take strike action over 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. After initially refusing to set a strike date in order to come to an agreement with management, as it has done in other sectors of BA, the union has now set strike dates. The cargo handlers will begin nine days of strikes on Christmas Day.

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. With fears over a no-deal Brexit, demand for air cargo services is increasing rapidly.

#### Security workers at Reading hospital in England five-day stoppage

Security staff at the Royal Berkshire Hospital in Reading walked out Monday in a five-day strike over pay. The Unite members are demanding a wage rise to £12 an hour and £13 for supervisors. Other grievances concern sick pay, overtime pay and enhanced pay for working nights and weekends.

Unite regional officer Jesika Parmar said, "Our lowly-paid members provide security 24/7 at the hospital which is on the Covid-19 frontline." She said the union was "very reluctant to take industrial action during a national crisis," and that the union's "door remains open" for talks.

Global employer the Kingdom Services group has a turnover of £100 million.

#### Strikes continue at London college against victimisation for raising Covid safety issues

Staff at the London Design and Engineering College voted for a further six days of strike action. They have already held six strike days in support of sacked colleague, Sharon Morgan. The National Education Union (NEU) members called for Morgan, an NEU representative, to be reinstated.

She 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.

On November 12, the NEU executive voted against calling a national strike ballot of its 450,000 members against unsafe conditions in schools.

### **Further strike by teachers at London special school**

Teachers at the Leaways School in the inner London borough of Hackney held a three-day strike Tuesday to Thursday this week, on top of previous strikes. The 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 want a 2.75 percent parity pay rise as given to local authority teachers, not the one percent offered. They are also calling for additional teaching staff with specialist knowledge to meet the needs of the students.

### **Scottish further education college lecturers vote for industrial action**

Lecturers at further education colleges in Scotland voted by a more than 90 percent majority in a consultative ballot to take industrial action short of a strike. The Educational Institute for Scotland members are opposing plans by the colleges to replace lecturers with support staff designated as instructors.

### **Bus manufacture workers in North Yorkshire to continue strike action**

Workers at the Optare bus manufacturing plant in Sherburn-in-Elmet, North Yorkshire, England are continuing their strike for a pay increase. The workers have not had a rise for two years. Around 500 workers are employed at the site.

The 100 Unite union members at the plant voted by a 73 percent majority for action. The ballot took place following months of fruitless negotiations. From October 15, the workers began a continuous overtime ban and a series of 48-hour discontinuous stoppages. From November 17, they escalated action by holding four-day strikes. They are to hold a further series of discontinuous strikes from December 21 till January 5.

### **London bus drivers involved in strike ballots**

Bus drivers in London employed by several companies are demanding industrial action over threats against pay and conditions.

Unite union members working for French-owned RATP, which operates the London Sovereign and Quality Lines in west London, will be balloted.

Unite will re-ballot its 3,000 members working for Singapore-owned Metroline in the new year, over proposals by the company to introduce remote sign-on and a derisory one percent pay offer. In a ballot in October the drivers voted by a 97 percent majority to strike against the remote sign-

on system. Under remote sign-on, drivers begin their driving shift at a bus stop taking over from the previous drivers rather than the depot, leading to a reduction in driving time representing an eight percent pay cut. The October ballot could face a legal challenge from Metroline so Unite has ordered the re-ballot.

Drivers at Abellio, which runs services in south and west London, have rejected a one percent pay rise offer, and could be balloted for industrial action.

Drivers at Arriva in London are also to be balloted. The Unite members are seeking compensation for losses in pay during the first lockdown. As a result of low passenger numbers Arriva imposed a Sunday schedule, meaning a 25 percent cut in pay. The company has refused to consider compensation.

### **Communications Workers Union in Britain uses telecom workers' strike vote to press for negotiations**

In a consultative vote, telecom workers at BT group companies, including EE and the network division Openreach, voted by a near 98 percent majority on a 74 percent turnout to be willing to strike. The Communications Workers Union (CWU) members are opposed to plans by BT to reconfigure the business, which would result in job losses, closures of sites and attacks on pay and conditions.

Like other unions, the CWU is using the consultative ballot result to pressure BT management and prevent a strike. Unions at BT have overseen cuts in employee numbers over the years, pushed through on the basis of no compulsory redundancies.

In a *Union News* website article of December 11, CWU assistant general secretary Andy Kerr stated, "Even now my message to management is that the CWU will work in complete cooperation with the company to address whatever challenges it faces—just as the union has done on numerous occasions over the decades since privatisation."

CWU general secretary Dave Ward added, "We are giving management the opportunity to return to the negotiating table with a serious offer to resolve this dispute. The message from our members could not be clearer: The ball is in BT's court."

### **Strike by delivery drivers at UK firm suspended**

A six-day strike due to begin Monday, by drivers at Harper & Guy Consulting Ltd delivering goods to around 100 Sainsbury's supermarkets in southeastern England, has been suspended. The 12 Unite union members were seeking pay parity with drivers directly employed by Sainsbury's.

