UK engineers at British gas continue strikes; walkout by UK staff at London’s Heathrow airport; Nigerian University administration workers’ stoppage

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

11 February 2021

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

Europe

Energy engineers at British Gas continue strikes

Engineers at energy company British Gas, part of the Centrica group, are continuing their programme of strikes. British Gas supplies gas and electric energy and services equipment and has around 20,000 employees.

A four-day strike is due to begin today, with further four-day actions planned for February 19 and 26. The GMB union members are opposing “fire and rehire” plans by British Gas to undermine workers’ conditions and cut pay by 20 percent.

Around 7,500 workers are involved, including 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 strikes have led to a backlog of 170,000 boiler repairs and the delay of 200,000 service visits.

The company announced restructuring plans in June last year, including shedding 5,000 jobs. Following negotiations, Unison, Unite and Prospect unions reached agreements to accept the inferior terms. This covered 7,000 frontline office workers, most of them represented by Unison.

Airport staff at London Heathrow strike

Around 4,500 UK workers at London’s Heathrow Airport Limited (HAL) walked out February 5 and again on Tuesday, with further action planned for February 13, 16 and 18. The Unite members took four days of strikes in December.

The airside operations, baggage handling, engineering and security staff are opposed to HAL’s announcement last September to cut pay by up to 25 percent, with some workers set to lose around £8,000. HAL, using the pandemic to impose long planned attacks, threatens to fire and rehire the workforce on lower pay and inferior terms.

Scaffolders at British Steel Scunthorpe plant continue pay strike

Around 50 scaffold erectors at British Steel’s Scunthorpe plant held a 48-hour strike on Monday, after taking four days of strike action. Another 48-hour strike is planned for February 15, followed by a 24-hour strike February 18, a 48-hour strike on February 22, and a final 24-hour strike on February 25.

The Unite union members are employed by contractor Brand Energy. They have been in dispute since 2019, demanding to be paid the hourly rate determined by the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry. Their current rate is £2 short of that. 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 plans to re-ballot its members.

Workers at care home in UK capital continue strike

UK workers employed as carers and cleaners at a care home for the elderly, run by the Sage group in Golders Green, north London, held a one-day strike Saturday, their sixth strike day.

The United Voices of the World (UVW) union members voted unanimously for action. They are calling for a £12 an hour wage, sickness and leave conditions in line with NHS staff and recognition of their union. UVW met with management at the care home the previous day to discuss demands.

Strike by staff at north London school

Teachers and support staff began a three-day strike on Wednesday at Colvestone Primary school and Thomas Fairchild community school, run by the Hackney-based Soaring Skies Foundation. The National Education Union and Unite union members are opposed to a planned reorganisation that will lead to job losses.

© World Socialist Web Site

Bus drivers in UK capital to strike

UK bus drivers in London working for three subsidiaries of French-owned transport company RATP, London United, Quality Line and London Sovereign, plan to strike over pay and conditions. Around 2,000 Unite union members oppose plans by the companies to attack conditions using the pretext of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unite says the proposals would leave drivers around £2,500 a year worse off, with longer working hours. RATP are also proposing bringing in a zero-hour type system whereby drivers would be paid for time behind the wheel, not actual working time.

Drivers at London United will strike February 22 to 24, those at Quality Line February 22 and 23 and those at London Sovereign February 22. In a separate dispute, around 4,000 drivers at Singapore-owned bus company Metroline will be balloted by Unite over plans by the company to bring in a remote sign-on process.

Go North West buses drivers in Manchester, England vote to strike

UK bus drivers at Go North West buses in Manchester voted by an 82 percent majority on a 77 percent turnout to strike. The Unite union members are opposed to a new contract the company is seeking to impose.

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

Unite regional secretary Ritchie James immediately called for negotiations aimed at ending the dispute, saying, “They are being forced by Go North West to choose between their jobs and huge cuts in their pay and conditions. Unite is now providing Go North West with a very short window of opportunity, where it can tear up its fire and rehire plans. If the company fails to grasp this opportunity then Unite will not hesitate in calling strikes.”

News website *aboutmanchester* reported that drivers have been given hand-delivered letters stating that if they do not sign the new contracts, then “Go North West is issuing you with notice of the termination of your employment, which shall end on 8 May 2021.” The article said drivers have only until February 16 to decide whether or not to accept the new contract.

In a consultative ballot held September last year, drivers voted by a 94 percent majority to be prepared to strike. 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 said it was prepared to accept a year-long pay freeze to save the company an additional £200,000. The company is demanding more, and the union was forced to call the strike ballot.

UK telecom workers engineers vote to strike

A ballot of 170 Repayment Project Engineers (RPE) working for UK telecom company BT’s Openreach division produced an 86 percent majority on a 94 percent turnout to strike. The Communication Workers Union (CWU) members oppose company plans to unilaterally impose regrading of their posts.

