

UK bus drivers continue strikes in Manchester and at London United over pay and conditions; one-day national stoppage of lorry drivers in Netherlands for pay rise and improved conditions; thousands of doctors strike in Sudan against lack of COVID safety and pay

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

15 April 2021

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

Strike by Go North West bus drivers in Manchester, England continues

The strike begun February 28 by nearly 500 bus drivers in Manchester at Go North West, part of the Go Ahead group, is continuing. Drivers are opposed to company plans to “fire and rehire” them by May 8, unless they accept an inferior contract leaving them worse off by £2,500 a year as well as less sick pay.

Attempting to break the strike, Go North West has hired fleets of buses and coaches, along with drivers from several companies. The Go Ahead strike supporters’ Facebook page recently listed 32 companies involved in a scabbing operation. Strikers are compiling a growing list of COVID-19 breaches being perpetrated by the strikebreaking operation.

In the face of the strikebreaking operation, Unite is not appealing to Go Ahead workers at other garages in across Britain or drivers from other companies to walkout in solidarity, but is isolating the dispute. The union is appealing to management, shareholders, potential investors, and pro-business local politicians, including the Labour mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham.

Unite is offering Go North West £1.3 million in cost cutting savings aimed at returning the company to “a healthy profit-making position.”

The profitable Newcastle upon Tyne-based Go Ahead group employs over 28,000 workers and has operations in Ireland, Norway, Singapore and Germany.

Further strike by bus drivers at London United against attacks on pay and conditions

Bus drivers at all seven depots of RATP-owned subsidiary London United in the UK capital held a one-day strike Thursday, bringing the total number of strike days to nine.

The Unite union members are opposed to proposed changes in their contracts including remote signing on, which will leave them around £2,000 a year worse off. The strike hit routes across south and west London. A further strike is planned for April 15.

Drivers at two other London RATP subsidiaries, London Sovereign and Quality Line, were also involved in strikes over pay and conditions, but Unite called off action after pushing through rotten pay deals. Strikes at London United were suspended for talks, but these broke down and strikes resumed.

Drivers for RATP in France walked out on April 2 seeking a pay rise and against privatisation.

Strike vote by bus drivers at Metroline in UK capital

Around 4,000 drivers at the Metroline bus company in London voted by a more than 95 percent majority for a stoppage. The Unite union members are opposed to plans by Metroline to introduce a “remote sign-on” policy.

Under remote sign-on drivers do not begin their shift at the bus depot, instead meeting their bus usually at a bus stop. Drivers say it will mean longer driving hours, no access to canteen or toilet facilities and having to wait outside in poor weather.

Currently the “remote sign-on” policy is subject to a moratorium called by the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan and is being reviewed.

Unite say unless Metroline withdraws its plans to introduce “remote sign-on” a strike could take place as “early as the end of this month.”

Electricians in UK capital continue struggle against deskilling

On Wednesday, construction electricians went into a Balfour Beatty construction site in London’s Canary Wharf as part of their campaign against deskilling, known as No2ESO. They handed out leaflets and spoke to workers on the site, then marched to parliament.

The Unite union members oppose plans by construction companies to introduce an electrical support operative (ESO) grade to replace the use of

fully trained electricians in many roles.

ESOs would be paid a lower rate than fully qualified electricians. The electricians say the use of ESOs would lead to a deskilling of their role. In March, construction electricians held a protest outside the offices of Balfour Beatty in London. More protests are planned at Hinkley Point C, the first nuclear power station built in the UK for 20 years in Somerset, where the attacks began.

Staff at Thurrock council in Essex, England begin strike over pay cuts

Workers providing refuse, highway maintenance and street cleaning at Thurrock council in Essex, England began continuous strike on Tuesday, to last until May 7 (excluding May 3 bank holiday).

The Unite union members are opposing plans by the council to cut salaries by £2,000 to £3,500 a year. Several large conurbations such as Tilbury and Grays will be affected by the dispute. During the period April 13 to May 7, refuse workers will carry out bin collections each day but only until 9am so a backlog of uncollected refuse will mount up.

Strike by IT staff at London tenant referencing service against pay cuts continues

Around 20 IT workers at Goodlord in the UK capital are continuing their indefinite strike, begun March 1. On February 22, they began discontinuous strikes, before escalating on March 1. Goodlord provides checks on potential tenants for estate agents.

