

Portuguese teachers strike; national strike planned against South Africa's ANC government

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

18 February 2021

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

Strike by Portuguese teachers

Teachers in Portugal held a week-long strike last week against the Socialist Party government's plans to reopen schools. The All Teachers Union (STOP) members were providing distance learning to pupils.

Rather than opposing on principle the unsafe reopening of schools, the union is calling for additional resources and equipment before teachers return. They are demanding vaccination priority for teachers and for computer equipment and internet connections for distance learning.

Portugal recently recorded the highest coronavirus death rate in the world, with 250 deaths per million inhabitants in January. 790,885 people have been infected, with 15,649 fatalities. At the height of the pandemic, Germany sent in medical staff, and intensive care patients were airlifted to Austria as the hospitals were overwhelmed.

Scaffolders at British Steel Scunthorpe plant continue pay strike

Around 50 scaffold erectors at British Steel's Scunthorpe plant held a 48-hour strike beginning Monday, following several previous days of strike action. A 24-hour strike was planned Thursday. Other action includes a 48-hour strike beginning February 22, and a 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 below that rate. Brand Energy has refused to negotiate with Unite. The workers voted 100 percent for action.

Go North West bus drivers in Manchester, England set strike date

UK bus drivers at Go North West buses in Manchester are to begin an

all-out strike on February 28. The Unite union members voted by an 82 percent majority on a 77 percent turnout to strike in opposition to a new contract.

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 called for negotiations aimed at ending the dispute, saying drivers "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 on February 9 that drivers had been given hand-delivered letters telling them that if they did not sign the contracts "Go North West is issuing you with notice of the termination of your employment, which shall end on 8 May 2021." The letter gave drivers only until February 16 to decide whether or not to accept.

In a consultative ballot held September last year, drivers voted by a 94 percent majority 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 made proposals to save the company £1 million a year, saying 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 ballot.

Logistics and warehouse staff at DHL southeast England to strike

UK staff at the regional distribution centre of logistics company DHL in Dartford, Kent have voted to strike. The 350 Unite union members are opposing the suspension of a union representative who challenged a manager when representing a union member.

The workers will stage walkouts throughout March, April and May. The strike will disrupt the operations of retail grocer Sainsbury's, who have a contract with DHL to distribute its goods throughout the southeast.

DHL Supply Chain workers in Croxteth, Liverpool were involved in strikes over a pay claim and alleged DHL bullying tactics. The 120 Unite union members, who work for DHL on a delivery contract for Burton

Biscuits and AB World took 10 days of action.

Unite called off the strike after agreeing a three percent rise for 2020 backdated to April, followed by a three percent rise this year and 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.

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.

Ancillary hospital staff in northwest England to strike

Porters, cleaners and switchboard staff at Cumberland Infirmary in Carlisle, England are to hold 24-hour strikes on February 26 and March 1. The 150 Unison and GMB members voted by a 97 percent majority to take action. They work for external contractor, Mitie.

They have been in dispute for over 10 years and are seeking parity with staff directly employed by the NHS, who are entitled to enhanced pay for working nights or weekends.

Staff at UK driver and vehicle registration office in south Wales hold strike ballot

Around 2,000 UK workers at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) in Swansea, south Wales, are balloting for strike action.

The Public and Commercial Services union members are angry that DVLA management forced employees to attend the workplace, where over 500 cases of COVID-19 were recorded, and one worker died following a positive COVID-19 test. The workers argue their work could be done safely online from home. In the first lockdown around 250 staff were on site.

The ballot began on Thursday, and runs until March 11. Under anti-strike legislation, the earliest date action could take place is March 25.

Unite suspends energy engineers' proposed stoppage at British Gas

A four-day strike of engineers at energy company British Gas, due to begin February 12, was suspended by the GMB union. The GMB and British Gas management entered talks moderated by the government's Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service. An online meeting narrowly voted in favour of the suspension.

The GMB union members are opposed to "fire and rehire" plans by British Gas to undermine workers' conditions and cut pay by 20 percent. Around 7,500 workers are involved in the dispute, 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 15 days of previous strikes led to a backlog of 170,000 boiler repairs and delayed 200,000 service visits.

