British gas workers' strikes continue; Dutch electronic and metalworkers walk out; French teachers, school nurses and students walk out; non-teaching university staff plan strike in Nigeria

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

British energy workers' strikes continue

Engineers and office staff at energy company British Gas are continuing their strikes, begun January 7 against an inferior contract, with a five-day walkout. The GMB union members also held 24-hour strikes on January 20, 22, and 25, and a four-day strike is planned from today. On January 22, pickets publicly burnt the new employment contracts spelling out inferior terms.

The workers voted by an 89 percent majority for action. They are opposed to the company's plans to "fire and rehire," putting them on a contract with less favourable conditions and a 20 percent pay cut. The strikers include 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 strikes have led to a backlog of 150,000 households awaiting a service engineer. Around 70 percent of the public surveyed in a GMB poll said they would not use British Gas or would consider moving to a different energy company because of its wage-cutting actions.

After the Unison union recommended around 7,000 office staff accept British Gas's reduced terms, they signed the new contract, as have 4,000 non-unionised workers.

British Gas parent company, Centrica, returned a £0.9 billion pre-tax profit in 2019. It has a £22 billion turnover. In a poll commissioned by the *Daily Mirror* newspaper, 47 percent of people thought the pay of Centrica's executives should be cut rather than the pay of workers. Over the last five years four British Gas board members have earned £37 million outside their British Gas remuneration.

Strike by Dutch metal and electronic workers

Metal and electronic workers in the Netherlands began a stoppage on January 21. The FNV and CNV union members rejected a 2.25 percent pay offer over two years from the employers' body. The workers' demands include a pay rise of €60 plus one percent, a better work-life balance and equal pay for flexi workers.

Among companies hit are computer chip supplier ASM, truck manufacturer DAF and steel producer ThyssenKrupp. Around 160,000 workers are covered by the contract.

Strike by French teachers over pay and safety in pandemic

Thousands of middle and high school teachers in France walked out Tuesday. They held marches in Paris and other main cities, joined by school nurses and students.

The FSU union members were protesting the inadequate wage increase proposed by the French government. French teachers are paid seven percent less than teachers in other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries.

They were also protesting their treatment during the pandemic. The Macron government has attempted to cover up the spread of infection in schools, maintaining they are safe, so workplaces can remain open for profit making. Schools remained open throughout the pandemic, along with nonessential workplaces. Despite public support for a lockdown, only small businesses are closed, with a 6pm curfew.

Union suspends UK Heathrow cargo handlers' stoppage

The Unite union called off industrial action by UK cargo handlers at London's Heathrow airport, after recommending a deal put forward by Heathrow Airport Limited. The cargo handlers had taken days of action over Christmas and New Year, with more strikes planned next week.

The workers voted almost unanimously to walk out over plans to fire and rehire the entire workforce on inferior terms. Some workers faced losing a quarter of their income under the new terms. The union initially refused to set strike dates, hoping to reach agreement with management, as it did in other sectors of BA. Following the failure of talks, the first

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strike went ahead on Christmas Day. Unite did not organise pickets, citing COVID-19 fears.

Workers will be balloted over the proposed deal, which is reported to include no compulsory redundancies and a pay rise for most staff. A key point in the deal states: "Workers will revert to previous contractual provisions *subject to agreed changes* [emphasis added]."

Unite assistant general secretary Howard Beckett said, "Unite recognises the personal involvement of Sean Doyle, the new CEO of BA, as significant in achieving a negotiated settlement that our reps now feel able to recommend to our members."

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.

Strike by Deliveroo food delivery workers in Dublin

Deliveroo delivery workers in Dublin, Ireland began a two-hour withdrawal of their services from 6pm on January 22. The delivery workers, classed as self-employed so not entitled to sick pay or paid leave, were protesting their terms and conditions.

Drivers accuse Deliveroo of reducing their rates of pay last month. They also highlighted the lack of security, with workers saying they have been attacked and had their bikes stolen.