The Unite union members, employed by the company on rolling fixed-term contracts, walked out after the company cut pay by 20 percent, a form of fire and rehire. Under the new contract they would see salary cuts of up to £6,000, leaving staff on annual pay of around £18,000, less than the current London Living wage of £21,157. Unite called for Goodlord to lose its Living Wage Foundation accreditation, as the pay cut would mean it no longer qualifies.

A further ballot by the strikers began Wednesday and is due to close April 26. In addition to “fire and rehire,” the ballot covers the dismissal of strikers currently taking strike action and the use of agency staff as strike breakers.

Dispute of staff at ScotRail in Scotland over overtime pay continues

Ticket inspectors working for ScotRail in Scotland have voted overwhelmingly to walk out, joining action by conductors. The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) members are seeking equality with other rail staff for enhanced pay for working rest days. From April 28, the ticket examiners will not work Sundays, rest days or higher-grade duties until further notice.

Several hundred conductors at ScotRail took three days of strikes with more planned on April 18 and 25. They are also working to rule. They are protesting being paid a lower rate of overtime than train drivers.

ScotRail is owned by Dutch transport company Abellio.

Demonstration by Bluestar bus workers in Southampton, England in support of sacked union representative

Bus workers and supporters demonstrated on Monday morning in Southampton, England to demand the reinstatement of sacked union branch secretary, Declan Clune.

The RMT members are balloting for strike action.

Bus company Bluestar sacked Clune after he reported a bus hitting a rail bridge to Network Rail. An RMT press release noted, “A Director’s Review of the matter of the dismissal has now been granted and our officials will be putting a strong case for reinstatement and to right this wrong. The company should seize this opportunity to reinstate Declan rather than provoking an industrial dispute and action by our members.”

Further strikes planned by British Telecom engineers

Around 170 British Telecom Openreach Repayment Project Engineers have announced they will strike for five days beginning April 19. To date, they have held 10 days of strike action.

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.

Education workers at 49 young offender prisons in England to strike over COVID safety

Prison education staff at 49 prison and young offender institutions across England have voted by a two-thirds majority to strike. The University and College Union (UCU) members, employed by Novus, will hold a one-day strike on April 26, followed by a two-day strike beginning May 11. Further action may be announced.

They are in dispute with Novus for disciplining educators who raised health and safety concerns around COVID-19. A recent report highlighted that COVID deaths in prisons were three times higher than in the general population.

UCU general secretary, Jo Grady stated, “Unless Novus stops its bullying behaviour, our members will walk out on 26 April, followed by a two-day strike on 11 and 12 May. We have a mandate to take sustained industrial action and Novus needs to urgently address staff health and safety concerns if it wants to avoid further disruption.”

Academic staff at United Colleges Group London vote to walk out over contract changes

Academic staff working for United Colleges Group based in UK capital London voted by a 99 percent majority to strike in opposition to changes in contracts. The UCU members argue that the changes imposed by management will increase their workloads.

At the start of the 2020 academic year management unilaterally removed timetabled staff non-teaching hours.

The UCU called on the colleges to use planned negotiation meetings to reach a settlement to avoid industrial action.

Ballot of Scottish local government workers over pay offer

Strike vote by Liverpool university staff, England against redundancies

Staff at Liverpool university, England voted by nearly 85 percent on a 60 percent turnout to strike. The UCU members oppose plans to make 47 staff in the Health and Life Sciences department redundant, including academics who have carried out leading research on COVID-19.

Housing maintenance workers at London-based charity to begin indefinite strike

Twelve maintenance workers employed by the property services of housing charity St Mungo's in London will begin an all-out stoppage on April 22. The charity runs 3,200 accommodation units in Bournemouth, Brighton, Bristol, London, Milton Keynes, Oxford and Reading.

The Unite union members accuse the maintenance section managers of bullying tactics by using inappropriate disciplinary measures against union members. Currently the planned strike is restricted to the maintenance department, but the union warns it could be widened.

In response, the charity suspended a union rep on a charge of gross misconduct for raising a grievance about management bullying. One of the grounds cited for the gross misconduct charge was management "distress" at suggestions of bullying.

In March last year, several hundred St Mungo's workers held a three-day strike. The Unite members were opposed to changes in sickness policy and the falling number of more experienced senior workers employed. They were concerned the changes were aimed at creating a lower-paid workforce with inferior conditions.

