

Strikes by UK energy workers continue as British Airways workers plan further walkout; French energy workers strike; South African metal workers and broadcast workers strike against redundancies

## 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.*

Unlike BA's passenger sector, the cargo handling company has not suffered any reduction in business as a result of the pandemic. Fears over a no-deal Brexit led to increased demand for cargo services.

### Europe

#### Further strikes by UK energy workers

Following a five-day strike, engineers and office staff at energy company British Gas, owned by Centrica, held a further strike on Wednesday with another due today.

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.

Further action of five 24-hour strikes on January 20, January 22, January 25, January 29 and February 1 is planned.

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

#### Further strikes by British Airways cargo staff in UK

Around 850 British Airways (BA) cargo-handling workers at London's Heathrow Airport are set to begin a further nine-day strike today. They previously held a nine-day strike beginning 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 workers face losing a quarter of their income under the new terms. The union initially refused to set a strike date, hoping to reach agreement with management as it did in other sectors of BA. Following the failure of talks the first strike went ahead on Christmas Day. Unite did not organise pickets citing COVID-19 fears.

#### French energy workers' one-day strike

On Tuesday, energy workers at state-owned French power company EDF held a one-day strike. The energy workers represented by four unions are opposed to the Hercule restructuring project, which would see the break-up or partial privatisation of the company. The strike is part of an ongoing programme of opposition to the project.

#### Industrial action threat by French lorry drivers

French lorry drivers are threatening industrial action, such as mounting blockades. They are concerned over difficulties with having to carry out COVID-19 tests prior to crossing borders, the closure of facilities for cheap food and refreshment and problems arising from Brexit.

Any action by the lorry drivers represented by five unions would begin on February 1. The unions have called for urgent discussions with transport minister Jean-Baptiste Djebbari.

#### Strike by French pharmaceutical workers

Workers at pharmaceutical company Sanofi walked out Tuesday over plans by the French multinational to cut around 1,000 jobs across its estate. Around 200 strikers, CFDT and Stalinist CGT union members, protested outside the company's research and development facility in Marcy l'Étoile in central France.

Sanofi, France's largest pharmaceutical company which is involved in the roll out of the COVID-19 vaccine, has come under criticism for its slow dispersal of the vaccine. The company expects to push through the majority of its proposed cuts through voluntary redundancy.

occasions, and its use of scab labour from within DHL.

### **Irish medical staff to reject government pay deal**

Irish medical laboratory staff are set to reject a government pay offer. The Medical Laboratory Scientists Association (MLSA) members voted unanimously last October to strike over pay rates. The strike did not go ahead as a new pay deal was proposed, to come into effect at Christmas. The workers, however, do not think the deal addresses the gap between their pay and that of biochemists and medical scientists.

Related to pay is the high level of unfilled posts, currently standing at around 130. MLSA members, who have a high workload resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, argue a pay increase is needed to address staff shortages.

### **Union at UK plane makers seeks to impose pay cut on behalf of company**

UK workers at plane manufacturer Airbus at Broughton in North Wales will ballot over a five to 10 percent cut in working hours and consequently pay.

The Unite union negotiated the sellout deal with Airbus, with the company insisting on the need to achieve savings in light of the pandemic, which has impacted the air travel industry. The company claims without the cuts it would be forced to make redundancies, and say the cuts will be restored at some point.

Unite attempted to gloss over its reduced hours and pay cut deal in a statement from its Wales Regional Secretary Peter Hughes. He declared, "This plan to reduce hours will come with a reduction in pay for our members but crucially it offers a route out of the current crisis which will not involve any further job losses. Unite and our senior reps on site believe this is the best option available and we will be strongly urging our members to accept the proposal."

The company and union have already overseen the loss of almost 1,000 jobs during the pandemic, a fact admitted to in Hughes' statement.

### **DHL delivery and warehouse staff in Liverpool, England resume strike**

Around 120 UK delivery and warehouse staff employed by DHL Supply Chain in Liverpool have resumed their strike. They walked out on December 19, but the Unite union called off the action after the employer made an improved pay offer. However, DHL reneged on their offer.

The workers also accuse DHL of using bullying tactics. They were due to strike Wednesday and Thursday, with further strikes planned for February 2, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9.

The workers are responsible for contracts supplying brands such as Wagon Wheels and Jammie Dodger biscuits.

Attempts by Unite at the government mediation service ACAS to resolve the dispute failed. The workers began their original stoppage after rejecting a pay offer, due to come into effect in April next year, which would leave them just above the minimum wage rate of £8.91. Instead, they are seeking a 50p an hour increase.

The strikers are angry at the company after it called the police on several

### **Strike vote by teaching support staff at London school**

Ten UK teaching support staff at Colvestone Primary school and Thomas Fairchild community school in London voted unanimously to strike. The Unite members are opposed to plans by the employer, Hackney-based Soaring Skies Foundation to cut 18 out of 30 teaching support roles. Soaring Skies says it is proposing the restructuring in response to falling school rolls. No strike date has been set.