Many restaurants in the city took to social media to support the strikers. With the COVID-19 lockdown, many food outlets depend on food delivery services to maintain their businesses. Deliveroo has around 1,000 delivery workers across Ireland and services around 1,800 restaurants.

Parcel delivery service workers walk out at Liège airport, Belgium

FedEx parcel delivery staff at Liège airport in Belgium began a 48-hour strike on January 19. They were protesting plans by US giant FedEx to cut 671 out of 1,700 jobs at the airport and review the working hours of the remaining workers.

FedEx is planning a restructuring of its European wide operation that would lead to the elimination of 6,000 jobs. When FedEx took over TNT in Belgium in 2016, it stated it did not expect to cut any existing posts.

Go North West bus workers in Manchester, England ballot for strike action

A ballot of UK bus workers employed by Go North West in Manchester began Tuesday and will close on February 9. Any strike would begin later in February. The Unite union members are under threat of being fired and rehired on inferior terms as the company seeks to impose cuts.

Go North West, part of the multi-billion pound Go Ahead group, wants to impose inferior terms including a 10 percent pay cut, working extra hours for no additional pay, and cuts to sick pay for the 500 workers. The latter could force drivers who are sick or should be self-isolating into work.

In a consultative ballot held September last year, the workers voted by a 94 percent majority to be prepared to take action against the attacks. The union did not proceed to a strike ballot, instead appealing to the Go Ahead group—"all of your stakeholders, partners and associates, including our significant political network in the Nordic countries, Germany and Australasia"—to pressure Go North West to drop their plans.

Unite also made proposals to save the company £1 million a year and was prepared to accept a year-long pay freeze which would save the company an additional £200,000. However, the company is still demanding more, and the union was forced to call the strike ballot.

Staff at UK universities and colleges demand action over cuts

In the last two weeks workers at a number of UK universities have indicated willingness to take action against proposed cuts. Last week, workers at the University of Roehampton passed a motion on an 89 percent majority calling for a "move to industrial action immediately." They had previously voted by a 64 percent majority to take action in a consultative ballot.

On Monday, staff at the University of Leicester voted in a meeting to oppose threats to sack 16 members of the School of Business, and to ballot on industrial action.

Staff at Chichester College voted unanimously to declare a dispute in response to threats to cut posts in the Maths and English departments.

The university staff are represented by the University and College Union (UCU), which is sitting on a powder keg of discontent by staff and students, whose education has been disrupted by the pandemic while they are expected to pay fees and rent.

Strike by vegetable growers in Almería, Spain

Workers at Fresh Tom, a tomato grower in Almería in southeast Spain, began an indefinite strike on January 19. Their demands include raising the monthly wage to the current Minimum Interprofessional wage of €1,180, a transport bonus and an end to temporary contracts. Their current contract was negotiated in 2005. The workers are picketing the site.

Logistics staff at depot in Dartford, England to ballot for industrial action

Around 350 staff at the grocery retailer's regional distribution centre run by logistics firm DHL in Dartford, southeast England, will ballot for industrial action. The Unite union members are opposing the suspension of a Unite representative, who represented a worker at a meeting with management. Management accuse him of acting aggressively, which he denies with support from a neutral observer.

Following a recent management structure change at DHL, the company is seeking to impose attacks on the workforce. Around 120 DHL staff at Croxteth in Liverpool resumed strike action in the New Year and have held a 48-hour strike with further action planned for February 2-5, and 8-9. The DHL staff are under contract to Burton Biscuits and AB World Foods. The Unite members are seeking an improved pay offer and accuse management of bullying tactics.

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Strike by aerospace engineers at UK Royal Air Force base

Around 40 UK aerospace engineers providing operational and engineering services at the Royal Air Force (RAF) base at Leeming, North Yorkshire went on strike on January 20, as well as beginning an overtime ban. The Unite union members are demanding to be paid a shift pay premium in line with colleagues at RAF Valley in Wales. The non-payment of the shift premium leaves the Leeming workers around £5,000 a year out of pocket.