Protest by cleaners at London hospital against cut in hours

Cleaning staff at private contractor, ISS at Lewisham Hospital in south London protested Monday outside the hospital. The GMB union members are opposed to a 495 hours' cut in its cleaning contract. It is the second such hours and jobs cut by the company since it took over the contract in February 2020. The cut will mean more pressure on remaining workers to complete cleaning tasks in the allotted time and increase the risk of infection.

London Underground rail strike vote at Queens Park depot against job losses

London Underground rail (tube) drivers on the Bakerloo line at the Queens Park depot have voted near unanimously to strike. The RMT members are opposed to a new proposed work schedules, which would cut 11 jobs.

Local government workers in Scotland in the Unison union are taking part in a consultative ballot. The ballot will determine whether they are prepared to strike against a two percent pay offer from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, made on March 15. The ballot which opened Tuesday will close on April 28.

According to Unison, of the quarter of a million Scottish local government workers, half earn less than £25,000 a year and 100,000 earn less than the average wage of £32,000 a year.

Ballot of Woolwich ferry workers in London

Nearly 60 ferry workers on the Woolwich ferry service across the River Thames in London are being balloted for strike action. The ballot which began Wednesday will close April 29. The service is operated by Transport for London, who took over from discredited company, Briggs Marine Contractors.

The Unite union members have a number of grievances, including victimisation by management, failure to agree a new pay and bonus structure and concerns over health and safety.

Freight drivers strike across the Netherlands over pay and conditions

Lorry drivers in the Netherlands took a national day's strike on Monday to demand an update to the collective labour agreement covering 90,000 drivers, according to the *Algemeen Dagblad*. The FNV and CNV unions report 500 people attended a "drive-in" protest, to support the call for a pay rise and improved conditions.

The unions are calling for a 3.5 percent pay increase rather than the employers' offer of 2 percent, as well as an early retirement scheme, and improved conditions such as air conditioning units in cabs and a maximum weight to roll containers, which drivers must unload themselves. These became much heavier during the coronavirus pandemic as supermarket sales increased.

Dutch textile workers at two factories strike over pay

Workers at two Dutch factories owned by Japanese multinational Teijin Aramid producing synthetic fibres took a 12-hour strike on Wednesday, after a vote of hundreds of workers rejected the employers' pay offer. The FNV union, which called the protest strike, threatened an indefinite strike later in April if the company does not agree to a higher pay rise, reports the *Reformatorisch Dagblad*.

School workers supporting children with disabilities strike across France for pay rise and permanent contracts

On April 8, "AESH" workers who support students with disabilities

attending school, walked out across France. The unions called 95 demonstrations across the country to demand pay rises and permanent contracts for these precariously employed workers. Local paper *Le Télégramme* reporting that a demonstration in the town of Lorient, Brittany drew nearly 70 protestors.

Bus strike continues in Rennes, France

Nearly 370 bus drivers in the French city of Rennes took a second stoppage day on Saturday against the imposition of an “all-digital” work system. The UNSA, CGT and CFDT unions called the strike to demand consultation and a monthly pay rise of 25 euros to compensate for the new system. The strikes are scheduled to continue every Saturday, reports *Ouest France*, with the CGT announcing, “we chose Saturday because we want the strike to impact the users as little as possible.”

Striking workers protest in Barcelona, Spain against Bosch plant closure

Two hundred Spanish workers at the Lliçà d’Amunt plant in Barcelona, on strike since April 5 against the decision by Bosch to close the plant, protested April 6 in Barcelona where the works council was attempting to negotiate a plan to maintain production.

The president of the works’ council is quoted in *20 minutos* announcing his readiness to agree to wage freezes and redundancies to keep the plant open. The strike is scheduled to last until the end of April.

Unions call off strike of Spanish cleaners, agree sellout pay deal

The CCOO and UGT unions representing 3,500 Spanish workers signed an agreement April 12 with the Professional Association of Cleaning Companies of Navarra and the ISN Group, calling off a four-day strike planned to begin the following day.

The strike, arranged by the CCOO and UGT as well as the ELA and LAB unions, was to demand a substantial salary increase, full sick pay and to increase the available work hours.