### **Unions call off planned stoppage by paint production workers in northeast England**

Unions called off planned action by around 400 UK workers at International Paint's site at Felling, Gateshead. An overtime ban was due, with strikes on January 27 and February 10.

The Unite and GMB accepted a 1.5 percent pay offer backdated to April last year, along with improvements to performance-related bonuses and the holiday scheme. The decision means the paint production site has not had a strike over the last 100 years.

### **Middle East**

#### **Strike by Palestinian workers on West Bank industrial estate**

Around 80 Palestinian workers at the Yamit plant, on the West Bank industrial estate of Nitzanei Shalom, went on strike December 31. The plant produces water filters for domestic and agricultural use. While in Israeli-occupied West Bank territory, the workers are subject to Jordanian rather than Israeli labour law.

Many of the highly skilled workers, employed at the plant for over 20 years earning between \$1,600 and \$1,900 were seeking a pay rise. Other demands include improved health and safety measures, sick pay and leave in line with Israeli workers, and a regulated pension scheme.

The workers organised a union which sought to negotiate with the factory owner. After months of fruitless negotiations in which the owner cited the pandemic as reason not to meet their demands, the workers walked out. In response the owner threatened to close the facility.

#### **Protest by Jordanian farmers**

On Sunday, Jordanian farmers protested outside the Ministry of Agriculture. Their demands included being allowed to hire foreign workers, the abolition of taxes on fertiliser and other agricultural chemical products, and the abolition of peak hour price increases on electricity supplies. Jordanian farmers have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic.

## **Africa**

### **South African metalworkers strike over summary redundancies**

Workers employed by steel manufacturer and distributor, Macsteel Service Centres, South Africa, went on indefinite nationwide strike Monday in protest at 99 workers dismissed at short notice before Christmas.

The National Union of Metalworkers South Africa members plan to disrupt the company's operations at over 50 centres countrywide until management reinstate the workers under their existing employment conditions.

### **Paint manufacturing workers in South Africa win victory over unfair dismissal**

South Africa's Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) ruled last Monday that 181 workers employed by Luxor Paints, an automotive coating manufacturer in Johannesburg, were treated unfairly when dismissed after striking over pay and conditions in February 2018.

The General Industrial Workers Union of South Africa members were sacked for carrying sticks, allegedly to intimidate security personnel, during the strike. However, video evidence showed that armed security guards incited violence, using rubber bullets and causing one worker to lose an eye.

The CCMA ordered that all the workers be reinstated on February 1, and that R40 million (\$2.6 million) in lost wages be paid by Luxor Paints.

### **Workers strike against redundancies at South African Broadcasting Corporation**

Employees at the state-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) are to strike Friday against the loss of 300 jobs. The workers took industrial action against the redundancies last year, but suspended action for consultation. Now workers have started to receive retrenchment notices.

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) members drove a motorcade to the Union Buildings in Pretoria Wednesday, and presented their demands to the government. On Thursday they had a go-slow, and Friday's action will cause a four-hour blackout of broadcasts.

The workers were joined by Broadcasting, Electronic, Media and Allied Workers Union members, despite that union's efforts to avert the strike by requesting further negotiations with the SABC board.

### **Namibian Shoprite retail workers continue strike, defying intimidation**

Over 2,000 retail workers from Shoprite, Checkers and U-Save stores in Namibia have been on strike since December 23. They are demanding a pay increase of N\$600, a minimum wage of N\$2,500 and allowances for

housing and transport.

The employers and government are relying on the "conciliation service" to agree settlement that keeps the workers on low pay. The employers began recruiting 390 new employees to replace the strikers until prevented by an order from the law courts.

### **Nigerian retired teachers hold protest and enter state building over lack of pension payments**

Retired teachers in Iwo, Osun State, Nigeria stormed the Iwo-East Local Council Development Area secretariat building in Olomowewe on Monday. They were protesting pensions unpaid since 2016.

The leader of the protest, Okunlola Joseph Oludare said, "[The local government] should stop telling lies, they have not paid us. Some of us are sick; some have died because they could not afford food."

### **Midwives in Zimbabwe strike over lack of PPE**

Midwives at the Sally Mugabe Hospital maternity ward in Zimbabwe's capital, Harare began strike action on January 8, to demand adequate supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE).

The strike came after the death of one of the ward's matrons on January 7 due to COVID-19, and 15 other confirmed cases among nurses on the same ward. Nurses explained they have only been supplied with plastic aprons and surgical masks when they need World Health Organization-approved N95 masks and protective suits.

The Zimbabwe Nurses Association (ZINA) has focused attention on the role of health minister and Vice President Constantino Chiwenga.

Last year, all nurses at government-financed hospitals struck over lack of PPE and low pay. Since the strike was betrayed by the unions some nurses have moved into private healthcare.

Zimbabwe has 29,408 reported cases of COVID-19 and 879 deaths.

### **Council workers in Zimbabwe's capital strike over lack of PPE**

Local government workers in Harare went on strike from January 18 over the lack of PPE and non-payment of salaries and bonuses for December 2020. Press reports described the dire consequences of the strike including raw sewage flowing on the streets, without mentioning safety needs of key workers.



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