

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.

National one-day postal strike in France over job cuts and pay

Workers at the French postal service La Poste took part in a one-day national strike on Tuesday to oppose job cuts and demand a pay rise. *France Bleu* reports that in the department of Sarthe, where La Poste has 1,200 workers, “212 jobs have been lost in the past five years following closures of local sorting offices.”

The Stalinist General Confederation of Labour (CGT), which called the strike with Workers Force (FO) and the Union Syndicale Solidaires, said it followed many local strikes and protests by La Poste workers against working conditions and job cuts during the pandemic.

French anaesthetists and other hospital workers strike for pay rise

A national strike of anaesthetists took place in France on Monday to demand salary increases, including a raise taking account of the specialist two-year training they require on top of a three-year medical course. *France Bleu* reports that the 11,000 anaesthetists in France were called out by the CGT.

The one-day stoppage follows a national strike in intensive care units on May 11, and further strikes on Tuesday of hospital lab technicians, pharmacists and dieticians called by the French Democratic Confederation of Labour and FO unions. Workers in these also demanded their salary be adjusted in recognition of the amount of training these specialties require.

Workers oppose thousands of job cuts at Spanish bank BBVA

A campaign of protests and partial strikes has begun over plans by major Spanish bank BBVA to cut nearly 3,500 jobs. On May 10, 6,000 people took part in demonstrations in 15 Spanish cities called by the General Union of Workers (UGT), Workers’ Commissions and Banking Board Association unions in support of the BBVA workers, according to *Europa Press*.

This week saw another national protest of workers in 18 Spanish cities on Monday evening, and in four cities in Galicia on Wednesday. Partial strikes are planned for May 25 and 31, and a single 24-hour strike on June 2, which the unions say they hope will bring pressure in their negotiations

with the company.

Striking Nissan workers in Barcelona, Spain protest plant closure

Around 800 strikers from car maker Nissan’s plant in Barcelona, Spain protested in the city centre on May 13, reports *Crónica*. An indefinite strike of workers at eight subcontractors at the plant resumed on May 3, after being suspended for dialogue with Nissan.

The demonstrators demanded a reindustrialisation strategy to protect jobs at the facility, following Nissan’s announcement that production will end there on December 31.

Unions at the plant have formed a commission with the companies subcontracted at the plant and the local government, but this commission has not proposed to save jobs.

National strike against H&M redundancies in Spain enters third week

Workers in Spanish branches of multinational retailer H&M are in the third week of their strike against an “ERE” redundancy plan, which would cut almost 1,100 jobs nationwide and close 30 stores. After walkouts on different days in different parts of the country last week, H&M workers across Spain took part in simultaneous stoppages on Wednesday and Friday.

Crónica reports the UGT, one of the unions involved in the dispute, has called for the company to add an extra 45 days of redundancy pay per year worked to its redundancy offer, and to convert some of the layoffs into “voluntary” redundancies.

Students in Barcelona protest unpaid internships and tuition fees

Hundreds of students at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) in Spain took part in protests and a student strike last week, demanding the price of undergraduate and masters degrees be equalised and that all student internships be paid, among other demands.

On May 12, around 150 students picketed the main UAB campus, with the university reporting few attending classes, according to *Europa Press*. The following day, between 500 and 1,000 students participated in a protest in Barcelona arranged by the Student Union of the Catalan Countries.

The two-day protests followed the end of the occupation of the

University of Barcelona's rectory building last month, after which the Catalan Association of Public Universities agreed to negotiate with the students.

Dutch freight drivers continue dispute over pay and conditions

Lorry drivers in the Netherlands held another one-day stoppage on May 14, demanding a new collective agreement for the over 150,000 workers in the professional goods transport sector, reports the *Leeuwarder Courant*. The first one-day strike took place on April 12, called by the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions and the Christian National Trade Union Federation.

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 heating units in cabs.

Week of protests against student loans in the Netherlands

This week students in the Netherlands held a series of protests to demand an end to the system of student loans introduced in 2015.

The *Reformatorisch Dagblad* reports that there were demonstrations in Wageningen, Groningen and Utrecht on Tuesday, in Rotterdam on Wednesday, with protests planned for Nijmegen on Friday and Leiden on Saturday. A national student strike is planned for June 3, as part of the campaign to demand grants instead of loans.

Polish nurses and midwives protest against poor working conditions and low pay

On May 12, nurses and midwives marched through the streets of the Polish capital Warsaw to protest their working conditions, which have deteriorated through the pandemic, and the low salaries of their professions. According to *Gazeta Olsztyńska*, the immediate trigger for the demonstration was an amendment to the minimum wage law which did not increase nurses' wages at all.

The National Trade Union of Nurses and Midwives reported that 160 nurses and midwives died from COVID-19 last year, and that Poland has only 5.7 nurses per 1,000 people.

Workers at Georgian bottling plant strike to improve wages and staffing levels

Around 400 workers at the Borjomi mineral water bottling plant in Georgia began a strike on Tuesday, to demand an increase in wages, staffing levels and overtime pay, reports *First Channel*.

Following a meeting between strikers and management, in which the company announced it would bring in employees from other regions to break the strike, the workers picketed the plant overnight. The workers oppose the company cutting wages during the pandemic, which together with high inflation rates has reduced their incomes by almost 50 percent.

