

British gas engineers continue stoppage; 2,000 UK bus drivers strike in London; nationwide one-day strikes and demonstrations in South Africa

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.

UK gas energy workers resume strike

Strikes planned by British Gas engineers resumed February 19, with a four-day stoppage. The four days of strikes, planned to begin January 12, were suspended for talks between British Gas parent company Centrica and the GMB union under the auspices of the government mediation service Acas. The talks broke down after British Gas refused to take the threat of “fire and rehire” off the table. A further four-day strike will begin February 26.

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 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 supplies gas and electric energy and services equipment, with around 20,000 employees. The company has threatened to sack workers who refuse to sign up to the new contract by March 31.

Teachers’ strikes at school in Midlands, England over COVID-19 concerns

Around 20 UK teachers at Langley Primary school in Sutton Coldfield near Birmingham held a one-day strike Wednesday. The special school caters for around 120 pupils who are either autistic or have learning difficulties.

The National Education Union (NEU) members are concerned over COVID-19 safety measures at the school. Among the issues is the inadequate heating system, meaning if teachers open windows to lessen

the threat of infection, they and their pupils become excessively cold. In addition, there are concerns over cleanliness in the school, particularly the toilets. Additional strikes are planned for March 2 and 4. No picket lines were planned because of COVID-19 concerns.

NEU members at Barrow Hedges School in the London Borough of Sutton began a two-day strike Tuesday. They are protesting the school management’s refusal to let teachers work from home when they have children who have to self-isolate. A further four days of strikes are planned.

Scaffolders at British Steel’s Scunthorpe plant continue stoppage

Around 50 scaffold erectors at British Steel’s Scunthorpe plant held a 48-hour strike beginning Monday, following nine days of previous strikes. A further 48-hour strike began Thursday.

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.

Striking security staff at hospital in Reading, England continue action

Twenty security staff at the Royal Berkshire hospital in Reading, southwest England, who began striking in December, are currently on their third walkout lasting until March 7.

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.

Two-day strike by lecturers at University of East London

UK staff at the University of East London (UEL) began a two-day strike Monday. The University and College Union (UCU) members voted by a 92 percent majority on a 63 percent turnout to take action. They were protesting the decision by UEL management to cut four jobs. Three of the workers were due to finish this week.

The redundancies come on top of 82 jobs cut last year, leaving remaining staff to struggle with unmanageable workloads. An online rally attended by over 200 workers and students took place Monday. The UCU said further strikes may take place next month.

Strike at college in Shrewsbury, England

Shrewsbury college workers walked out on Wednesday in defence of a sacked colleague who was an National Education Union representative. The representative had raised concerns over racism.

Bus drivers in north west England to begin all-out strike

UK bus drivers at Go North West buses in Manchester are set begin all-out strike action on Sunday. 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.

After drivers voted in September by 94 percent to strike in a consultative ballot, Unite appealed to shareholders to intervene to help resolve the dispute without the requirement for industrial action. On February 9, the company hand-delivered threatening letters to the drivers saying that if they did not sign the contracts their employment would terminate on May 8.

On its website, Unite explained it “entered into detailed cost saving negotiations with Go North West and agreed changes which would have generated savings of £1 million and also accepted a 12 month pay freeze which was worth a further £200,000 to the company.”

Appealing to the company, Unite regional secretary Ritchie James said, “Our members who have worked throughout the pandemic, ensuring key workers in Greater Manchester can get to and from work, are being rewarded for the dedication and commitment with huge pay cuts, which will mean that they and their families will struggle to make ends meet.

“Unite has been clear this strike can be averted providing Go North West withdraws its plans to fire and rehire its bus drivers and allow proper negotiations to take place.”

At a recent press conference, Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, said he met with Go North West senior management two weeks ago to discuss the issue and called for mediator Acas to become involved.

