

Swedish care workers' national action; UK energy workers plan further industrial action as telecom workers in strike ballot; Nigerian polytechnic staff pay walk out

## Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

14 January 2021

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

### Europe

#### Care workers in Sweden to begin industrial action

Around 55,000 workers providing health and social care for the elderly, working for private care companies, plan to begin industrial action today. Negotiations between the companies represented by the Swedish Association of Private Care Providers, and Kommunal, the Swedish Municipal Workers Union representing the workers, broke down.

The care workers are seeking improved wages and conditions, and terms of contract brought into line with care workers in the public sector. They are also protesting the increased workload resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic in Sweden.

Initially the action will consist of an overtime ban and working strictly to contract. From January 22, the action will escalate with all-out strikes at a number of homes for the elderly and health centres across the country.

Around 20 percent of Sweden's regional health services have less than 10 percent intensive care spare capacity. Sweden spearheaded the criminal policy of herd immunity, which permitted an uncontrolled spread of coronavirus

#### UK energy workers plan further walkouts

Monday was the last day of a five-day strike by engineers and office staff working for energy company British Gas, owned by Centrica.

The GMB union members voted by an 89 percent majority for action. They are opposed to the company's plans to "fire and rehire," putting workers on a contract with less favourable conditions and 20 percent pay cut. Those involved in the strike included 4,000 service and repair gas engineers, 1,700 smart metering engineers, 600 central heating installers, 540 electrical engineers and 170 specialist business gas engineers.

The strikers carried out socially distanced pickets throughout the

country. The union announced further action composed of five 24-hour strikes on January 20, January 22, January 25, January 29 and February 1.

Around 7,000 office staff members of the Unison union have accepted British Gas's reduced terms and signed the new contract, as have 4,000 non-unionised workers.

#### UK telecom workers voting on strike action

In December, a consultative vote by 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 oppose restructuring plans by BT, which would result in job losses, closures of sites and attacks on pay and conditions.

A ballot for strike action began on Thursday and is due to finish February 4.

The CWU tried to use the consultative vote to reach an agreement with BT but failed. Writing in the *Union News* website December 11, CWU assistant general secretary Andy Kerr wrote, "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."

#### Workers at UK rail company declare dispute over COVID-19 fears

Rail workers employed by UK Cross Country trains are in dispute with the company over its insistence onboard workers continue to collect revenues.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT) members argue the company is ignoring the current more infectious variant of the COVID-19 virus. They are demanding revenue collection staff should not interact with rail passengers by inspecting tickets.

#### Passport control staff at London Heathrow's airport to ballot for

## **strike action**

Around 400 UK passport control staff working at London's Heathrow airport will be balloted for possible strike action. The Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) members are opposed to plans to change their rosters. Workers fear the changes would make it harder for them to swap and request shifts to fit in with their caring responsibilities.

## **Ferry workers at UK line in dispute over COVID-19**

Ferry and port workers employed on the Stella Line ferry operation between Birkenhead in northwest England and Belfast in Northern Ireland declared a dispute. They have a longstanding objection to Stella Line's cutting of sick pay in April in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some Stella Line employees succumbed to the disease in December. The RMT members have reprised their objection to the cut in sick pay in light of the more infectious COVID-19 variant. They argue they should not have to choose between taking sick leave on inadequate pay or working while ill possibly with COVID-19.

## **Strike vote by UK Isle of Wight ferry link workers**

Workers on the Wightlink ferry route, which operates services between the Isle of Wight and the UK mainland, have voted overwhelmingly to strike. The RMT members are opposed to plans by the company to close the defined benefit pension scheme and reintroduce a flexible working roster used in the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The RMT has set dates for strike action, April 2 to 5 covering the Easter Bank holiday weekend, May 28, May 31, June 4-6, June 11-13, June 18-20 and June 25-27. The union has made clear it is available for further discussions.

## **Aircraft engine manufacturers in northwest England suspend industrial action**

Workers at the Rolls-Royce Trent jet engine blade manufacturing facility in Barnoldswick, northwest England suspended their strike begun November. Five hundred Unite union members had voted by a 94 percent majority to strike against company plans to move 350 jobs involved in making blades overseas. The strikers included finish inspectors, machinists, electricians and instrumentation staff.

On January 8, the company and the Unite union agreed a deal. According to the *Lancashire Telegraph* newspaper, the deal will save the 350 jobs earmarked to be transferred overseas. The workers were due to meet and vote on the deal this week. Details of the deal have not yet been made public but are thought there will be no compulsory job losses over the next two years. This does not rule out "voluntary" jobs losses that the union can facilitate.

Rolls-Royce is the major employer in Barnoldswick and began production at the site in 1943.

## **Care home staff set to strike at north London home**

Workers employed as carers and cleaners at a care home for the elderly, run by the Sage group in Golders Green in north London, voted unanimously to hold a three-day strike due to begin today. The United Voices of the World union members demands are calling for a £12 an hour wage and for sick and leave conditions in line with NHS staff.

## **UK facility management workers balloted for industrial action**

Workers employed by management facility company OCS, on contract with Her Majesty's Court and Tribunals, are being balloted for industrial action. The ballot began January 7 and will close February 3.

The PCS union members rejected a derisory 1.5 percent pay offer. Their demands include being paid the Living Wage Foundation figure (£9.50 outside London and £10.85 in London).

Other demands include sick pay from day one of sick leave, 30 days paid leave and a one-off bonus for their commitment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Strike by workers at French magazine**

Workers including journalists at the French daily sports newspaper *L'Equipe* began an ongoing strike on January 8. They are opposed to plans by the company to cut 36 jobs, around 10 percent of the workforce.

