24-hour national strike call in Italy’s public sector and transport; thousands demonstrate against poverty across Lebanon

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

4 March 2021

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

Nationwide general strike call in Italy

A nationwide general 24-hour strike call has been made by Italian unions, to begin 9pm on Sunday. They are demanding higher pay and improved working conditions.

Expected to take part are transport and public sector workers including civil servants, health workers and teachers. Rallies are planned in major towns and cities.

The government led by Prime Minister Mario Draghi has ordered school closures until April 6, in areas hit hardest by the pandemic—as new variants spread with 15,000 new cases a day. Italy has reported 2,976,274 coronavirus cases and 98,635 deaths, the worst in continental Europe.

British Telecom engineers continue strike

Last week, 170 British Telecom (BT) Openreach, Repayment Project Engineers (RPEs) held a 48-hour strike. They began a further three-day strike on Wednesday.

They voted by an 86 percent majority on a 94 percent turnout for action. The Communication Workers Union members are protesting the imposition of regrading. An online rally was held at the beginning of their action, the first industrial action at BT since 1999.

Porters at hospital in Birmingham, UK continue strikes against new work rotas

Around 140 porters at the Heartlands hospital in Birmingham, England, are continuing their action, which has included 20 strike days since last autumn.

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

The porters worked fixed rotas and could fit in caring and childcare around them. Under the threat of dismissal they had to sign up to the new rotas but are still taking action. The Hospital Trust is chaired by former Labour government Home Secretary Jacqui Smith.

Strike by hospital staff at Carlisle Cumberland Infirmary in north west England

Around 150 caterers, porters and cleaners at Carlisle’s Cumberland Infirmary walked out on Monday and last Friday. The Unison and GMB union members are employed by outsourcing company Mitie.

The strikers are demanding to be paid enhanced rates for working nights and weekends. Directly employed National Health Service staff have received the payments for the last 10 years.

Teachers at UK private school strike over threat to pensions

Teachers at a UK private independent boarding school, Wycliffe College, Gloucestershire held a strike Tuesday, with further strikes planned for March 9, 10, 16-18.

The National Education Union members are opposing plans by the college to close the Teacher Pension Scheme and replace it with one on inferior terms. The college has threatened to fire and rehire the teaching staff.

Staff at UK vehicle and driver registration office set to strike over COVID-19

Workers at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) office in Swansea, Wales are angry over the outbreak of COVID-19 cases at the site, where around 2,000 workers are employed. Since September there have been 535 cases of the disease and one worker has died. Workers were forced to come into the office rather than work remotely.

The chief executive of the DVLA told a parliamentary transport committee meeting last month that she had only been in the office six or

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seven times since September.

A straw poll of around 500 Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members on Tuesday indicated 90 percent in favour of strike action over the lack of COVID-19 safety measures. PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka told *Wales on Line* the "PCS is now highly likely to move to a statutory strike ballot at the DVLA because it is clear senior management and Grant Shapps [transport secretary] will not listen to strong and reasoned arguments on staff safety."

Workers sacked after striking tile manufacturing plant in Reading, south west England

Three workers at Marley Tiles in Reading in southwest England were sacked after striking in December. Two other workers were disciplined. They had rejected a one percent pay offer.

Around 60 GMB union members at the site are working to rule over the pay claim. They are also being balloted for possible strike action in support of their sacked colleagues.

The workers accused the manager at the site of driving a car dangerously at a picket line and encouraging a lorry driver to do the same.

Scottish further education lecturers' strike vote

Around 5,000 further education lecturers across 26 colleges in Scotland have voted by a 91 percent majority on a 61 percent turnout to strike.

The Educational Institute of Scotland—Further Education Lecturers Association (EIS-Fela) members are opposed to management at the colleges imposing fire and rehire and casualisation measures. Rather than as lecturers, they would be reemployed in various roles such as trainers, assessors or instructors on much-reduced pay and conditions.