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.

British Gas engineers involved in the dispute took to social media to voice their concern at the decision. Emails received by the workers from Centrica and the GMB make no mention of "fire and rehire" being off the

table. According to the GMB, British Gas has sent out payslips for this month with pay deductions for strikes that have not yet taken place.

The *Edinburgh News* website quoted one engineer saying, "We've been getting pressured into signing contracts. Colleagues have had emails every week about it. And police moved us on from the picket line last week. All we want is for this to be over so we can get back to doing our jobs and helping customers."

British Gas, part of the Centrica group, supplies gas and electric energy and services equipment with around 20,000 employees.

Unite suspends strike at UK London's Heathrow airport

A strike by around 4,500 UK workers at London's Heathrow Airport Limited (HAL) has been suspended by the Unite union, following six days of action. The union suspended the stoppages scheduled for February 13 and 16.

The airside operations staff, baggage handlers, engineers and security staff took the action in opposition to HAL's announcement last September of a pay cut by of to 25 percent, with some workers set to lose around £8,000. HAL used the pretext of the pandemic to impose long-planned attacks, threatening to fire and rehire the workforce on lower pay and inferior terms.

The union presented management with proposals to end the dispute. Unite regional coordinating officer, Wayne King said, "As an act of good faith and to increase the prospects of securing a negotiated settlement, Unite has suspended the next two days of strike action at Heathrow airport. This is as a result of HAL providing an initial positive response to Unite's proposals, which could bring this bitter dispute to an end."

As of this writing, strikes scheduled for February 18 and 21 remained in place.

Unite suspends road haulage drivers' strike in northwest England

The Unite union suspended UK road haulage drivers' planned four-day strike at Eddie Stobart's Warrington depot, which distributes Walkers Crisps.

Unite regional officer Steve Gerrard, said, "Following constructive talks with the Stobart management on Tuesday, we have suspended the three days of strike action due to have started on Wednesday to allow negotiations to take place next week. Unite will be entering the next round of talks on our members' long-standing dispute over pay in a positive frame of mind."

Planned strikes between February 28 and March 2 will depend on the outcome of the negotiations.

The Unite union members voted by a 96.7 percent majority to strike at the end of last year, over the company's imposition of a pay freeze and refusal to negotiate with the union. Unite suspended a planned stoppage over Christmas and imposed a three-week work to rule and overtime ban.

Strike threat by Quorn production workers in Teesside, England called off by union

The overtime ban by 60 workers involved in the production of meat-free

alternative product Quorn at its factory in Billingham on Teesside, England, has been called off by the Unite union. Workers were seeking a 2.5 percent pay rise.

The union accepted Quorn's offer of a two percent pay rise (the company's original offer) backdated to June 2020, and a rise in line with the retail price index, plus one percent from June 2021 to May 2022. In addition, sick pay and pension bonus conditions will improve.

Refuse collectors' strike on Spanish Balearic island, Majorca

Spanish refuse workers in eight municipalities of Majorca walked out on February 12. The CCOO and the UGT union members are opposing the terms of a new contract. The unions and municipal authorities reached an agreement, but workers were not informed in time to stop the strike.

General strike call in the Catalan region of Spain as protests begin

A general strike call in Catalonia, Spain, for February 21 has been made by the Intersindical-Confederació Sindical Catalana independent trade union body. A series of protests and demonstrations began February 12.

The strike and protests will commemorate the start of the trial of the dozen Catalan politicians sentenced to 10 years for sedition after carrying out the October 2017 independence referendum. In the vote, 90 percent favoured independence, while peaceful protests met with police violence. The result was ruled unconstitutional and annulled by the central Spanish government, then led by the People's Party.

The imprisonment of the Catalan nationalists is inseparable from a campaign in the ruling class since the referendum to rehabilitate Franco and fascism. Growing conflict between the working class and the emerging police state has been exacerbated by the PSOE/Podemos government's herd immunity response to the pandemic. Spain reported 3,107,172 coronavirus cases and 66,316 deaths.

Strikes by Iranian auto workers

Auto workers at the Iran Khodro Company in Tabriz have taken wildcat strike action over non-payment of wages.