## **Strike by Serbian Fiat workers**

Workers at Magneti Marelli in Kragujevac, Serbia walked out on Tuesday. The company is a subsidiary of Fiat, producing plastic bumpers for the Fiat 500L model. The Magneti Marelli independent union members are opposed to the company's reduction of wages. The company blames the pandemic, which has led to a decrease in production. However, the company was cutting back production before the pandemic hit.

## **Middle East**

### **Protest by Iranian medics, teachers and pensioners**

Medics, teachers and pensioners demonstrated in Tehran on Sunday. They were calling for free medical services and higher pensions. Protests by pensioners took place in other Iranian cities the same day, demanding pension increases.

### **Jordanian teachers protest**

Teachers protested in front of the Jordanian parliament on Sunday, in spite of efforts by security forces to prevent them congregating. They are opposing the Ministry of Education decision to enforce the retirement of 62 teachers, including the deputy head of the Jordanian Teachers' Association (JTA) union and other union activists.

Jordanian teachers held a long-running strike in 2019, which ended with promises from the government which it has reneged on. In July, the police raided the JTA headquarters and arrested 13 board members. They were released the following month following international pressure. On December 31, a court in Amman issued a ruling dissolving the JTA and imprisoning board members for 12 months.

### **Stoppage by Lebanese lawyers**

Lawyers in Lebanon held a strike on January 4 to protest the arrest and assault of a colleague by internal security force officers. The lawyer defended his wife after she was challenged over a parking infraction in Beirut, when he was assaulted. The strike led to the suspension of courts for the day.

## **Africa**

### **Nigerian polytechnic staff pay strike**

Both academic and non-academic staff at Nigerian polytechnic colleges walked out after the Christmas break to demand payment of their salaries and minimum wage arrears from April 2019 onwards.

The unions focused on the university authorities' use of a consultant. The Chairman of the Senior Staff Association of Nigeria Polytechnics stated, "We want the institution to have powers to manage its affairs. The current mode of operation is affecting the smooth running and operation of the institution..."

On the first day of the strike on January 11, students were gathering at the main entrance of the college expecting the gates to be opened.

### **Nigerian identity card staff strike over COVID-19 threat and lack of PPE**

Staff at the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC) in Nigeria began a sit-down strike on January 7 against exposure to the COVID-19 virus, lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) as well as problems with promotion and lack of funding.

In December 2020, the Federal government asked all telecoms companies to disconnect the SIM cards of anyone who had not integrated their National Identity Number with their phone by the end of January.

Based on figures from the NIMC, 43 million have so far complied so far—less than a quarter of the population—with huge crowds now gathering at the NIMC offices in breach of COVID-19 regulations. NIMC staff contracted COVID-19 as a result and insufficient measures were introduced to curtail its spread, such as the adequate supply of PPE.

Nigeria has 103,999 reported cases of COVID-19 and 1,382 deaths.

### **Ghanaian Coca-Cola workers protest wrongful dismissals**

Coca-Cola workers at the bottling plant in Ghana protested outside the plant January 11 against the company's dismissal of 30 of their colleagues.

While workers opposed the sackings outright, the unions focused on the "lack of due process," which implies calling for the company to make further sackings they require with the collaboration of the unions.

### **Kenyan health workers sacked for going on strike**

Over 500 health workers have been sacked by Taita-Taveta County local government in south-eastern Kenya, for going on strike in December 2020 and refusing to be intimidated.

Those sacked were among the 23,000 Kenya National Union of Nurses members striking to demand PPE and improved work conditions, including health insurance.

The county government labelled the strike "illegal" and attempted to blame workers for the dire conditions caused by their own policies. County Health Executive John Mwakima said the replacement of those sacked by 400 new recruits was in progress and would be completed within a week.

The unions have not tried to broaden the strike by turning to the working class to defend the health service and the basic right to strike but to the capitalist law courts.

Kenya has 98,555 reported cases of COVID-19 and 1,720 deaths.

### **South African marking personnel walk out due to COVID-19 fears at exam centres**

South African exam markers, 2,703 out of 46,024, declined their marking duties after a worker died from COVID-19. Another 238 markers who tested positive contracted the virus after reporting for duty. Markers fear for themselves and their families. Others tested positive or are isolating.

South Africa has 1,278,303 reported cases of COVID-19 with 35,140 fatalities.

### **South African Airways pilots locked out for refusing new pay and conditions**

South Africa's Labour Court has dismissed a bid by South African Airways Pilots Association (SAAPA) to end a lockout at South Africa Airways (SAA).

SAA was placed in business rescue last year. A plan adopted by the rescue practitioners in July involved mass retrenchments and new terms and conditions for those jobs retained, including new salary scales. When nearly 400 pilots refused to accept these terms and conditions of employment, they were locked out on December 18 by the business rescue practitioners.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and the South African Cabin Crew Association (SACCA) accepted the new terms,

leaving SAPP members isolated.

SAAPA, NUMSA and SACCA refused to sign up for a three months' salary settlement in lieu of back pay, but because of the lockout SAAPA members are no longer accruing unpaid salaries. The rescue practitioners stopped paying their salaries in May, and the SAA's shareholder now says there is no more money available than three months' back pay.

SAAPA described the court's refusal to rule the lockout illegal as "a further abuse of power." Desperate workers who left SAAPA in order to take up the salary settlement have also not been paid.

SAAPA continues to insist, "All that is required is for the rescue practitioners to be willing to compromise." SAAPA's Grant Back pointed to their previous record of betrayals: "We have attempted all along to find a negotiated solution. We agreed in principle to reduce our salaries by up to 50 percent and to cancel our Regulating Agreement and replace it with a fair and reasonable alternative, benchmarked to the market conditions as they stand."



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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