

Strikes across Italy to protest fatal industrial accidents; Intensive care nurses protest in France as Covid overwhelms hospitals; after series of union sellouts London bus workers strike vote against remote sign on; UK teachers oppose victimisations, attacks on jobs, pay and conditions

## 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.*

### Europe

Public transport workers across Italy took part in a four-hour strike Wednesday called by the USB union. According to *Sky News* the stoppage was to bring attention to the quality of public transport provision and working conditions, including safety. Workers took part in the cities of Rome, Bologna, Milan, Turin, Palermo and others.

Hundreds of Fedex-TNT workers marched on the Milan Prefecture on May 12 and to the headquarters of the Democratic Party in Rome on May 4 to oppose an attack on the right to strike and police intimidation.

This was after dozens of striking workers were issued “away notices” (*fogli di via*) and fines for their peaceful protests at the Peschiera Borromeo and San Giuliano Milanese factories against the planned closure of the Fedex-TNT hub at Piacenza. The closure of the hub threatens the jobs of more than 300 workers who are members of the Si Cobas union.

Over the past two weeks, workers in Italy have taken part in multiple strikes and demonstrations following industrial accidents which have killed their colleagues.

On May 7, Luana D’Orazia was killed when caught in a machine at the textile factory in Prato where she worked. Her colleagues walked out for a four-hour strike after the tragedy, and locals joined a demonstration, including striking workers from the Texprint facility nearby.

On the same day workers in Campomarino walked out for four hours following another incident in which a highway maintenance worker was killed. Another strike in the city of Ceri took place on Wednesday after an explosion at the Greenvest cannabis farm killed two workers.

ANSA reports that every day between January 1 and March 31, two people in Italy have died at work. In all these incidents, the CGIL, CISL and UIL unions have made ritual denunciations of unsafe working conditions which confront Italian workers, but after short walkouts failed to lead any organised fight for safety measures.

On Tuesday, nurses in intensive care units across France took part in protests organised by several unions. Hundreds joined demonstrations, or wore slogans declaring “on strike” while caring for patients, to demand a pay rise in recognition of the high demands of the job, and to increase staffing levels. *France Bleu* reports that nurses at more than 110 ICUs across the country were mobilised.

A strike notice for anaesthetists May 17 has also been filed by the CGT-Santé union.

Despite the large daily cases of COVID-19 and hospitals being overwhelmed, the Macron government has begun ending the limited lockdown.

This week, workers in the Spanish branches of the multinational retailer H&M continue a series of strikes begun last week. This follows the company’s announcement on April 6 of an “ERE” redundancy plan, which would cut almost 1,100 jobs nationally, and close 30 stores.

*Europa Press* reports that the CCOO and UGT unions, which are negotiating with the company, have called for a national two-hour strike this Friday, and two 24-hour strikes on May 19 and 21. An offer from the company that some of the redundancies be made “voluntary”, and some be replaced by cuts in hours, was rejected by the unions as “insufficient”.

Metal workers in the Spanish province of Pontevedra, in the state of Galicia, took part in a half-day strike on Wednesday called by the CIG union to oppose a collective agreement signed by the CCOO and UGT unions.

According to *Europa Press*, the CIG has denounced the fact that the agreement would mean severance pay is paid at the end of a contract rather than over a period of months. The collective agreement also includes a mere 0.5 percent pay increase for 2020, and 1.75 percent for each of 2021 and 2022.

Teachers in state afternoon and evening schools in Cyprus began an indefinite strike on Tuesday against being hired as freelancers rather than employees, reports the *Cyprus Mail*.

A motion passed by the House of Representatives calls for these freelance arrangements to be converted into permanent contracts, but the education ministry has not yet implemented it. The strikers also plan to protest on Friday with a convoy to the Presidential Palace.

Workers at Fiat Plastic in the Serbian city of Kragujevac continued their struggle for the reversal of a 300 euros annual pay cut, which began on

January 12 with one-hour per day stoppages.

*Naslovi* reports that the company attempted to break the strike by placing the strike committee on paid leave and has transferred some of the production away from the Kragujevac facility. Workers at the plant, who formed their own union, complained that other trade union organisations failed to support them in the face of company intimidation.

On Wednesday miners from state-owned mines across Ukraine stopped work and travelled to the capital Kiev to begin an indefinite protest to demand the payment of wage arrears by the government. According to *UNIAN*, the miners are owed 2 billion UAH (around 60 million euros) in back pay. The protests, called by the Independent Trade Union of Miners, are planned to continue indefinitely and are also calling for a salary increase.

The Independent Workers Union (IWU) union suspended the stoppage of around 500 technicians at the Irish state-owned electricity company ESB, according to *RTÉ*.

Following four strike days spread over two weeks, the technicians were working to rule and refusing to take on any overtime, but the IWU instructed its members to return to work pending the outcome of its court case to demand the right to be consulted by the company.