The deal reached with the employers provides only a 2.5 percent pay rise this year and 1.75 percent in the following two years, reports *Navarra.com*. Responding to the ELA and LAB, the UGT claimed this is “substantial,” saying, “first of all, we have managed to get the employers to return to the negotiating table.”

Union ends Pesquerías de Almadraña fishery bonus strike in Spain

An indefinite stoppage by workers at the Pesquerías de Almadraña [tuna] fishery on April 8 was called off the next day by the CCOO union. The strike of over 60 workers was called to demand the company pay agreed performance bonuses from 2020 of around 1,600 euros each, reports *Diario de Cadiz*.

The union ordered the return to work after securing the agreement of the

company to pay each worker 800 euros, and to negotiate the bonus for the next year.

Italian metalworkers in Taranto begin strike and sit-in against victimisation

On Wednesday, workers at the ArcelorMittal metal plant in Taranto, Italy began an “all-out” strike against victimisation. The company fired one of their colleagues for a post on his Facebook page recommending the recent drama, *Wake up my love*, based on a true story of health damage caused to residents near a steel mill.

A one-hour solidarity strike took place in the ArcelorMittal plant in Genoa, reports *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, and from April 15 there will be a permanent sit-in by the fired worker and a delegation from the USB union in front of the management offices. Three other unions at the plant have scheduled a one-day strike for April 24.

Italian agricultural workers protest, plan national strike against lack of government support

A protest of agricultural workers took place across Italy on Saturday, after the government did not provide financial support for the thousands of workers in this sector. According to *Corriere del Mezzogiorno*, three unions announced a national strike for April 30, demanding the government introduce a bonus for seasonal agriculture workers.

Court bailiffs in Portugal strike over forced overtime

Portuguese court bailiffs struck this week against forced unpaid overtime, reports *Lusa*. The Union of Justice Officials called the five-day walkout from Monday among the 8,000 court workers.

The union accepted the government insistence that a skeleton staff remain at work to provide essential services if they were vaccinated.

Portuguese energy company workers to strike over wages

Workers at the Portuguese energy company EDP Group will strike April 20, after management proposed a 0.2 percent pay increase for the year. According to *Notícias ao Minuto*, the Fiequimetal union demanded a salary increase of 90 euros per month for workers at the company, which employs over 12,000 people.

Civil servants in Northern Cyprus strike over cost-of-living payments

Hundreds of civil servants in Northern Cyprus walked out on April 8, and marched to the parliament building in Nicosia to protest a four-month freeze in their cost-of-living increment, reports the *Cyprus Mail*.

The strike was called by unions representing civil servants, customs officials, as well as nurses, doctors and midwives. Reportedly the parliamentary session for that day was cancelled because most of the staff were on strike.

Former Debenhams retail staff in Ireland continue dispute a year on over redundancy pay

Former employees of Debenhams' 11 stores in Ireland are continuing protests to demand a promised redundancy package of four week's pay for each year of service rather than the statutory two weeks, which the liquidators KPMG refused to honour.

The Mandate union members began protesting after Debenhams announced it was entering liquidation on April 9, 2020, and 1,000 staff across Ireland would be made redundant. An injunction was granted in October to prevent pickets at the former Debenhams stores from blocking the removal of goods and equipment.

The *Irish Examiner* reports that a three million euro "upskilling fund" to end the dispute was rejected by 91 percent of Mandate members in a vote in January, but the union is considering putting a slightly improved offer to another vote. The *Examiner* quotes two Mandate stewards who say the best hope for redundant workers is a bill introduced by the pseudo-left Solidarity party to prioritise payments to workers during liquidations.

Tunisian news agency staff at TAP to strike

Staff at the Tunisian TAP news agency, which employs around 300 workers are to hold a strike on April 22.

The National Union of Tunisian Journalists and Tunisian General Labour Union are protesting the prime minister's appointment of Kamel Ben Younes as TAP CEO. They say the appointment should be made on a basis of professional criteria, and fear the imposition of a CEO by the government will undermine editorial independence.

A week ago, TAP staff staged a sit-in over the issue. On Tuesday, dozens of journalists protested outside TAP headquarters in Tunis and tried to prevent Younes gaining entry to the building. Police assaulted journalists to enforce his entry.