The workers accuse the company of failing to contribute to social security cover. This means some workers due to retire have to continue working because of insufficient pension payments being credited by the company.

The company produces buses, cars, minibuses and trucks under licence for Peugeot, Renault and Suzuki.

In a separate dispute, protests over pay and working conditions are continuing in the South Pars oil and gas field. Workers are demanding to be employed directly rather than through labour brokers.

South African workers plan national strike in protest against African National Congress government

Workers belonging to unions affiliated to the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU) are planning a national strike next Wednesday, to protest at the erosion of workers' rights, unemployment, corruption, inequality and poverty.

As the country is heavily dependent on tourism and travel, the pandemic has exacerbated these problems.

SAFTU has 21 affiliated unions organising 800,000 members.

While the majority will stay away from work, workers in Cape Town will march to the parliament buildings and demonstrate as the African National Congress (ANC) government finance minister delivers his budget speech.

South Africa has reported 1,496,439 coronavirus cases and 48,478 fatalities.

Mineworkers clash with police over South African mine closure

South African workers took to the streets in Badplaas, Mpumalanga province February 12 to protest redundancies at the nearby Nkomati nickel mine. Demonstrators' demands for talks with mine managers were ignored so they blockaded roads. Police were called and several demonstrators were injured.

In 2019, the mine was earmarked for closure as, according to owners, it was near the end of its economic life, despite having one of the largest nickel reserves in the country. Operations are due to end completely in March, when over 500 permanent workers will be made redundant along with 1,000 contractors.

South African teachers' unions collaborate with government to reopen schools

South African schools reopened Monday for the 2021 academic year, despite concerns that over 35 percent of them, especially in rural areas, are not safe for return. The National Professional Teachers Organisation of South African says the government should have made more funding available for safety measures but has not demanded schools remain closed or instructed their members to strike.

The South African Democratic Teachers Union urged "the communities and our people in South Africa to support the work of our teachers so that they are able to proceed with education from Monday," and that teachers can "support learners to be back to schools because they have been missing an education."

Both unions are complicit in the government policy of reopening unsafe schools to facilitate a return to work, the same policy pursued globally despite the danger to workers and the intensification of the COVID-19 crisis.

Nurses strike in Lesotho joined by support workers

Chefs, ward clerks, receptionists and support staff at the Queen Mamohato Memorial Hospital (known as Tšepong) in Lesotho joined nurses on strike on February 15, to demand salary increases and improved conditions. The nurses walked out on February 7, when anger erupted at being paid less than their counterparts in other hospitals.

The Lesotho Nurses Association members have not had a pay rise since 2012. They earn about M9,000 per month, compared to M13,000 pay in hospitals run by the Christian Health Association of Lesotho (CHAL) and other government-run hospitals.

Opened in 2011, the hospital is run under a Private Public Partnership (PPP) between the government and the Tšepong consortium. The consortium is made up of five companies: Netcare Healthcare Group and Afri'nnai based in South Africa, and Excel Health, Women Investment and D10 Investments based in Lesotho.

Health workers at the hospital are employed not by the government but by the private business, meaning they did not get a pay rise when staff at other hospitals did.

The public relations manager, Mothepane Thahane, denounced the strike as illegal and threatened disciplinary action.

Hospitals in Lesotho, with 10,350 reported COVID-19 cases and 254 deaths, are struggling to cope with the pandemic, as well as AIDS and tuberculosis.

Kenyan teachers prepare to strike

Teachers in Kenya are expecting to strike by February 25, over the refusal of the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) to negotiate a pay rise.

Normally the new agreement is signed and sealed by October the previous year, but this year the TSC issued a “take it or leave it” offer of 16 to 32 percent over a period of 4 years, ignoring all requests for negotiations.

The Kenya National Union of Teachers’ main concern is being kept out of negotiations.

Fish processing workers strike in Namibia

Around 30 workers employed by the Namibia Fish Consumption Promotion Trust walked out on February 15, after negotiations between the company and the Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union failed to agree a pay rise. The company is offering a one-off payment of up to N\$2,500 per employee.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact