Pharmacists strike across Lebanon in national day of action; UK bus drivers at Go North West garage continue strike; workers at British Gas threaten further strike; autoworkers at Renault foundry in France strike against closure

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 bus drivers at Go North West continue strike

The strike by nearly 500 bus drivers at Go North West in Manchester begun February 28 is continuing. They are opposed to “fire and rehire” plans the company is seeking to impose, which would mean drivers being around £2,500 a year worse off.

Unite union members voted by an 82 percent majority on a 77 percent turnout to strike.

To try and break the strike, Go North West hired fleets of buses and coaches, along with drivers from B and N Coaches, Connexions Buses, Edwards Coaches, Orion Travel, Red Rose, Selwyns, Swans, The Big Coach Company, The Travellers Choice and Tyrers Coaches. The striking drivers are compiling a growing list of COVID-19 breaches being perpetrated by the scab bus service.

Unite is not appealing to Go Ahead workers at garages across the UK or drivers from other companies to support the strikers but has made a series of futile appeals to management, shareholders, potential investors, and local politicians, including Manchester city council’s Labour mayor Andy Burnham.

Go North West is part of the profitable Newcastle upon Tyne-based Go Ahead group, with operations in Ireland, Norway, Singapore and Germany. Unite has offered the company a pay freeze for their members and £1 million of savings.

Further strike action by British Telecom engineers

Around 170 British Telecom Openreach Repayment Project Engineers began a five-day strike March 18. This follows earlier two-day and three-day strikes. The Communication Workers Union members voted by an 86 percent majority on a 94 percent turnout for action to defend jobs, terms and conditions as a result of regrading.

Strikes by aerospace workers at UK plant continue

Around 200 workers at the UK aircraft parts manufacturer SPS Technologies in Leicester went on strike Monday and are to strike again March 26. This follows one-day strikes the previous two weeks. The Unite union members are opposing company plans to “fire and rehire,” imposing a new contract, which will mean an annual wage loss of between £2,500 and £3,000.

Lecturers at Northern Ireland further education colleges walk out

On Wednesday, lecturers at all six further education colleges in Northern Ireland walked out. Other action short of a strike continues, including an overtime ban, working to contractual hours and a boycott of additional duties. The University and College Union (UCU) members, who voted by a near 89 percent majority to strike, are calling for an improved pay offer. Employers have offered a seven percent increase over four years.

Scotland-wide strike by college lecturers

Lecturers in further education colleges across Scotland held a one-day strike Thursday. Educational Institute of Scotland Further Education Lecturers’ Association (EIS-FELA) members are protesting plans by the employers’ body, Colleges Scotland, to replace lecturer posts with lower-paid instructor posts. EIS-FELA called off a planned strike last week over the issue after Colleges Scotland put forward proposals accepted by the union. However, the employers then withdrew the proposals.

Strikes at two English schools and a college

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Following previous strike action, workers at Shrewsbury college walked out again on Wednesday in defence of a sacked colleague, a National Education Union (NEU) representative who raised concerns over racism. An online rally of 60 took place.

Teachers at the Leaways School in the inner London borough of Hackney walked out on Tuesday and Wednesday, following six days of strikes in December. Leaways is a special school run by the Kedleston group, providing support to children with emotional, social, and mental health problems.

The NEU members are demanding a 2.75 percent parity pay rise as given to local authority teachers, as opposed to the one percent being offered. They are calling for additional teaching staff with specialist knowledge to meet the needs of the students and are also protesting the dismissal of two teachers since the dispute began. They accuse the school management of bullying and intimidation.

Staff at Moulsecoomb primary school near Brighton held a one-day strike Wednesday, to protest plans for the school to become an academy (publicly financed, privately run). The NEU, GMB and Unison union members held a COVID-19 safe picket line. Three academy sponsors have applied to run the school, with a decision due Thursday.

Packaging workers at Scottish plant hold further strike

Workers at Saica Packaging UK based at Edinburgh and Milngavie held a further strike Wednesday, following a 24-hour stoppage on March 17. They are also undertaking an overtime ban. Further 24-hour strikes are planned each Wednesday.

The Unite union members are opposing company plans to bring in contracts with inferior terms when the company relocates to a new site in Livingston in 2022. Police broke up a picket line at the first strike, citing COVID-19 regulations. Unite announced it will challenge this action in court.

Further strike planned by British Gas workers over fire and rehire threat

Engineers at British Gas plan a four-day stoppage from March 26, taking the total strike days up to 42. The GMB union members are opposing "fire and rehire" plans 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 strikes have led to a backlog of boiler repairs and delayed service visits.

Thursday was the deadline for workers to accept the new contract from British Gas. Talks at government arbitration service ACAS failed when the company refused to take "fire and rehire" off the table. On March 29, British Gas will give 12 weeks formal notice terminating the posts of those not signing, who will be sacked on April 1, with 12 weeks' pay in lieu of notice.