The vote by the RPEs to strike follows a consultative vote of CWU members across BT Openreach and EE announced in December last year. On a 70 percent turnout in that ballot, nearly 98 percent voted in favour of striking to defend jobs, terms and conditions.

Rather than acting on the ballot result, the union is seeking to pressure the company to retract the regrading. CWU national officer for Openreach, Davie Bowman, wrote to senior management saying, “It is clear from that result our members have demonstrated, once again, their clear opposition to the movement of the RPE role from the team member grading structure. The CWU believe the company should reflect on the outcome of the statutory ballot and urgently meet with the CWU.”

Union ends strike of DHL drivers and warehouse staff in northwest England

Unite ended the strike by UK delivery drivers and warehouse workers at DHL Supply Chain, in Croxteth, Liverpool, after agreeing a paltry wage settlement. They had been due to strike Monday and Tuesday this week. The 120 Unite union members who work for DHL on a delivery contract for Burton Biscuits and AB World Foods had taken 10 days of action.

Strikers demanded a pay increase and an end to victimisation of union members. They were paid £8.94 an hour, just two-and-a-half pence above the new minimum wage rate coming into effect in April. Unite regional officer Kenny Rowe said 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 called 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.

Under the agreement between DHL and Unite, workers will be given a three percent rise for 2020 backdated to April last year, followed by a three percent rise this year plus a one-off £75 payment. This will leave the DHL workers on around £9.50 an hour, 60p above the minimum wage rate set in spring.

Scottish college lecturers’ ballot for strike action

Lecturers in Scottish Further Education colleges are taking part in a consultative ballot over plans by the national employment body, Colleges Scotland, to replace college lecturer posts with instructor/assessor posts. The new posts would be open to less qualified staff, on lower pay and inferior conditions.

Lecturers at Forth Valley college have been involved in industrial action over what amounts to a fire and rehire threat by management.

The Educational Institute of Scotland-Further Education Lecturers Association members has called an online rally.

© World Socialist Web Site

UK court security staff strike vote

Around 300 UK court security staff working for contractor OCS have voted to strike, rejecting a pay offer of 13p an hour. The Public and Commercial Services union members voted by more than 90 percent on a two-thirds turnout to strike. The workers also want sick pay paid from day one, and 30 days leave.

Union calls off IT staff strike at Brighton University after agreeing a redundancy

A strike by IT staff at the University of Brighton on England's south coast, due to begin Monday, was called off after the University and College Union (UCU) agreed to voluntary redundancy. Workers were opposing compulsory redundancy plans as part of restructuring of the IT department, under which a third of staff would be made redundant.

The workers took several strike days in December and were working to rule.

A statement agreed by the UCU and university said: "UCU and the University have met today (5/2/21) regarding the dispute in connection with the reorganisation of IS. The dispute is resolved as the individual concerned is now leaving the university voluntarily. As a result, the UCU has agreed to call off its industrial action. The University has given assurances that no repercussions will be felt by those who took part in industrial action and recognises that working hours lost through industrial action cannot be rescheduled. Both parties look forward to working together constructively on the significant future challenges facing the sector, the university and our students."

UK pharmacists may strike as they face overwhelming debts

Indebted community pharmacists in the UK—on the front line in the pandemic, as many GP practices only offer telephone consultations—are considering strike action.

The government loaned £370 million to pharmacies last year to cope with the COVID-19 crisis. The loan is due to be repaid this year. Pharmacists are urging the government to waive the repayment, saying many community pharmacies are in debt and paying back the loan would push them into bankruptcy.

The *Guardian* quoted Andrew Lane, chairman of the National Pharmacy Association, saying, "This is a desperate situation for many of our members, so it's not surprising that you do hear people talking about some form of protest. But no one wants to let their patients down, so strike action is the last thing any pharmacist would want to do. Instead, we need to continue to make the evidence-based case and appeal to the government to do the right thing by the nation's heroic pharmacists and the patients they serve."

In contrast to pharmacists, GP practices had costs of £197.5 million reimbursed in recognition of the extra workload due to the pandemic. Dentists, too, had financial help.

In 2009, pharmacists in Ireland took 10 days of strike action protesting cuts in payments by the Irish government.

Port workers strike in Hamburg, Germany

Around 350 technical workers at state-owned HHLA subsidiaries SCA and SCB, Hamburg, held a three-day stoppage February 2–4, following a one-day strike the previous week. The Verdi union members are demanding that an agreement covering weekend work week be brought into line with conditions in other northern German ports.

Under the current agreement for most port workers, a regular 40 hour working week is spread Monday to Saturday. With 30 days leave per year this amounts to a 35-hour week. Sundays are not included in working out the working week figure. However, for SCA and SCB employees, Sundays are counted as a normal working day, so they end up working more weekends than colleagues at other ports.

