

9,000 British gas employees strike; UK student rent strikes spreading; Kenyan healthcare stoppage continues despite union sabotage

## 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

#### Strike by workers at major UK energy company

Workers at the UK energy company British Gas, owned by British-based multinational company Centrica, began a five-day strike Thursday. The GMB union members voted by an 89 percent majority for the action. They are opposed to the company's plans to "fire and rehire," putting workers on a contract with less favourable conditions and lower pay. Those involved in the strike include 7,000 engineers and 2,000 call centre workers.

The Unison trade union accepted British Gas's reduced terms contract, with 7,000 Unison union office staff then signing the new contract, as have 4,000 non-unionised workers.

British Gas posted a £1 billion loss in 2019, forecast a drop in revenues for 2020 and did not pay a shareholder dividend. Among the UK's big six energy companies, it has faced a haemorrhaging of customers to undercutting start-up energy companies.

#### Strike by British Airways cargo staff in UK

Around 850 British Airways (BA) cargo handling workers at London Heathrow airport began a nine-day strike on Christmas Day. The Unite union members voted almost unanimously to walk out over plans to fire and rehire the entire workforce on inferior terms.

Some of the workers face losing a quarter of their incomes under the new terms. The union had initially refused to set a strike date, hoping to reach agreement with management as it had done in other sectors of BA. Following the failure of talks the strike went ahead on Christmas Day. Unite did not organise pickets due to COVID-19 fears.

Unlike BA's passenger sector, the cargo handling company has not suffered any reduction in business as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fears over a no-deal Brexit led to increased demand for air cargo services.

#### Rolls Royce aircraft engineers in northwest England continue strike

Striking Rolls Royce workers at the Trent jet engine blade manufacturing facility in Barnoldswick, northwest England are continuing their strike. 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.

At the end of November, the company locked out the strikers. The company is still insistent on moving the jobs offshore. The workers continue to mount picket lines in opposition to the company's plans.

The Unite union is desperate to come to an accommodation with Rolls Royce. The *Lancashire Telegraph* reported Unite regional officer Ross Quinn saying, "We're back at the picket line at Barnoldswick for the 35th day of strike action ... Unite has worked extremely hard with Rolls Royce to try and put something tangible to members that would end this dispute. Unfortunately, we never got the resolution that we were hoping for before Christmas. We continued discussions and negotiations right throughout the holidays and we are still hopeful that we will get a resolution in the next couple of days."

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.

#### UK university student rent strikes spreading

Rent strikes by UK students are escalating, as students protest at having to pay rent for accommodation they cannot to take up following the recent COVID-19 lockdown in England.

According to the student information website *Tab*, the current strikes are the largest in the last 40 years. Around 3,000 students across more than 30 university sites, including Sussex University, Warwick, the University of London intercollegiate halls and Bristol are involved. New campaigns are being launched, with students at Manchester and Salford threatening to

join.

Rent strikes began at 21 universities in early December. The largest was at Bristol University, where 1,400 students withheld rent. A rent strike by students at Manchester University, during which students occupied the Owens Park Tower accommodation block at the Fallowfield campus, reduced rents by 30 percent for the Autumn term.

On December 4, around 100 students marched from Owens Park in the student area to St Peters Square in Manchester 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.

### **French power workers to walk out**

Power workers employed by the French-state-owned EDF have called for a strike on January 19. It would be the fourth such action since December 10. The workers are opposed to EDF's restructuring plans, under 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, leading to job losses.

### **Strike threat by Swedish health workers**

Swedish private health care staff are threatening strike action as the COVID-19 pandemic explodes. The Swedish Municipal Workers union members are opposed to the overwhelming workload resulting from the pandemic.

Around 20 percent of Sweden's regional health services have a less than 10 percent intensive care spare capacity. The workers want pay and conditions to be brought in line with public health staff.

Sweden spearheaded the criminal policy of herd immunity, which permitted an uncontrolled spread of coronavirus.

### **Unite union suspends strike by bus manufacturing workers in northern England**

The dispute by UK bus manufacturing workers at the Optare PLC plant in Sherburn in Elmet, near Leeds was called off on December 23 by the Unite union. Around 500 workers are employed at the plant.

Around 100 union members voted by a 73 percent majority to take industrial action. 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 have not had a rise for two years.

Strike action planned for the New Year was called off by Unite after reaching an agreement with Optare management not to push the pay claim at present.

On December 23, Unite announced details of the agreement on its site: "After comprehensive discussions, both parties recognise that some form of pay settlement is important but at this time of considerable uncertainty, accept that it is not currently possible. Unite and Optare have agreed to work together on a payment mechanism to address this, ready for

implementation once recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic is clear and future orders have come in."