Included in the strike ballot were lecturers at Forth Valley College, who have already had their roles downgraded. They are currently taking industrial action short of a strike.

College lecturers in Northern Ireland seek improved pay offer

Lecturers in the six further education colleges in Northern Ireland (NI) have rejected a pay offer of seven percent over four years, a cut in real terms. They are seeking parity with a pay offer made to school teachers in the province, of two percent for 2019/20 and also for 2020/21.

The University and College Union last month wrote to the NI Economy Ministry to declare a dispute.

Workers at three Scottish naval bases to strike

Around 1,000 workers at the Coulport and Faslane naval bases on the Clyde in Scotland will strike on March 12.

The Unite union members working for Babcock Industrial, Babcock Non-Industrial and ISS Facility Services are seeking an improved pay offer, having rejected a 1.1 percent pay increase for 2020. They are also seeking bargaining rights. As well as striking, they will ban overtime and not respond to call-outs.

Strike vote by civilian staff at UK nuclear bases

Workers at Babcock, which supplies engineering services and ISS Facility Services at the UK Ministry of Defence naval nuclear bases on the Forth of Clyde, are to begin a rolling programme of industrial action on March 12.

The Unite union members reject a derisory pay offer made by the employers. They voted by a 95 percent majority on a 65 percent turnout to take the action.

There is also concern over how the new Royal Navy's Future Maritime Support Programme will affect the jobs and conditions of the staff.

Coffee produce workers at southern English plant face "fire and rehire" threat

Nearly 300 workers at the Jacobs Douwe Egberts coffee products plant in Banbury, Oxfordshire are facing a threat of "fire and rehire". The company wants to use Section 188 legislation to sack and take back the workers on worse terms of pay and conditions. The company also wants to replace the current final salary pension scheme with an inferior defined contribution one.

The workers are represented by the Unite union which issued a statement on Thursday. It said, "The decision to adopt a 'fire and rehire' strategy in the midst of a global pandemic is immoral and we are launching a campaign, which could include a ballot for industrial action, to fight this attack on our members' living standards…Unite is prepared for constructive talks with the management on the plant's future, but the threat of 'fire and rehire' needs to be taken off the table for such negotiations to take place—goodwill needs to be shown."

Protests by Spanish food delivery workers

Around 2,000 food delivery workers across Spain held protests on Wednesday in around 10 cities, including Barcelona and Madrid. They called on the Spanish government to bring forward promised legislation giving the workers the right to become full employees or to remain self-employed.

They are calling for the government to consult again groups representing the workers on the proposed legislation, known as the "ley riders" (drivers' law), as they did initially. According to reports the legislation is due to be announced shortly. It is also reported firms will be given a three-month period in which to switch workers to employed status if that is what they choose.

Recycling workers in Belgian capital announce strike

Recycling workers in Brussels, Belgium announced their intention to

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strike. The VSOA union members are employed at sites across the city run by the recycling organisation, Bruxelles-Propreté.

They are calling for heightened security at the sites following three recent cases of aggression against staff. They are demanding additional security guards. Requests to management for increased security elicited no response.

Strike of Cypriot taxi drivers called off

Taxi drivers launched a nationwide strike in Cyprus on Monday, against plans by the taxi licensing authority to introduce a new system of allocating jobs. Under the current system jobs are divided into long and short haul journeys, but the licensing authority wants to replace this with a single numbered queuing system.

The strike was called off almost immediately after the Transport Minister intervened and arranged a meeting between taxi driver representatives and the licensing authority.

Protests against economic devastation in Lebanon

Tuesday saw thousands of protesters hold marches in Beirut, Tyre and other major population centres in Lebanon. They were protesting the rise of the dollar exchange rate of the Lebanese currency, which has exacerbated the poverty of Lebanese workers. The minimum monthly wage is now only $67. Protesters on the demonstrations called others to join them, shouting, “We will starve, so what are you waiting for?”