Unite called off the strike when the company gave the drivers a 2.1 percent pay rise in line with the raise given to the directly employed drivers. The issue of pay parity has not been resolved.

### **Strike by lorry delivery drivers at UK firm put on hold by union**

Lorry drivers at the Warrington depot, northwest England, of haulage firm Eddie Stobart voted by a more than 95 percent majority to strike. The drivers work on a contract to deliver supplies of well-known crisp

manufacturer Walkers. The Unite union members are opposing a pay freeze imposed by Stobart and calling on the firm to negotiate with the union.

Instead of calling a strike, Unite has imposed an overtime ban to begin December 26 until January 15. Unite says it will then consider imposing the strike mandate but called on Stobart to enter into negotiations.

#### **Staff at government office in London, UK vote for stoppage over COVID-19 fears**

Around 100 support staff at the UK government Business Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) department in Westminster, London voted by a near 95 percent majority on a more than 70 percent turnout to strike. The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members are concerned over the lack of COVID-19 safety provisions at the department.

The support staff employed by contractor ISS provide cleaning, portering, postal and security services. Because of concerns over COVID-19, most directly employed civil service staff at BEIS work from home, but support staff are expected to attend the office. Some workers have tested positive for the disease. They are demanding to be allowed to work from home to mitigate the danger of infection. A strike date has not been set.

#### **Bottled gas product workers at UK firm balloted for strike action**

UK workers at Air Products depots in Bardon, Bargeddie, Basingstoke, Stoke and Walkden are being balloted for possible strike action. The GMB union members are opposed to the company imposing a pay award and are seeking a higher increase. In a consultative ballot 82 percent of drivers and 90 percent of bay operatives said they would be willing to strike.

#### **Union calls off planned strike by UK pharmaceutical workers**

The strike by UK pharmaceutical manufacturing workers at Boots Contracts Manufacturing (BCM) in Beeston, Nottinghamshire planned for Wednesday and Thursday this week has been called off.

The USDAW union members were opposing a more than year-long pay freeze. They had “voted decisively in favour of industrial action, with [a] turnout well above the 50 percent legislative threshold,” said a union national officer. The union called off the strike after receiving a pay offer from BCM, which will be put to the pharmaceutical workers.

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.

#### **Middle East**

#### **Israeli lecturers' two-month strike ends**

On Sunday, Israeli lecturers at 11 colleges ended their two-month strike and returned to work. The Koah LaOvdim labour union members were protesting their terms and conditions. They demanded a pay rise and an end to the practice of being fired every summer at the end of the academic year.

The agreement reached between the junior lecturers and the Ministry of Finance will give lecturers two-year contracts, advanced notice of any planned job termination, and compensation for lectures cancelled due to low registration numbers. The new agreement will be in force until May 2023, when it will be renegotiated.

#### **Workers' demonstrations in Iran**

On Sunday, teachers held a protest in front of the Iranian parliament to protest their lack of security and low pay. The same day, municipal workers protested in the city of Ilam in western Iran over several months of wage arrears.

#### **Protests by Iranian bus drivers**

Bus drivers in the Iranian city of Falavajan have been on strike for over a week protesting low wages. On Saturday, a group of bus drivers protested outside the governorate office in Tehran against the dismissal of drivers who had 14 years' service.

#### **Africa**

#### **Healthcare workers in six South Africa hospitals strike for pay increase**

Health workers at Clinic Health Group in South Africa walked out Monday, after negotiations with the private healthcare company failed to reach an agreement. The action affected six hospitals in Gauteng and North West provinces.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union members are demanding a 10 percent wage increase and a housing allowance.

South Africa has recorded 883,687 coronavirus cases with 23,827 fatalities.

#### **Nigerian port workers on strike after 500 sackings**

Port workers in Nigeria went on strike on December 14, in response to the sacking of 500 workers. The members of the Maritime Workers Union of Nigeria were employed by the companies Integrated Logistics Services Nigeria and Associated Maritime Services.

The union claimed that “[to] our greatest shock, while the union was holding its NEC [National Executive Council], the two companies issued redundancy letters to over 500 of our members.”

The two companies locked-out the 500 workers, and contracted security

operatives who assaulted them.

Local government workers walked out over pay and redundancies the previous week. Mass protests against police brutality recently swept over Nigeria.

### **Nigerian sacked oil workers protest outside ExxonMobil**

On December 9, 1,650 Nigerian workers sacked by companies affiliated to ExxonMobil protested in Akwa Ibom State to demand benefits they are due.

The demonstrators, contracted to upgrade cables, put up canopies in front of the company premises, singing solidarity songs and using drums. They accuse ExxonMobil of refusing to complete the process of terminating their contracts or giving them their entitlements.



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