Job protests in Iraqi city Nasiriyah

On Sunday, hundreds of protestors in Iraqi city Nasiriyah blocked three bridges and surrounded the Maysan Oil Company premises. They were demanding jobs for local people. Government figures put the unemployment rate in the oil rich region at 27 percent and the poverty rate at 25 percent.

Protest by Iranian vehicle makers in Zaran

On April 8, workers rallied outside the Zaran Wagon factory in the Iranian city Zaran. The rally followed three days of protests against the

renewing on a promise of a wage increase made earlier in the year, three months' wage arrears and non-payment of new year bonuses.

Sudanese doctors strike in protest at intolerable conditions in face of the COVID-19 pandemic

Thousands of doctors are on strike in Sudan. Their grievances include not being paid for nearly a year and intolerable working conditions as they battle against COVID-19 infections. The doctors say many hospitals are not providing them with face masks.

Around 200 doctors and other health workers have died from COVID in Sudan, though the official figure is 60. Many were senior medics in their fifties and sixties, a group particularly at risk from the disease. Many frontline health staff have not been able to obtain the COVID-19 vaccine.

South African miners at Aviemore mine, Kwazulu Natal strike for pay increase

Around 130 mineworkers at the Buffalo Coal-owned Aviemore mine near Dundee, Kwazulu Natal, South Africa were on sit-in strike April 8-10, demanding an immediate salary increase.

The company is in ongoing talks with the unions at the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration.

South African care workers strike at hospital in Gqeberha, South Africa over pay

Care workers at Dora Nginza Hospital, Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth), South Africa stopped work Monday protesting the non-payment of performance-related bonuses and increases.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) members said some of them had not received their Performance Management Development System payments for two years, despite being publicly lauded for their work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. They said they were overworked and suffering from anxiety.

South Africa has 1,561,559 coronavirus cases, with 53,498 fatalities.

South African staff and students at a university in Durban demonstrate for increased funding

Lecturers and hundreds of students at Mangosuthu University of Technology, Durban, South Africa protested April 8, demanding higher salaries for staff, support with education funding and improvements in the student registration process, which has left 9,000 waiting to enrol.

The NEHAWU members are asking for a 12 percent rise in salary, increased housing allowance and permanent positions for contracted staff.

Students were unable to start classes because of delays in registration. When they burned tyres and trees at the university entrance, police attacked them with water cannons, stun grenades and teargas.

Game reserve workers in Mpumalanga province, South Africa strike over pay and conditions

Workers at government game reserves in Mpumalanga province, South Africa stopped work April 6, demanding an increase in long service pay and improved working conditions.

The NEHAWU members picketed outside the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MTPA) head office and closed all 14 nature reserves. They want an end to arbitrary redeployment between parks, and for permanent placements for employees acting in senior management positions.

MTPA have said the workers' action is illegal, and threatened to prohibit the strike through the courts. The union wants the provincial council member for finance to intervene.



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Warning strike by academics in Kano State, Nigeria

Nigerian Academic Staff at Federal College of Education, Bichi, Kano State, began a one-week warning strike Monday.

The COESU members accuse management of non-remittance of N25million deducted from wages for the staff multi-purpose cooperative society and non-payment of allowances. School buildings are dilapidated.

Union suspends Nigerian doctors' strike

The six-week strike by Nigerian resident doctors has been suspended by the National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD).

Resident doctors (learning while providing healthcare) comprise a large proportion of all doctors in the Nigerian tertiary (specialist) hospitals.

The doctors walked out March 31, with demands including payment of salary arrears, increase of the hazard allowance to 50 percent of basic salaries for all health workers, and payment of outstanding COVID-19 allowances, which are largely unpaid in state-run hospitals.

NARD issued an empty threat to government that the stoppage would resume if "our demands are not met in four weeks' time." The government claimed it paid the salaries of some doctors.

Nigeria reported 164,000 coronavirus cases and 2,061 deaths.

Malawi government threatens to starve striking teachers back to work

The Malawi government secured a court injunction against striking teachers at state-run schools throughout the country and is threatening to stop salaries unless they return to work by April 12.

Teachers walked out April 6, to demand the government pays a promised COVID-19 risk allowance.

The government prepared the injunction while meeting with the Teachers Union of Malawi (TUM) on April 8. TUM supports unsafe face-to-face teaching. The teachers struck in March, but TUM ended the strike without any demands met.

Malawi recorded 33,891 coronavirus cases and 1,134 deaths.