Midwives in Ondo state, Nigeria strike over non-payment

Midwives in Ondo state, Nigeria walked out on March 1 for a three-day “warning strike,” after the state government failed to respond to a seven-day ultimatum over non-payment of their full salaries.

As was previously the case with doctors in the state, midwives were hit by a state government decision to put health workers on the front line of the pandemic on half pay. They are also concerned about being increasingly short-staffed in all the government hospitals, and having to use out-of-date equipment.

Nigerian coronavirus cases total 156,960 and 1,939 deaths.

Nigerian retail workers protest as Shoprite owners pull out

On March 2, Nigerian employees of the Shoprite retail chain in Lagos and Ibadan, the Oyo state capital, demonstrated in front of the malls where they work. The company is refusing to pay them money owed.

The South African owners say they have been approached by potential investors to take over its Nigerian operations.

Placards carried by the demonstrators said, “10 years of service without entitlements,” and “They want to abandon us and run.” Protesters demand what is owed them before new owners take over.

Shoprite workers submitted a list of demands to management, with no response.

Sudanese port workers carry out sit-in protest

Workers carried out a sit-in protest at Port Sudan in the Sudanese capital Khartoum on February 23. They are demanding a pay rise, so their wages are commensurate with the difficulty of their jobs. Other demands include the dismissal of the port director, an increase in the number of available ambulances and provision of free meals.

Sudanese doctors have now returned to work after an eight-day strike affecting over 40 hospitals. Specialist doctors across the country walked out on February 21, over the government’s failure to implement agreed benefits and health insurance during the pandemic.

Sudan reports 28,545 coronavirus cases and 1,895 fatalities.

South African student nurses protest being used as cheap labour

Community Service practitioner nurses in Western Cape, South Africa are conducting sit-ins and sleepovers at the provincial health department’s offices in Cape Town.

The Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA) student movement members are demanding permanent employment and better conditions in nurses’ homes. They are exploited as cheap substitutes to fill the acute staff shortages of Western Cape’s health facilities, compared with the full employment given to their counterparts in neighbouring provinces.

Healthcare workers in Limpopo, South Africa to strike over working conditions

Healthcare workers including nurses, paramedics and other workers will strike Monday across all hospitals and clinics in Limpopo province, South Africa over unilateral changes to working conditions.

The members of seven unions, including DENOSA, the National Health, Education and Allied Workers’ Union, the Health and Other Services Personnel Trade Union of South Africa and the Public Servants’ Association, say changes to their working hours are to save money and they will be overworked.

Management warned the strike is prohibited because the health sector is classed as an essential service. They have also threatened to withdraw the COVID-19 vaccine from striking workers.

South Africa has 1,516,262 coronavirus cases, with 50,366 fatalities.

Food processing workers in South Africa protest workplace abuse

Around 50 workers at Ladismith Cheese, a cheese and dairy products manufacturer in Ladismith, Western Cape, South Africa face disciplinary action after demonstrating February 17 in support of local farmworkers employed by the firm.

The Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers’ Union

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members allege the owner of a transport company used by the firm is racist, and verbally and physically abused the farmworkers. They are also protesting poor working conditions in the factory, where many have suffered injuries which are ignored by management.

The firm say they will drop the disciplinary proceedings if workers unconditionally accept the outcome of an investigation concluding there was no evidence of wrongdoing by the transport company owner. Workers have refused.

Union instructs striking Lesotho health workers to return to work

On February 22, the Lesotho Nurses Association instructed its members to return to work after the Lesotho labour court ruled in favour of Netcare South Africa, and against nurses and others, at the Queen Mamohato Memorial Hospital—which is run as a Public-Private Partnership.

Over 300 strikers picketed to protest low pay and failure to pay COVID-19 allowances and other incentives. The strike was the latest stage of a long dispute caused by nurses and other staff members being paid much less than their colleagues employed at government-run hospitals.

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