Lecturers at Chichester College Group in England ballot for strike action

Lecturers at the Chichester College Group in southeast England are

balloting for strike action. The UCU members oppose plans outlined in letters sent to staff to cut around 10 posts in the maths and English department—around 40 percent of staff. The UCU accuses the college of using the pandemic to push through cuts.

Cleaners at London school vote to strike

Cleaners at the La Retraite Catholic girls’ school in south London voted by a 100 percent majority to strike. The United Voices of the World union members, who are all originally from Latin America, are employed by private contractor Ecocleen.

While the company agreed in January to pay its workers the London Living Wage, currently set at £10.85 an hour, there are unresolved issues. The company cut the cleaners’ hours, resulting in a loss of around £150 a year. The workers are also calling for parity of terms and conditions with teachers around sick pay and for the reimbursement of wages docked when they refused to work in unsafe COVID-19 conditions.

A 40-day strike is due to begin March 16.

ScotRail staff ballot in pay dispute

Conductors working for ScotRail are being balloted for industrial action. The Rail, Maritime and Transport union members are pushing for an increase in overtime pay rates. The ballot will run until March 11.

Protest by Romanian coal miners

Hundreds of Romanian coal miners employed at the Lupeni coal mine held a protest at the Hunedoara Energy Complex on Monday. Around 60 miners refused to go underground on their shift and threatened to go on hunger strike. The miners are protesting outstanding wages over 10 months. Allowances for travel and heating are owed for the last 11 months.

The protests were held at the same time as talks between the miners’ leaders and the Energy and Labour ministry representatives. Later that day, Labour minister Raluca Turcan announced 3,000 miners would be paid their outstanding wages in three instalments, beginning this week. On the basis of the agreement, the miners’ leaders called off the protest.

Strike by Italian Amazon drivers

Last week, drivers working for the online company Amazon in the Italian city of Vigonza walked out. The CGIL union members were protesting low pay, poor working conditions, the unsustainable pace at which they are expected to work and inadequate COVID-19 protection measures.

Strike and protest by Greek hospital doctors

On Tuesday, Greek hospital doctors held a one-day strike. Dozens of the strikers marched through Athens. The OENGE members were protesting the “suffocating” conditions they work under on the front line against the COVID-19 pandemic. Intensive care units (ICU) operating at 80 percent capacity have little room to cope with surges of patients.

The doctors called on the government to create new units to deal with COVID-19 patients and for more staff, to leave ICUs more able to cope with other critically ill patients. To date over 1,200 COVID-19 patients have been admitted to ICUs since the start of the pandemic.

On the day of the strike, Reuters reported that 880 cases of COVID-19 were announced, with 24 deaths. Since the pandemic began, 6,371 people have died and there have been 184,686 cases.

Protest by Greek students against draconian campus security law

On Tuesday, over 5,000 students and supporters held a protest outside the courthouse in the northern Greek city Thessaloniki. They were protesting the arrest of 31 students the previous day for demonstrating against measures brought in by the right-wing New Democracy government allowing police to patrol university grounds.

Since 1982, police were not allowed on university campuses, following the killing of least 23 students and civilians, including a five-year-old boy, during an uprising at the Polytechnic University in Athens—now called the National Technical University of Athens, on November 17, 1973

The new law establishes a special campus police force for the surveillance of universities. The university police force is empowered to “guard” campuses and will be able to arrest those deemed troublemakers by the authorities. The university police will be answerable to the Hellenic Police force rather than the education institutions they are patrolling. The law established a ‘disciplinary council’ able to suspend or expel students.

Belgian retail workers set to strike

Employees of the Swedish-owned fashion retailer H&M are to hold strikes and protests against job losses incurred with the closure of eight stores in Belgium. H&M announced the closures between November last year and January this year.

The CNE union complained that H&M was closing the stores in such a way as to avoid having to create any legally binding restructuring plan to save some jobs. Workers are also protesting the insufficient severance pay. Stores are slated for closure in Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent and Liège.