HHLA want to maintain the flexible working hours system to enable Hamburg to better compete with other ports in northern Europe.

Middle East

Egyptian fertiliser workers continue sit-in

Workers at the Delta Company for Fertilisers and Chemical Industries at Daqahlia, in Egypt's Nile delta, are continuing their sit-in protest. Around 2,500 workers oppose company plans to relocate to Suez. Last week, 13 workers were arrested and eight remanded in custody. The sit-in is supported by workers' families.

Africa

Nigerian university administration workers' national walkout as union sells out teachers' strike

University workers in Nigeria walked out midnight on February 5. The strike is over the Integrated Payroll Personnel Information System (a new computer system used to handle salary payments), non-payment of the minimum wage, delays in negotiations, and failure to honour an agreement from 2009.

Leaders of the SSANU (Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities) and NASU (Non-Academic Staff Union of the Universities) said the strike would go ahead "pending any contrary resolution by the branches."

A three-week stoppage by teachers in Edo state ended February 8, when the national leadership of the Nigerian Union of Teachers intervened. Workers' demands including unpaid salaries were not met.

Overworked doctors at South African hospital protest

Doctors at Dr Harry Surtie Hospital, Upington, Northern Cape, South Africa walked out February 3, to protest staffing levels and overwork. They are demanding the appointment of another 10 medical officers and four community service doctors, or they will strike.

© World Socialist Web Site

The hospital is staffed by 36 doctors, which they say is inadequate to serve the local population. In a letter to management, they state “the COVID-19 wards are full and no doctors have been appointed to work in these wards.” They are expected to work an extra 110-140 hours a month in excess of their 40-hour week, leading to burnout.

South Africa has 1,482,412 cases of COVID-19 with 44,145 deaths.

South African municipal workers in Port Elizabeth walk out in protest over wages and conditions

Over 200 municipal workers in Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape, South Africa stopped work Tuesday and protested outside the provincial government offices.

The South Africa Municipal Workers Union members are demanding a COVID-19 compensation allowance, discounts on electricity and water, the ending of outsourcing and permanent employment of all contract workers. Union representatives are currently in discussion with the municipality.

South African animal feed workers at Humansdorp Co-operative dismissed after striking for wage increase

Workers at the Humansdorp Co-operative animal feed plant in Cookhouse, Eastern Cape, South Africa were dismissed after walking out in protest over wages. The 25 forklift truck drivers and food mixers at the plant said they should be paid as skilled workers, and also complained their contracts were written in Afrikaans.

The company said the strike was “unprotected” and gave notice of dismissal on February 4, suggesting workers go to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) if they wanted to contest the decision. Employers know the CCMA is currently struggling to cope with a backlog of cases after having its budget massively slashed, making it difficult for workers to access services.

Shop stewards dismissed by Volkswagen in South Africa

Fourteen trade union shop stewards at the Volkswagen car plant in Uitenhage, South Africa, sacked at a disciplinary hearing in January, will dispute the decision at the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration February 15. The South African Federation of Trades Unions held a demonstration outside the factory February 3, and future protests are planned.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) stewards were originally suspended last year, when workers walked out July 17 after returning to work from the COVID-19 lockdown to find themselves exposed to unsafe conditions. When the firm threatened the entire workforce with dismissal, workers went to the Department of Employment and Labour to enforce their rights, and the international company was found to have violated health and safety regulations. The stewards were reinstated but were sacked after the disciplinary hearing, which accused them of “inciting” the 2020 strike.

NUMSA General Secretary Irvin Jim said members now have no union representatives at the factory and management refused to meet him.

Twenty years ago, 1,300 workers from the Uitenhage plant were sacked while on strike in defence of elected stewards, who had been suspended from office by NUMSA. The union leadership collaborated closely with VW management in ousting the militant shop stewards and the workers supporting them from the plant to prevent further industrial action.

Liberian workers confront House of Representatives Speaker to demand payment of arrears

Workers from the House of Representatives in Liberia besieged the official vehicle of the Speaker of the House on February 4, to demand payment of 17 months’ arrears of unpaid salaries. Workers shouted, “We have families to take care of, we cannot afford to pay our children’s school fees.”

The Liberian dollar component of workers’ pay was removed 17 months ago by the Ministry of Finance.

In a previous protest by the workers, leader Archie Ponpon set himself on fire in front of the Ministry of Justice and is still being treated for his injuries.

Tunisian union umbrella group agrees protest ban

During a “working session” of the Tunisian government with the Tunisian General Labour Union ending on February 9, the two bodies agreed to ban all forms of protest in the health sector.

They also agreed to work together on a statute to be followed by public health workers. A corporatist committee is to start work on February 17 to draw up the statute, expected to be completed by November.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site