Porters set to strike at hospital in Birmingham, England

UK porters at Heartlands hospital in Birmingham are to begin a three-day strike on February 1. The Unison union members are involved in a long-running dispute over hospital management plans to impose rota changes. They have already held 11 days of strikes. The chair of the University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Trust seeking to impose the changes is the Blairite former Labour government Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith.

Strike by scaffolders at British Steel Scunthorpe plant

Around 50 UK scaffold erectors at British Steel's Scunthorpe plant began a 48-hour strike on Monday. They held socially distanced picket lines.

The Unite union members are employed by contractor Brand Energy. They have been involved in a long-running dispute since 2019, seeking to be paid the hourly rate as determined by the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry. Their current rate is £2 short of that figure. Brand Energy has refused to negotiate with Unite. The workers voted 100 percent for action. Further strikes are planned for Monday and Wednesday next week and the following week.

IT staff at University of Brighton to strike

IT staff at the University of Brighton on England's south coast are to strike from February 8 to 12. They are currently conducting a work to rule.

The UCU members are opposed to compulsory redundancy plans as part of a restructuring of the university IT department, under which a third of the IT staff are to be made redundant. The workers took several days of strike action in December over the issue.

Workers at UK retail chain Wilko face attack on sick pay

Workers at UK general products retailer Wilko face a cut in sick pay. Workers are entitled up to four instances of sick leave on company sick pay from day one for each twelve-month period. From February 1, however, workers will not be entitled to the scheme after one instance of sickness.

Wilko stores have remained open throughout the pandemic, and its workers have been on the frontline. The GMB union which represents some Wilko staff informed the company it will launch an industrial action ballot if the attacks go ahead.

Middle East

Lebanese protests over lack of financial help during COVID-19 lockdown

Protests took place targeting government buildings in Tripoli and Saida, Lebanon. Unlike previous lockdowns, no financial help has been provided to workers unable to work during the current lockdown, which is scheduled to last until at least mid-February. Grocery shops are closed and only offer home delivery, but such deliveries are often not available in poorer areas. Lebanon, with a population of 6 million, has seen 289,660 COVID-19 cases and 2,503 deaths.

Strike of hospital workers at Palestinian hospital in Jerusalem

Around 850 workers at the al-Makassed Palestinian hospital in Jerusalem, Israel came out on strike Monday. The workers have not been paid since October and so cannot afford to buy food for their families or even pay the bus fares to get to work.

The hospital, established in 1968, treats Palestinians from Gaza, the West Bank and Jerusalem and is known as the hospital of the poor. It has debts of around $49 million, and the hospital workers' union hold the hospital management responsible for the dire financial situation.

Strike by Moroccan postal workers

A nationwide strike of postal workers in Morocco ended January 17, after 11 days, when the Moroccan government called on the Poste Maroc (postal service) management to begin negotiations with the workers union FNPL-UMT. The workers struck over a series of issues, including poor working conditions and lack of promotion for postal workers. During the strike, protests were held in Casablanca and Marrakesh.

Africa

Nigerian non-teaching university staff to strike in February

Non-teaching staff at Nigeria's federal universities are preparing to strike from midnight on February 5, to demand the government honours an agreement made October 20. Seven issues were agreed then between the government and the Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities and Educational Institutions. Six have been addressed, and one only partially.

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The demands include ending the long-term neglect and cuts in university funding, removal of inconsistencies in the implementation of the Integrated Personnel Payroll and Information System, payment of unpaid allowances and arrears, and payment of benefits to retirees.

The union complained that N40 billion released to the universities by the government was misspent.

South African Macsteel strike ends after union negotiates sellout deal

Workers at steel manufacturer and distributor Macsteel Service Centres, South Africa, on nationwide strike January 18 to protest 99 redundancies in December, returned to work Monday after the union negotiated a deal which does not guarantee jobs.

Under "mutual consensus" between the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and Macsteel, the company will "*endeavour* to place every employee who was retrenched into a new position" by the end of February and "*as far as is reasonably possible*, Macsteel will ensure that they do not earn less than they earned before retrenchment," [emphasis added] according to union secretary-general Irvin Jim. The company said it remains "committed to adapting to changing economic conditions."

The settlement states that anyone taking up a vacant post will be considered a new employee from January 1, and NUMSA agreed not to resume strike action if workers refuse to accept the offered vacancies.

Delivery drivers' low pay stoppage at Uber Eats in South Africa

Uber Eats self-employed delivery drivers in South Africa went on national strike January 21 for an increase in the fees they receive. They picketed outside the larger fast-food outlets and at Uber's head office in Johannesburg.

Last month, the Uber Driver Partners Association members stopped work for two days in protest. Some have seen their average earnings halve in the last three years. They also want Uber Eats to stop giving preference to labour brokers, who charge workers large fees, while those who apply direct wait months for a contract.

One driver stated, "Uber Eats boasts of huge profits, which sit in the billions of dollars, while totally neglecting and treating driver partners like slaves. Enough is enough. We are united and we are tired."

South African teachers oppose reopening schools

Teachers in South Africa are fighting to keep schools closed as the country faces the new COVID-19 variant. As infection rates rise, they say the government's Department of Basic Education (DBE) is not doing enough to protect teachers and pupils.

The South African Democratic Teachers Union and the National Professional Teachers Union of South Africa members quote the World Health Organisation, which recommends that a country must have a 14-day consecutive decline of COVID-19 infections before reopening schools. This is not the case in South Africa, yet the DBE intends to open schools on February 15.

The DBE, the School Governing Bodies Association, the Independent Schools Association and the Colleges of Public Health Medicine (CPHM) insist schools are Covid safe, offering "a more controlled environment." The head of the CPHM said, "We cannot have our children miss another year of schooling… I don't disregard the fears but the harm to the children is more worrying." The real motivation is so workers can rely on school childcare while continuing to make profits in the workplace.

A teachers' spokesperson said, "We can't understand why close to a million teachers must return now… this is surely a superspreader event waiting to happen." Around 2,000 teachers have died of COVID-19 in South Africa. The country has reported 1,430,648 cases and 42,550 deaths.

Namibian Shoprite retail workers' strike ends, union agrees to forego future pay rise

Over 2,000 retail workers from Shoprite, Checkers and U-Save stores in Namibia, on strike since December 23, will return to work Monday. They were demanding a pay increase of N$600, a minimum wage of N$2,500 and allowances for housing and transport.

The Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union agreed an increase N$250 per month for permanent workers and a minimum salary of N$2,500 per month. Permanent employees earning N$9,71 per hour or more will get a one-off payment of N$1,000. In February, workers will receive back pay from July 2020 to the end of January 2021.

The union, however, agreed their members will forego any future increase if the statutory minimum wage rises, according to the *Namibian.*

Senegalese postal workers strike to demand government pays its debt

From January 22, Senegalese postal workers engaged in strikes and sit-ins to demand the government pays its US$115 million debt to the state-owned postal service. La Poste du Sénégal employees were denied their December salaries until January and are concerned that their January payments will be delayed.

In December, police teargassed postal workers in a sit-in in front of La Poste du Sénégal headquarters in the capital city, Dakar. Postal union leaders met with the Minister of Digital Economy and Telecommunications to discuss a deal.

Ethiopian garment makers complain to media of their unpaid work

Garment makers at Indochine Apparel and KGG Garments in Ethiopia complained to the media of being forced to do unpaid work and denied basic safety requirements for stopping the spread of COVID-19.

In the last months of 2020, workers were forced to work unpaid overtime to compensate for a drop in production when hundreds of workers failed to return to their jobs after being furloughed due to the pandemic. One worker complained she had been working an extra six hours a week without pay.

The two companies in Ethiopia supply fashion chains including Levi Strauss & Co and H&M. Ethiopia reported 135,045 coronavirus cases and 2,083 fatalities.

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