The strikes began in opposition to outsourcing, which the IWU described to the *Independent* as a “backdoor method of privatising the ESB”. The IWU is not officially recognised by ESB, and the three unions recognised by the employer did not call out their members to join the strike. ESB has begun its own court case against the union, which is demanding consultation on future outsourcing decisions.

Miners at the Panasqueira Mines in Covilhã, Portugal, announced a new series of daily two-hour stoppages between May 24 and June 12, as well as an overtime ban, reports *Sic Notícias*. The STIM union called an initial block of two-hour strikes between April 26 and May 8, to which it reported “almost total adhesion”, after employer Beralto failed to agree a 6.05 percent pay rise for the over 250 workers.

Following the full reopening of Belgian schools for face-to-face teaching on Monday, teachers at the Athenée provincial school in La Louvière opposed the measure, with one commenting to *RTL* that it “puts everyone in danger”.

Teachers speaking to *RTL* declared that they were considering stoppages and sickouts to prevent a full return, pointing to the impossibility of social distancing measures with full classrooms and that many teachers have not been vaccinated.

The CSC and CGSP unions pledged to “cover” the stoppages taken independently by teachers but have not led any opposition to school reopenings. The heads of the two unions said teachers should first go through the official bureaucratic channels before taking any independent action, and that the unions wanted to “avoid [a strike] at all costs”.

Around 4,000 bus drivers working for Metroline West and Metroline Travel in the UK capital voted by more than 95 percent to walkout in a series of rolling strikes. The Unite union members are opposed to plans by Metroline, which runs bus services in north and west London, to implement a remote sign on scheme.

Under remote sign on drivers have to meet their bus on route rather than at the depot, increasing unpaid travel time and restricting drivers’ access to toilet and canteen facilities at depots.

In October, Metroline West drivers voted 97.7 percent and Metroline Travel voted 96.6 percent for industrial action against remote sign on. The union is yet to announce any strike dates.

At French-owned RATP subsidiary London United, Unite pushed through a below inflation 2.25 percent pay deal over two years and a £400 one off payment for 2020—after 10 days of strikes. The vote to accept was 696, with 639 voting to reject.

Drivers at two other London RATP subsidiaries, London Sovereign and Quality Line, were also involved in strikes over pay and conditions, but

Unite called the stoppage off after pushing through a one percent pay increase and a one-off payment of £425. During the last year, more than 60 bus workers in London have succumbed to COVID-19 after working in unsafe conditions.

A deal to end the long-running dispute by drivers at Go North West begun February 8 was agreed by the company and Unite, according to the company in a statement published in the *Manchester Evening News*. While it is claimed by the union that the plan to fire and rehire the workers was taken off the table, the details of the deal have not been made public as the union decides how to sell the deal to strikers.

Teachers at Oakes Park school in Redbridge, London voted to strike in an indicative ballot. The National Education Union (NEU) members oppose the sacking of union representative (rep) Keiran Mahon, who encouraged teachers at the school to invoke Section 44 of Employment Rights legislation to avoid being at risk from COVID-19 infection at work. A rally in his defence is planned for May 19.

Victimised NEU rep Louise Lewis was reinstated after winning a disciplinary hearing. Teachers at the North Huddersfield Trust high school in Huddersfield held a two-day strike last week and one the previous week protesting her suspension in October last year. Lewis was suspended by the school head after attempting to carry out risk assessments regarding COVID-19. A planned three-day stoppage this week was called off.

Teachers at the private Leaways School in the inner London borough of Hackney walked out on Tuesday and Wednesday as part of a long-running dispute begun at the end of last year. Leaways is a special school run by the Kedleston group, which runs other specialist schools across England. Leaways provides 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 offered. They are calling for additional specialist teaching staff which the school receives funding for to meet the needs of students. They are also protesting the dismissal of two teachers since the dispute began. They accuse school management of bullying. Further walkouts are planned for May 18 and 19. A support rally is called for May 22.

A planned three-day stoppage by teachers at the Greatfield Park Primary school in Cheltenham, Gloucester was called off. The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers members took a two-day stoppage last week and the week before to protest changes detrimental to staff well-being, implemented by a new head following an Ofsted (inspectors’) report. The teachers may take planned strike action June 23 to 25 if promised improvements are not implemented.

Staff at Nottingham Academy, Sneinton, Nottingham (part of the Greenwood Academies Trust) walked out on Tuesday after voting by a large majority to strike. Around 20 NEU members mounted a picket at the school gate. They are opposed to a forced re-organisation by school management. It would be the second such re-organisation within two years, meaning teachers having to compete with colleagues in applying for their own jobs. Unsuccessful teachers would be forced to leave the school.