An email from GMB to its members reads, "If you plan to stay with British Gas after March 31 and intend to ultimately sign a new contract, our lawyers [sic] advice is to do so by noon on March 25 if you want to avoid the loss of protected terms and changes you have fought for."

If its advice is ignored, GMB proposes to announce on April 1 that British Gas has declared a national lockout with its threat of mass sackings. Along with other unions, GMB fears fire and rehire measures threaten their corporate role in managing disputes. In a press release, GMB national secretary Justin Bowden stated, "Mr O'Shea—CEO of British Gas—has unilaterally created an April 1 cliff edge and is driving the company at high speed towards it…There is still time to pull back. Mr O'Shea should do what's right for the business, customers and the workers and take April 1 off the table."

Unipart Rail technology workers in Doncaster, England to begin industrial action

Workers at Unipart Rail, Doncaster in northern England, which specialises in railway signalling systems, will begin industrial action April 2. The Rail, Maritime and Transport union members will refuse to work non-contractual overtime and rest days. The action is in response to a derisory pay offer by the employer.

Coffee produce workers at Oxfordshire, England plant facing "fire and rehire" threat vote to ballot for industrial action

Nearly 300 workers at the Jacobs Douwe Egberts coffee products plant in Banbury, Oxfordshire facing "fire and rehire" have voted by a 96 percent majority in a consultative vote to ballot for industrial action. The company intends to issue "section 188" notices to its employees, enabling an employer who has failed to negotiate changes to fire and reinstate its employees on different terms and conditions. This legislation legally enshrines fire and rehire, enabling the company to sack and rehire the Unite members 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.

Unite national officer for the food and drink industry, Joe Clarke said, "Unite's door is open 24/7 for constructive talks with the management on the plant's future."

Scottish Water workers in consultative ballot

A consultative ballot of employees of Scottish Water which provides water and sewage services in Scotland began on March 18. Unite, Unison and GMB union members are taking part.

The dispute is over Scottish Water's removal of supplemental payment based on averaging overtime hours worked over a year, which covered payment for standby and emergency call outs. Scottish Water has imposed a new scheme cutting the supplemental payment and not paying for additional hours worked.

Under the new system, workers have already lost between £500 and £1,000 a year but stand to lose up to £3,000.

UK prison education staff to hold strike ballot

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Educators working in the UK's 117 prisons and young offender units are balloting for strike action. They work for Novus, providing education and skills training on behalf of the prison service. The UCU members are in dispute with Novus for seeking to discipline educators who raised health and safety concerns around COVID-19.

Prison educators attending a recent UCU branch meeting gave a 97 percent vote of no-confidence in the chief executive of Novus's parent company over his handling of health and safety issues. A recent report highlighted that deaths from COVID-19 in prisons were three times higher than the general population.

Workers at UK's biggest homelessness charity ballot for industrial action

A ballot for industrial action began on Wednesday of around 500 staff working for the property services organisation of housing charity St Mungo's, based in London. The result is due April 6. The Unite members accuse the organisation of bullying and anti-union attitudes. St Mungo's property service organisation has housing units in Bournemouth, Brighton, Bristol, London, Milton Keynes, Oxford and Reading.

Strike action at university in northwest England suspended as union accepts redundancies

Academic staff at the University of Central Lancashire were to strike this month and April, over the threat of compulsory redundancies. The action was suspended by the UCU.

The planned redundancies were due to restructuring by university management. Following discussion with university authorities, the union says the number of compulsory redundancies has been cut to four. Further discussions are due between the UCU and management over the remaining threatened redundancies. The mandate for strike action remains in place.

Cleaners at London school win sick pay demand

A 40-day strike by cleaners at La Retraite Catholic girls' school in south London, begun on March 16, was called off after workers won their claim. The United Voices of the World (UVW) union members, all originally from Latin America, are employed by private contractor Ecocleen. The strike was called off after the headteacher conceded that cleaners be paid sick pay in line with teachers at the school. He also agreed to a pay rise.

Previous negotiations between UVW, the school and Ecocleen led to the cleaners being paid the London Living Wage (£10.85 per hour). They were previously on the minimum wage (£8.72).

Renault auto workers in Caudan, France strike over plant closure

Workers at the Renault foundry in Caudan, France took 24-hour strike action beginning Monday evening against the decision of the car-maker to cease operations at the plant. The CGT union called the one-day action after nine months of "strategic review," during which time the company was planning to reduce costs, rather than pulling out completely, reports *Le Télégramme* .

The foundry, which employs 385 workers, has received €8.2 million from the national and local government since Renault threatened to stop production in 2009, leading the Economy Minister to make moral and nationalist appeals about Renault's "responsibility" to "French economic sovereignty" following meetings between the company, government and unions.