Strike by Tunisian airport staff

Airport workers at Tunisair held a strike at all its facilities across Tunisia on February 19. The General Transport Union members, who held a rally outside the company’s headquarters in Tunis, were protesting the deteriorating financial conditions at the company, which employs around 7,800.

The dire financial situation meant workers were not paid allowances to which they are entitled. On Monday, the Chief Executive Officer of Tunisair, Olfa Al-Hamdi was fired.

South African workers in nationwide strikes and demonstrations

South African workers in unions affiliated to the South African Federation of Trade Unions took part in stoppages and protests as part of a national strike Wednesday.

While many across the country stayed away from their workplaces, in the cities hundreds of workers marched in larger demonstrations against the erosion of workers’ rights, unemployment, corruption, inequality and poverty. The official unemployment rate is a record 32.5 percent.

In Cape Town, 40 workers marched to the parliament buildings to protest as the African National Congress government minister delivered his budget speech. Police blocked their progress using stun grenades and riot shields. Two protesters were arrested.

Around 150 workers in Johannesburg picketed a hospital in Soweto and demonstrated outside the offices of the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration, subject of recent budget cuts which have adversely affected workers ability to use the law to fight employers. In Port Elizabeth, 200 workers protested outside city hall, chanting “Down with the government.”

South African food workers strike for improved pay and benefits

Food processing workers at Tongaat-Hulett sugar and maize processing company mills in South Africa took industrial action Monday, for improved wages and allowances.

The Food and Allied Workers Union members want a 15 percent rise, housing allowance, COVID-19 allowance, health insurance and profit shares.

South Africa reported 1,507,448 coronavirus cases, with 49,523 fatalities.

Protesting South African municipal workers face police with teargas

Municipal workers burned tyres and blocked streets in the Buffalo City Metro area, Eastern Cape, South Africa on February 18 and 19, in protest over COVID-19 allowances unpaid since June 2020.

The South African Municipal Workers Union members were dispersed by police with teargas after they demonstrated outside East London City Hall.

Health workers in South Africa strike for permanent jobs and professional recognition

Community Health Workers (CHWs) picketed and closed clinics in Eastern Cape, South Africa February 18, demanding to be made permanent employees. Many CHWs do not have the salary, benefits, support or protection given to permanent staff.

The action was part of a second week of strikes and protests by National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union members in Eastern Cape province. On February 17, 30 enrolled nurses demonstrated outside the health department’s offices in provincial capital Bisho demanding professional status.

Specialist doctors and academics strike in Sudan

Specialist doctors at 35 hospitals across Sudan walked out on February 21, over the government's failure to implement agreed benefits and health insurance during the pandemic.

Medical specialists at a further 41 hospitals have been on strike since February 15, over non-payment of their salaries for the last 11 months.

On February 21, university professors and lecturers mounted a protest in front of the Cabinet office in the country's capital Khartoum against the government's failure to pay their January salaries. They denounced the government for bringing education to the brink of total collapse.

Union ends three-month strike by Kenyan nurses, clinicians and lab technicians

Health unions instructed nurses, clinicians and lab technicians in Mombasa County, Kenya to return to work after a three-month strike. Over 1,200 health workers walked out on November 15, over delays in salary payments, lack of promotions and non-payment of statutory deductions.

The Kenya National Union of Nurses, the Kenya Union of Clinical Workers (KUCW) and the Kenya National Union of Laboratory Officers used court rulings against them to justify the return to work. The unions kept workers divided between the different counties, with no common demands or coordinated action.

County governors refused to allow any pay increases for nurses. Clinical officers in Kenya were instructed to return to work after a court order issued on February 22, after 70 days on strike. KUCW Chairman Peterson Wachira told union members to report to work while admitting demands for adequate personal protective were not addressed.

Kenya has 105,057 coronavirus cases and reported 1,847 deaths.



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wsws.org/contact