Around 600 UK prison educators working at 49 prisons and young offender units walked out on Tuesday and Wednesday. They work for Novus, providing education and skills training on behalf of the prison service. The University and College Union (UCU) members are in dispute with Novus for seeking to discipline educators who raised health and safety concerns around COVID-19. A ballot of UCU members working in the prison system returned a 68 percent majority in favour of a stoppage.

Several hundred train conductors at Scottish rail transport company ScotRail held a further one-day strike Sunday. Sunday stoppages began at the end of March.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members are protesting being paid a lower rate of overtime than train drivers. They are also working to rule. The strike was joined by ticket managers in a separate

dispute but over the same issue.

Rail conductors at East Midlands Railway, England are to hold 24-hour strikes on three successive Sundays beginning May 16. The RMT union members are opposing the imposition of new contracts that will mean conductors being paid £5,500 less in their first year of employment and having to work additional rostered hours.

The RMT recently betrayed the struggle against driver-only operated trains (DOO) at South Western Railway, agreeing to a deal removing door safety operations from conductors. For the past five years, the RMT isolated and dissipated the struggle by 6,000 conductors and thousands of drivers at private rail franchises throughout the UK against DOO—threatening jobs and passenger safety as drivers take over the operation of train doors.

Around 1,300 staff at Liverpool University, England began a programme of industrial action on May 10 against redundancies, working contracted hours only and boycotting voluntary activities. The University and College Union members, who voted by an 84 percent majority to strike, announced a series of walkouts—on May 24 to 28, June 1 to 4 and June 7 to 11.

The university initially proposed to axe 47 jobs in the Health and Life Sciences department, although this has now been reduced to 32. Among those slated to be made redundant are academics who have carried out leading research on COVID-19.

UK staff at arm's length company, Norwich City Services Ltd (NCSL), voted to walk out over pay and conditions. The Unite members voted by 83 percent on a 90 percent turnout while Unison's voted by 81 percent on an 84 percent turnout. The staff work on street cleaning and ground maintenance.

NCLS was set up in 2018 to employ staff previously been employed by outsourcing company Norse. According to the unions, staff brought back in house and working for NCSL would have pay and conditions in line with local authority staff. This did not happen, and workers demand their conditions are harmonised. According to a Unite press release of May 5, "The workers transferring in have some of the lowest pay rates & terms of employment; much worse than any council worker."

Around 30 field service engineers working for Brush Electrical Machines in Loughborough, England, owned by venture capitalist Melrose will strike over the summer.

The Unite union members "who service generators around the world, voted overwhelmingly in favour of striking and will stage industrial action every day from 25 May to 16 August," said Unite. The company are threatening "fire and rehire" which would lead to cuts in overtime rates, holiday and other terms leaving the specialist engineers £10,000 to £15,000 a year worse off.

Hundreds of workers at Chivas Brothers whisky distillers in Scotland voted by an 82 percent majority on a 62 percent turnout to strike. The Unite members rejected a pay offer which in real terms is a pay freeze. Chivas, which employs around 1,600 workers across its facilities in Scotland, made post-tax profits of £486 million in 2019.

Unite said walkouts will begin from the end of May but that it was open for further discussions on an improved offer.

Workers at BCM Fareva's plant in Nottingham, England are to ballot for strike action beginning May 18. The company produces pharmaceutical and beauty products for the Boots pharmacy chain. Of the 800 employed at the Beeston site, 300 Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) members are balloting. The ballot closes June 2.

French-owned BCM Fareva is threatening to impose inferior terms and conditions on its workforce with cuts in pay and redundancy payments and has said it will use "fire and rehire" tactics to force through the changes. USDAW has asked for the "fire and rehire" threat to be lifted to allow negotiations to take place.

Social work staff at Scottish Argyll and Bute council are threatening to strike over the derisory low rates paid when on emergency duty standby. Other issues include staff shortages and high case load rates. The social workers are Unison and Unite union members.

A planned three-day strike this week over regrading by lecturers at Forth Valley College in Scotland was called off by the Educational Institute of Scotland-Further Education Lecturers' Association. The lecturers took part in a series of walkouts over plans announced by college management a year ago to move around 20 lecturers into lower grade assessor/instructor posts on inferior terms.

The threat to the Forth Valley lecturers sparked a wider dispute, with lecturers at 26 further education colleges walking out over threats to regrade lecturers as assessors/instructors. The strikes were suspended two weeks ago, after the union and employers announced an agreement under which a national definition of the lecturer role was agreed by both sides. Full details have not been made public.

An employer's spokesperson said, "The Colleges Scotland Employers' Association has unanimously ratified a resolution to the dispute as agreed with the EIS-FELA last week. We welcome the EIS-FELA's acceptance of the resolution, and their commitment to end strike action."