Bus drivers in Lille, France demand protection after colleague is attacked

Bus drivers in the French city of Lille stopped work on Monday to demand additional protection after a colleague was assaulted the previous Saturday. The CGT union reported to *Le Figaro* that a driver had bleach thrown on him through his cab window while returning to the depot.

As well as the danger from the coronavirus pandemic, bus drivers suffer increasing threats at work. In July, a driver in the French city of Bayonne, Philippe Monguillot, died after being assaulted by a group of men whom he had asked to wear face masks to protect other passengers. More than 6,000 people took to the streets in his memory, drivers at Monguillot's company struck to demand protection, and London bus drivers raised funds for his family.

Delivery riders in Nantes, France strike over scooter ban

Food delivery riders in Nantes, France, continue their strike, begun March 8, over the ban on non-electric scooters in the city centre. Many of these "gig economy" workers, who are now forced to make deliveries on foot to stay in work, failed to reach any agreement in meetings with the city government, according to *Ouest France* and will continue to strike every Friday and Saturday evening.

Strike at medical devices factory in Hungary over pay

Workers at a Hungarian plant producing medical devices for the multinational B. Braun took several days' strike action over the past few weeks to demand an eight percent pay rise for all employees. The VASAS union entered talks with the company on Monday, after receiving an offer in which 69 percent of the 16,000 workers at the factory would receive an eight percent rise and the rest 4-6 percent. The magazine *Magyar Hang* reports that this increase is partially offset by cuts to performance bonuses.

Protest strike against expansion of landfill site in Fyli, near Greek capital Athens

A protest and work stoppage took place on Monday at the landfill site in

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Fyli, near the Greek capital of Athens. *Ekathimerini* reports the strike was called by the SYPA union against plans to increase the size of the dump and build an incinerator, citing statistics showing an increase in cancer cases near the landfill.

Local residents warned in November that the landfill was already dangerously over capacity, risking a landslide. At the time, the local authority announced a plan to close the Fyli site and reposition it in another location.

Portuguese broadcast technicians strike over conditions

Technicians at the Portuguese national broadcast company RTP concluded four days of strike action on Monday, which began Friday, over the continual degradation of equipment and staffing conditions. According to *Notícias ao Minuto*, workers in both the technical centres of Lisbon and Porto complained about lack of career progression, while workers were generally covering two or three different roles.

Belgian teachers protest lack of health measures

Belgian teachers protested the inadequate health measures in schools on Thursday and Friday, taking part in one-hour strikes called by two education unions. In comments to broadcaster RTBF, the CGSP union warned of further strike action next Tuesday if no additional health measures are adopted.

The SLFP union complained their members were not prioritised for vaccination after having "placed themselves totally at the service of society" in keeping schools open. Despite school closures being one of the most effective ways of controlling the pandemic and protecting society, the unions accepted the opening of schools. With a full reopening planned for April 19, the unions restricted themselves to a call for teachers to be vaccinated, and for "effective testing" as a prerequisite.

Coca-Cola strike in Spain called off by unions

The final day of strike action planned this week by workers at Coca-Cola's operations in Spain has been called off by the unions after they secured the company's agreement that the 360 job losses and relocations would be "converted into voluntary redundancies and redeployments."

The company and the CSIF union announced an increased incentive package for workers choosing to take voluntary redundancy or early retirement, and that some of the workers would be hired by third-party companies, reports *El País*. However, Coca-Cola said the agreement to make no compulsory redundancies was conditional on the number of workers who signed up to the "voluntary" scheme.

Croatian rail strike called off after pay deal reached

A pay strike planned for Thursday at HŽ Infrastruktura, the company which maintains much of Croatia's railway network, was called off after a new collective agreement was signed by the three unions, reports *tportal*. The company, which employs around 5,000, had initially offered a pay rise of less than two percent, after workers had gone 14 years without a rise. The new offer works out at around a 9.5 percent increase plus a meal allowance, to take effect in January.

Workers at Serbian aerospace firm in dispute over worsening conditions

Workers at Jat Tehnika in Serbia protested worsening work conditions since it was privatised at the end of 2019. Nova tv reports workers' complaints of extremely cold temperatures in hangars, shorter vacations, and reduced benefits such as hot meals provided at work, conditions they had been promised would improve after the privatisation but that have only worsened.

According to the JAT-Nezavisnost union, about a third of the company's around 800 employees took part in a warning strike at the start of March, but the unions have now diverted this opposition into an appeal to politicians, writing a letter to ministers, the prime minister and president, none of whom replied.

Unions call off Cypriot port workers' strike in Limassol over redundancies

A strike over redundancies at the port of Limassol in Cyprus was called off by the unions last week. Port workers began their strike on March 16, after the company, DP World, announced that 16 of the 84 workers would be made redundant, according to *Cyprus Mail* .

