

Strikes across France against government's refusal to tackle pandemic, low wages and job insecurity; UK pay strikes by delivery workers, porters, scaffolders, care workers; Zimbabwe month-long council strike continues in Harare

## 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

#### Nationwide strikes in France against Macron government's criminal response to pandemic

Nationwide strikes took place in France on Thursday over the government's herd immunity response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the spread of a new more transmissible variant, the Macron government refused a national lockdown. The strikers also protested against low wages, growing job insecurity and deteriorating working conditions. The strike call was made by the Stalinist CGT union, along with the FSU and Solidaires unions, but France's largest union the CFTD was not involved.

Taking part were public sector workers, including civil servants, teachers, healthcare staff along with rail and other transport workers. Teachers held a one-day strike on January 26 for higher wages and resources. Rallies were planned in cities and towns across France including Paris, Nice, Marseille and Lyon. Students and other groups joined the demonstrations.

French workers have a long militant tradition, including widespread strike movements as in 1968 and 1995. However, their struggles were betrayed by the trade union bureaucracy. The "yellow-vest" protests in 2019 against Macron's regressive fuel taxes, low wages, austerity and police-state militarism were condemned by the pseudo-left supporters of the unions, which in turn shut down solidarity strikes of truckers and port workers. French workers must establish rank and file committees independent of the unions to take their fight forward.

There have been 3,251,160 coronavirus cases reported in France and 77,595 deaths.

#### DHL delivery and warehouse staff in northwest England hold further

#### strike

Following a 48-hour strike two weeks ago, UK delivery drivers and warehouse workers at DHL Supply Chain, Croxteth, Liverpool began a four-day strike Tuesday, to be followed by a 48-hour strike February 8. They also took several days of strike action over Christmas. The 120 Unite union members work for DHL on a delivery contract for Burton Biscuits and AB World Foods.

Strikers are demanding a pay increase and an end to victimisation of union members. They are paid £8.94 an hour, just two-and-a-half pence above the minimum wage rate coming into effect in April. According to Unite the Union regional officer Kenny Rowe, several members were "suspended or sacked on spurious charges, due to management victimisation." During the strikes in December, management called the police to picket lines on at least 10 occasions, involving up to three police vehicles at a time.

Unite initially called a strike after negotiations under the auspices of the Advisory and Conciliation Arbitration Service collapsed. Unite was calling for a pay rise of just 50p an hour above the minimum wage. The union then called off planned action in December offering further talks to DHL. They were forced to reinstate the action in late December as talks proved fruitless.

#### Porters at hospital in Birmingham, UK strike against attempts to impose new work rotas

Around 140 porters at the Heartlands hospital in Birmingham, England walked out Monday to Wednesday this week. This follows 12 days of strike action since the autumn.

The Unison union members are protesting the announcement by the University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust to unilaterally impose a flexible rota with several different start times.

The porters work fixed rotas and have been able to fit in caring and childcare around them. This week, the Trust, chaired by former Labour government Home Secretary Jacqui Smith, sent out dismissal meeting letters. The letters state the porters must sign up to the new rotas. Those

refusing will be given five days to change their minds or face the sack.

### **Striking security staff at hospital in Reading, England announce further strikes**

Twenty security staff at the Royal Berkshire hospital in Reading, southwest England are striking this week Monday through Friday, with a further strike planned for next week. The Unite union members are employed by contractor Kingdom Services to provide security at the hospital. They are seeking a pay increase of £12 an hour and £13 for supervisors. Kingdom, with a turnover in excess of £100 million, is offering £9.30 an hour for staff and £10 for supervisors.

Strikes began at the hospital in December, with further action scheduled from February 12 until March 7.

In a separate dispute, hospital security staff employed by contractor Engie at Blackburn and Bolton hospitals in northwest England are balloting for strike action. The Unison union members are seeking pay parity with NHS staff.

### **Further strike by scaffolders at British Steel Scunthorpe plant**

Around 50 UK scaffold erectors at British Steel's Scunthorpe plant began a second round of strikes Monday. They held a 48-hour strike last week. Further strikes are planned next week.

The Unite union members are employed by contractor Brand Energy. They have been involved in a long-running dispute since 2019, to be paid the hourly rate 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.

On February 15, Brand Energy's contract for scaffolding ends and transfers to Activo. If the dispute remains unresolved at contract transfer Unite plan to reballot its members.

### **Quorn production workers at northeast England factory begin industrial action**

Around 60 UK workers involved in the production of meat-free alternative product Quorn at its factory in Billingham on Teesside began an overtime ban Monday.

The Unite union members want a 2.5 percent pay rise. The company has offered two percent. Possible strikes are scheduled over the next few weeks.

### **Further strike action by UK care home staff in north London**

Workers employed as carers and cleaners at a care home for the elderly, run by the Sage group in Golders Green, north London, were to begin their second stoppage, a five-day strike on Thursday.

They previously voted unanimously to strike, and held a three-day strike

beginning January 14. The United Voices of the World union members are calling for a £12 an hour wage, and for sick and leave conditions in line with NHS staff.

### **IT staff at UK's University of Brighton to strike**

IT staff at the University of Brighton on England's south coast are to strike in an ongoing dispute from February 8 to 12. They are currently conducting a work to rule. A rally is planned on the first stoppage day.

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

### **Passport staff at the UK's Heathrow airport vote to strike**

Passport control staff at the UK's Heathrow airport voted to strike by a near 97 percent majority on a 68 percent turnout. The Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) members are opposed to local management's decision to unilaterally amend staff rota arrangements. The new rotas will be less flexible and make it difficult for those with caring responsibilities or disabilities.

Management justify the rotas as a response to COVID-19, but local PCS representatives say they were planned previously, and the pandemic is a pretext to push them through. The strike dates have not been announced.

### **Unite union at Airbus plant in North Wales impose pay cut on behalf of company**

The Unite union negotiated a sell-out deal with Airbus at Broughton, North Wales, including a five to 10 percent reduction in members' working week and a subsequent reduction in pay.

The company insisted on the need for savings due to the pandemic, which has impacted the air travel industry. The company claims without cuts it would be forced to make redundancies and says the cuts will be restored at some point.

Prior to a ballot on the deal, which was accepted, Unite Regional Secretary Peter Hughes 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, as Hughes admitted. After workers voted to accept, he said, "Whilst it is not ideal that our members have had to commit to a shorter working week, this decision should be viewed against the background of an unprecedented crisis in global aviation. This solution to the crisis faced by Airbus is one that could be deployed to other manufacturing sites across Wales in order to avoid large scale redundancies. These unprecedented times require creative solutions."

## **Staff at UK vehicle and driver registration office ready to strike over COVID-19**

A straw poll of around 500 workers at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) office in Swansea, Wales, has indicated that 90 percent would be in favour of strike action over the lack of COVID-19 safety measures.

Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union which conducted the poll, told *Wales on Line* the union “is now highly likely to move to a statutory strike ballot at the DVLA because it is clear senior management and Grant Shapps [UK government transport secretary] will not listen to strong and reasoned arguments on staff safety.”

Around 2,000 workers from the Swansea area are employed at the site, where there have been 535 cases and one death from the disease since September.

Workers are angry they have to come into the office rather than work from home. In contrast, the chief executive of the DVLA told a parliamentary transport committee meeting last month that she had only been in the office six or seven times since September.

## **Ballot of cleaners at south London school**

Cleaning staff working for a contractor at the La Retraite Roman Catholic Girls' School in Clapham Park, south London, are being balloted for strike action.

The 26 migrant workers from Latin America, United Voices of the World members, are opposed to the employer's plan to cut working time of the total workforce by 800 hours a year. This would reduce each cleaner's employment and wages being cut by three weeks, from 46 weeks to 43 weeks.

## **Spanish rail maintenance workers strike threat**

Spanish rail maintenance workers announced they will hold five-day strikes this month and in March. The SEMAF union members are protesting the loss of 700 jobs last year. They say the staff shortages are leading to lack of proper maintenance, and resultant cutbacks in trains available on the network.

## **Middle East**

### **General strike in Tamra after killing by Israeli police**

A general strike Tuesday, in the Arab city of Tamra in northern Israel, led to the closure of all shops and markets. The strike was in response to the killing of two Arabs by police on Monday. Police said they had confronted four suspects firing on a home and tried to arrest them. It was later revealed that one of the dead was Ahmed Hijazi, a university student shot by mistake.

Since the beginning of the year, 16 Arab citizens in Tamra have been

shot dead by unknown gunmen. Arab citizens of Tamra accuse the Israeli authorities of failing to do anything about the killings.

## **Strike by autoworkers in Morocco**

Workers at the Peugeot plant in the northwestern Moroccan city of Kenitra walked out January 29. They are protesting low wages. They currently earn less than €240 a month with poor working conditions. They have to work long hours including overnight and Saturdays, do enforced overtime for no extra pay and have no medical cover.

Peugeot, Europe's second largest auto manufacturer, is about to announce profits of €2.5 billion.

## **Africa**

### **Council strike in Zimbabwe's capital city continues as union appeals for government intervention**

Council workers in Harare, Zimbabwe, are continuing their strike against the city council's refusal to pay wages and allowances or to provide adequate personal protective equipment (PPE).

The workers have been on strike for more than a month. During this time sewers burst and blockages were left unattended, causing raw sewage to flow in streets.

The Harare Municipal Workers Union, Zimbabwe Urban Councils Workers Union and Zimbabwe Allied Municipalities Workers Union recently sent a joint letter asking the government to intercede for the workers. According to the letter, money paid to the council by ratepayers is siphoned off by council officials. All the elected Harare councillors are members of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change. Several of the council's current and former officials are facing charges of corruption.

Inflation is running at 385 percent. Nurses struck for four months last year for a living wage and to protest lack of PPE. Zimbabwe has 33,964 reported coronavirus cases and 1,269 fatalities.

### **South African nurses and hospital staff in Limpopo to strike over staff shortages and increased workloads**

Around 11,000 nurses and support staff in Limpopo Province, South Africa are to walk out after roster changes increasing their workload were imposed.

Members of the Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA), National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union, and Health and Other Services Personnel Trade Union of South Africa say there will not be enough rest time between shifts. Some will finish at 2 a.m. The unions have not named a strike date, with reports saying it may not happen until April.

Staff shortages were caused by a failure to fill vacant positions. Workers say they are already overstretched and exhausted coping with a health system overwhelmed by the ANC government's inadequate response to the pandemic.

Limpopo has reported 56,059 coronavirus infections and 1,246 fatalities,

including 20 nurses. South Africa has over 1.4 million cases of COVID-19 with 45,344 deaths.

### **South African casino workers arrested after protesting contract changes**

Workers at Suncoast Casino entertainment complex in Durban, South Africa, were picketing on January 29, when their action was declared lawful by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA).

The Future of South African Workers Union (Fosawu) members had been on strike for six weeks, but the union said they had been waiting for the CCMA ruling as the law did not allow them to picket without it.

Seven pickets were arrested without reason, and later released on a warning.

The Fosawu members, mostly waiters and chefs, are protesting a change to their contract where a “13th cheque” guaranteed bonus in December and an agreed 7.5 percent contribution to the workers’ pension fund are no longer being paid. The union accuses the company of taking advantage of the pandemic to change contracts.

### **Nurses in South Africa protest over job losses despite staff shortages in hospitals**

More than 600 nurses on internships in Eastern Cape, South Africa, have not had their 12-month contracts renewed as expected on January 31, despite the COVID-19 crisis in the province’s hospitals and health centres. They are planning to hold a sit-down protest at the provincial government offices in capital city Bhisho.

The DENOSA union members provide an essential role in understaffed hospitals, at great risk to themselves. The nurses were told there is currently no money to appoint them permanently, and to wait until April.

### **Nigerian teachers in Edo State defy return to work call**

Teachers in Edo State, Nigeria defied an official directive that all primary school teachers should resume work on February 1. They are continuing an indefinite strike.

The Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT) delayed the start of the strike until January 18 but could not suppress action further because teachers were not paid their salaries and the state government said it was unable to pay them. The NUT said it had given the state government eight weeks to resolve the dispute. Preparing the way for a climbdown, the union said its negotiations with the state government would continue.

### **Kenyan tea pickers in dispute with Unilever over jobs threat**

Thousands of Kenyan tea pickers face losing their jobs as Unilever Tea Kenya Limited is bringing in mechanised tea harvesting equipment.

In 2018, workers withdrew their labour to protest company plans to

mechanise. The Kenya Plantations and Agricultural Workers Union turned to the courts in 2010 to deter plans for mechanisation to avoid strike action but were unable to prevent a stoppage.

The court has now ruled in favour of Unilever, declaring the company has the right to bring in new technology and destroy the jobs of most of the tea pickers.

### **Striking Ghanaian teachers face betrayal as union enters negotiations**

After a three-week stoppage by teachers in Ghana, the Teachers and Educational Workers’ Union is meeting with the Fair Wages and Salaries Commission to finalise an agreement. The nationwide action began on January 13 against the COVID risks faced by teachers and the lack of allowances and promotions.

The National Labour Commission declared the strike illegal under Ghana’s anti-strike laws.



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