The college and union agreed that the joint secretaries of the Scottish Colleges' National Joint Negotiation Committee (NJNC) will hold a review of the plans by Forth Valley College. The remit of the NJNC is, "to jointly agree terms on issues, such as pay and terms and conditions of employment in Scotland's colleges in partnership with the trade unions".

## **Middle East**

Palestinian medics have ended their weeks-long strikes and protests in the West Bank. This week Palestinian Prime Minister, Muhammad Shtayyeh announced at his cabinet meeting in Ramallah a deal agreed with the Palestine Doctors' Association over enhanced salary payments, but no details were given.

It was agreed deductions made when medics were on strike will be refunded. This applies to doctors in hospitals, and medical and emergency centres.

Sunday saw protests in 13 cities across Iran including Tehran, Haft-Tapeh and Bandar Abbas by welfare organisation retirees and pensioners. They are calling for increased pensions. Their meagre pensions are being eroded by escalating inflation.

## **Africa**

Doctors at Sennar Hospital in Sudan have been on strike since April 29. They are demanding an end to the shortage of medicine, underfunding, lack of security, and the likelihood of a health disaster due to a lack of oxygen and hospital beds as a third wave of COVID-19 spreads across Sudan.

Medicines for the treatment of cancer, kidney diseases, heart problems, and diabetes are in short supply and will run out soon.

On May 8, the strike committee announced that the strike would be lifted in emergency departments after authorities agreed to some of the doctors' demands. Similar strikes took place at several other Sudanese hospitals.

Sudan has 34,272 reported cases of COVID-19 and 2,446 deaths.

South African bus drivers are continuing their stoppage at the city-

owned Metrobus in Johannesburg, with the company threatening a complete shutdown of services Monday as the strike entered its second week.

Over 100 Democratic Municipal and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (Demawusa) members are demanding an 18 percent pay rise, long service bonus, COVID-19 allowance, transport allowance and the reinstatement of dismissed employees. They have appealed to fellow workers to join them in the dispute but the majority South African Municipal Workers' Union (Samwu) with 700 members refused, preferring to negotiate separately.

Last week, Metrobus used police escorts to ensure services continued claiming strikers used intimidation. Demawusa deny this and accuse Samwu of undermining their strike by collaborating with the employer and police.

Almost 200 workers at Vital Health Foods vitamin and supplement manufacturers in Cape Town, South Africa went on strike May 3 to demand a 10 percent rise and a guaranteed 13th cheque for the next ten years.

The UASA union members worked throughout the pandemic, contributing to the huge profits made by the company when sales of vitamin c and zinc rocketed as people sought to strengthen their immune system.

The company offered 6.5 percent with a guaranteed 13th cheque for the next two years.

South African workers at a cleaning firm subcontracted to the City of Cape Town municipality barricaded roads in the Mitchell Plains suburb with burning tyres and rubble May 4 in protest over unpaid wages.

The 18 street cleaners at Bhebbetha Holdings say their pay is often late causing them to rely on money lenders.

Workers at the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), the state-owned national broadcaster, walked out April 22 on indefinite strike to demand improvements in their pay and working conditions.

NBC has about 600 employees involved in both TV and radio broadcasts, many of whom are on monthly contracts without any security, including around 60 percent of news reporters.

Salaries for NBC employees are kept low while the 16 highest-paid managers awarded themselves N\$5.4 million in bonuses to. Director-general Stanley Similo was given a vehicle costing N\$2 million while workers were told the corporation had no money to ease their burden. Chronic understaffing means journalists are pressured to take on extra work.

The Namibia Public Workers Union has carried on fruitless negotiations with managers for at least two years. The union's ability to hold back the anger of their members has run out. Their demands are minimal, including a pay rise of only eight percent.

NBC chairperson Lazarus Jacobs threatened those on strike with a "hostile working environment", demanding an end to the walkout.

The International Federation of Journalists and its Namibian offshoot, the Namibia Media Professionals Union, proclaimed "solidarity" with the strikers, confining their appeals to management.

Staff from Oke-Ogun Polytechnic, in Saki, Oyo State took to the streets May 10 to protest against casualisation by the polytechnic's management. The protesters demonstrated in the town from 7 a.m., chanting solidarity songs. They gathered at the polytechnic gates at 10 am.

"[T]he state government is cheating us... About 187 of us (teaching and non-teaching), with families and dependents, [are] taking home less than N30,000 month."

The government produced a "white paper" on necessary improvements in 2019, but the recommendations were not implemented. The state government claimed lack of money.

A strike by workers of Gweru City Council, in the Midlands region of Zimbabwe, begun on March 9 ended the same day when the union ordered

a return to work. The city workers are demanding a pay rise that puts them above the poverty threshold.

The city council gave eight suspended union reps their jobs back after they agreed to a wage settlement. The eight sacked workers were local leaders of the Zimbabwe Urban Council Workers Union (ZUCWU).

Some workers were angered that the union signed an agreement without prior consultation with them.



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