While warning of an indefinite strike unless the company withdrew the threat of redundancies, the SEK and PEO unions called off the stoppage with only a promise from DP World to delay layoffs until the conclusion of negotiations.

Drivers at South African bus company strike over cut in hours

Over 600 bus drivers at the Algoa Bus Company, Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth), South Africa went on strike March 18, in protest at the reduction of their working hours. The drivers burned tyres outside the entrance to company offices and depot, saying they would not return to work until their hours were increased. Taxi drivers also stopped work in solidarity, threatening to "torch" any bus breaking the strike.

Unemployed workers demonstrate in South African township in Gqeberha to demand jobs

Workers from Motherwell township blocked roads March 16, in protest at being overlooked for work by the local Coega Industrial Development Zone.

Around 200 protestors, represented by the Ibhayi Workers' Forum, barricaded all the roads into Motherwell with burning tyres. They are

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threatening to escalate their demonstrations until the Coega Development Corporation employs local people for unskilled jobs rather than bringing in workers from outside the area. Unemployment in the Motherwell township has caused many to migrate to other provinces in search of work.

Workers at Western Cape fish processing plant strike for a living wage

More than 80 workers at the Gallo Group mussel processing plant in the coastal town of Velddrif, Western Cape, South Africa have been on strike since March 10, after a wage freeze went into its second year.

The Food and Allied Workers Union members want an eight percent wage increase.

Shop workers at South African Spar distribution centre strike for pay increase

On March 18, 134 workers at a Spar distribution centre in Gqeberha, South Africa walked out, demanding an 8.1 percent wage increase, against the company's offer of three percent.

The Transport Retail and General Workers Union members' salary is not equivalent to workers in other Spar distribution centres, with company dividends up 8.1 percent in 2020. "We are demanding a piece of that pie," workers are quoted saying. "Managers are changing cars, we cannot even buy a wheelbarrow."

Health workers on Uganda-Rwanda border strike over unpaid allowances

Health workers at Mirama Hills, Uganda, near the border with Rwanda, walked out on March 22, to oppose the non-payment of their allowances for more than six months.

The strike caused the flow of business and traffic across the border to come to a standstill. More than 200 trucks were stuck at the border, as without a negative COVID-19 test they are not allowed to cross.

The health workers are responsible for all medical services at the border, including screening of staff and truck drivers, sample collections, isolation when necessary, clearing drivers and the fumigation of buildings.

One of the strikers explained, "We have been here at the border since March 2020. We have worked hard and tried to prevent more infections... they are no longer paying us while we continue to risk our lives and keep away from our homes."

Uganda has 40,734 reported cases of COVID-19 and 334 deaths.

Teachers in Imo State, Nigeria protest lack of pay for a year

Teachers from primary and secondary schools in Imo State, Nigeria protested outside government house, Owerri on March 18, against a year's non-payment of wages. State governor, Hope Uzodinma claimed they were "ghost workers."

Around 300 teachers were last paid in February 2020, barely one month after Mr Uzodimma became governor.

The protestors carried placards saying "Uzodimma lied to Imo people on teachers' salary," and "We are not ghost workers, we have our employment letters, please pay us."

Grace Ajaegbu, a teacher at the secondary school in Udo, a sparsely populated area in Ezinihitte Mbaise, said, "I started teaching in 1992 but since the administration of this governor began, I have not received a dime...I'm not a fraudster as the governor claimed."

Juliet Akalazu from Mbaitoli said unpaid teachers came to demonstrate with documentary proof of their status, "We submitted our documents to the offices of the accountant-general and head of (civil) service, yet we have not been paid."

Rural teachers' stoppage in Zimbabwe

Teachers stayed away from schools in rural areas of Zimbabwe due to reopen on March 22 following government directives. They are angry at the government's refusal to address concerns about pay and conditions.

The Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe called for the restoration of the pre-October 2018 salary of teachers with a minimum of US$520 but raised no concerns on the safety of a return to schools during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Zimbabwe has recorded 36,749 cases of the virus and 1,516 deaths.

Student teachers are threatening action over the tiny ZW$150 (less than US$0.50) they are paid per month. Civil servants are also increasingly angry over the erosion of their salaries by inflation.

National strike action by Lebanese pharmacists

Pharmacists across Lebanon, including in the cities of Beirut, Sidon and Tripoli, shut their shops on March 18, as part of nationwide strike action protesting their inability to procure drugs because of the deteriorating economic situation. Pharmacists also held a sit-in outside the Health Ministry in Beirut.

Nurses in Lebanon held a protest the previous day over the same issue.

Lebanon is in the midst of an ongoing economic crisis, with its currency depreciating by around 80 percent. Petrol is rationed and subsidies on fuel, food and medicines are expected to end. This month, workers protested by blocking roads.

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