### **Continuing strike action by hospital security staff in southwest England**

Around 20 UK hospital security staff at the Royal Berkshire Hospital came out on a four-day strike Monday. The action follows five days of strikes last month, with a further four-day strike planned for next week, and two four-day strikes in February. The Unite union members, who work for contractor Kingdom Services Group, are demanding a pay rate of £12 an hour.

### **Irish public health doctors union defer strike**

Public health doctors in Ireland have suspended strike action planned for January 14, 21 and 22. The Irish Medical Organisation members have suspended the action citing the upsurge in COVID-19 infections. They plan to review the situation at the end of January.

The doctors voted by more than 90 percent for the stoppage. They have carried out a near two-decade campaign to be graded on a par with hospital consultants with enhanced pay and conditions.

## **Middle East**

### **Protest and strike by Moroccan miners**

Last month, miners at the Jebel Aouam mine in the Moroccan province of Khenifra held a strike and underground protest. The mine produces silver, gold, zinc and lead. While 100 miners held a sit-down strike underground, 200 striking miners protested above.

The UMT union members were protesting the failure of the mining company, Compagnie Minière de Touissit to keep an agreement signed with the UMT in 2019. The agreement committed the company to improve working conditions including health and safety measures in return for increased productivity. While the miners have increased productivity, the company has failed to improve working conditions.

### **Striking Egyptian fertiliser factory workers imprisoned**

This week, eight Egyptian workers at the Delta Fertiliser and Chemicals Company who had been on strike were sentenced to 15 days imprisonment by the Supreme State Security Prosecution (SSSP) body. The SSSP accused them of disrupting production and sabotage.

The fertiliser factory workers have been on strike since the beginning of December. The workers began their action in opposition to plans by the state-owned company to move from its current location in Talkha, Dakahlia in the Nile delta area to Suez. The company plans to sell the factory plot for residential development.

## Africa

### Kenyan health workers' strike continues as unions instruct doctors to return to work

A Kenyan health workers' strike continues despite the Kenya Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentists Union (KMPDU) ordering doctors to return to work. Medical laboratory officers joined striking nurses and clinicians on December 28.

Their demands include medical cover, life insurance, a health service commission, promotions and staff recruitment. Nurses had already been on strike for 25 days. The lab workers update the COVID-19 figures.

Doctors joined the strike on December 21, later than originally planned, as the KMPDU attempted to negotiate a deal. The doctors are demanding personal protective equipment (PPE), improved working injury benefits, employment of an additional 2,000 doctors and payment of call allowances, but on December 24 they were told to return to work after the union reached a deal with the government on how their demands would be addressed.

The acting general secretary of the KMPDU appealed to the government Labour Ministry to intervene between doctors and the county governments with whom they are in dispute.

Health Cabinet Secretary Mutahi Kagwe said the strike by health workers was illegal and threatened strikers with disciplinary action.

Kenya has 97,398 reported cases of COVID-19 and 1,694 deaths.

### Polytechnic staff on strike in Nigeria over pay arrears

Senior staff at polytechnic colleges in Nigeria began a 14-day "warning strike" January 4, to demand payment of their salaries and minimum wage arrears from April 2019 onwards. The state governments of numerous states, including Benue, Cross River, Abia, Ondo, Ogun, Osun and Kano have refused to pay the outstanding amounts.

The Senior Staff Association of Nigeria Polytechnics said its complaints had been ignored for years by federal and state governments. Nothing was reported on what the union plans to do if the "warning strike" fails to win the staff's demands.

### Unemployed South African student nurses protest for jobs

Recently qualified student nurses conducted a sit-down protest at two hospitals in Johannesburg, South Africa after they were given notice Friday that their community service contracts were being terminated without an offer of permanent employment with the provincial Department of Health.

The Democratic Nursing Association of South Africa (DENOSA) National Student Movement members completed a four-year nursing course in 2019, and were then employed as community service nurses using a government bursary. They subsequently expected to be absorbed into the health system, especially since the country is struggling to cope with a second wave of COVID-19. The nurses are demanding to continue

their current work or be given their completion certificates so they can work elsewhere.

DENOSA says that people are dying on stretchers while waiting for beds. The lack of capacity in the health system as workers become ill or self-isolate has worsened through the discredited African National Congress governments' treasury ban on employing new workers.

South Africa has 1,149,591 reported cases of coronavirus infection with 31,368 deaths.

### Liberian beach workers stage protest over non-payment of wages

On January 5, Liberian workers at the Samuel Kanyon Doe Sports Complex in Paynesville, near the capital Monrovia, confronted government officials, including Youth and Sports Minister D. Zeogar Wilson and Finance and Development Planning Minister Samuel Tweah over non-payment of their wages over 21 months.

The officials tried to quell the anger of the unpaid workers with a series of excuses, blaming supervisors and saying that it would take time to resolve. The workers made clear they had waited long enough.

The officials made their escape from the meeting when their words produced anger and resentment. The workers blocked the main entrance of the complex, hoping to prevent the officials from leaving.



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