Georgian gig economy couriers protest changes to payments

Couriers in Georgia for the multinational gig economy platform Glovo held protests on Sunday, in response to changes in the payment and bonuses paid through the app. *Agenda.ge* reports a rally of 50 workers took place in Tbilisi.

Strike against job cuts at IBM in Belgium

On May 12, Belgian workers at the technology company IBM joined a one-day strike in response to almost 200 planned job losses.

The company was negotiating restructuring with the unions at IBM, reports *RTBF*, but the unions called the strike after complaining management had not "set objective, transparent and measurable criteria for voluntary redundancies."

National transport strike in Italy called off

A planned one-day stoppage on Monday of workers across the Italian state-owned railway infrastructure company Rete Ferroviaria Italiana (RFI) was cancelled by the Italian Transport Federation union after an agreement was reached with the company to hire 1,000 new staff.

Corriere reports RFI also agreed to bring some of its outsourced activities back in-house, but the union is still negotiating with the company over the maintenance model, after an increasing rate of rail accidents in 2020.

Court officers in Portugal begin campaign of partial stoppages over low pay and staffing

Court officers in the Union of Justice Officials (SFJ) across Portugal began a 30-day campaign of one-hour daily strikes on Monday. According to *Impala News*, the SFJ denounced low pay and a constant reduction in staffing levels.

Panasqueira miners in Portugal end strike with wage agreement

The STIM union called off the strike of miners at the Panasqueira Mines in Covilhã, Portugal after reaching an agreement with Beralt Tin over its demand for a pay rise. A series of daily two-hour stoppages were planned to begin May 24 after the company refused the request for a 6.05 percent pay increase, but *Lusa* reports a deal was reached for a rise of between 27.50 and 30 euros per week.

Former Debenhams workers blockade store in Limerick, Ireland

On Monday, around 100 people in Limerick, Ireland, blocked an attempt by liquidators KPMG to remove stock from the former Debenhams store, which was closed in April 2020 when Debenhams shut all its Irish stores.

According to *breakingnews.ie*, former staff have picketed the Limerick store for over 400 days demanding Debenhams honour an agreement to provide two additional weeks of redundancy pay per year worked at the company, despite an injunction granted in October to prevent such picketing.

Despite a heavy police presence and the arrest of many protesters, the liquidators were forced to abandon their attempt.

Public utility workers in Sarajevo begin hunger strike over unpaid wages

After two months of receiving no wages, a dozen workers at the Cantonal Public Utility Company (KJKP GRAS) in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina began a hunger strike on Tuesday.

According to *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, KJKP GRAS is owned by the Canton of Sarajevo, but owes massive debts to the federal government, which led to a two-day strike last year when the company's accounts were blocked and workers went another two months without pay.

The union at KJKP GRAS said that if wage arrears are not paid by Friday, it will organise a strike of transport workers.

Stoppages by ScotRail staff in Scotland for equal overtime pay to continue

Several hundred train conductors working for Scottish rail transport company ScotRail have extended their programme of stoppages to June 20. They have held strikes each Sunday since the end of March, and have been joined in the dispute by ticket examiners.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members are protesting being paid a lower rate of overtime than train drivers, and are working to rule. The RMT accuses ScotRail of endangering safety by drafting in managers, who lack the necessary safety training and knowledge, to replace the striking conductors.

The RMT recently betrayed the struggle against driver-only operated trains (DOO) at South Western Railway, 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.

Walkouts by local authority workers at three English councils over jobs, pay and conditions

Around 170 UK environmental workers who provide street cleaning and ground maintenance services in Norwich are to walk out May 26 until June 2. They are employed by Norwich City Council arm's length company Norwich City Services Ltd (NCSL).

They were transferred to NCSL from outsource company Norse, and promised their pay and conditions would be brought in line with directly employed council staff. Instead, they were offered a derisory 20p an hour pay rise. Unite members voted by 83 percent on a 90 percent turnout, while Unison members voted by 81 percent on an 84 percent turnout.

A strike is continuing by around 100 refuse collection workers at Thurrock council in Essex. The Unite union members began their stoppage on April 13, in response to proposals by the Conservative-controlled council to cut overtime rates, bank holiday pay and night shift premiums, leaving them between £1,200 and £3,800 a year worse off. Initially they worked 6am to 9am each day, but since May 10 have taken part in a complete stoppage.

Last week, Unite announced the strike will continue until June 18. The council set up collection points for households to drop off waste bags.

In the west London borough of Ealing, more than 40 traffic enforcement officers who oversee parking regulations are now in the second week of nine-day walkout. The Unite members work for contractor Serco, which has been trying to impose a restructuring and redundancy programme since 2019. They accuse the company of unfairly dismissing workers and call for the programme to be renegotiated.

Glass workers strike at company in England over pay and conditions

A four-day strike by 170 UK workers at the ENCIRC glass bottle and distribution centre in Elton, Cheshire began on Wednesday, following a 48-hour strike last week.

A previous proposed strike was suspended after Unite put a revised offer from the company to the workforce. The offer was rejected, and stoppages went ahead. Workers voted by a 95 percent majority to walk out.

They are protesting new work practices which adversely affect pay and flexibility in taking leave, and reduced staff levels leading to health and safety concerns. The new conditions leave them at a disadvantage compared to employees at other ENCIRC sites. A further four-day strike is due to begin May 26.

London ferry workers strike against pay and victimisation

Fifty-seven workers on the Woolwich ferry, which operates across the UK capital's river Thames, walked out on May 14. The Unite members are protesting the victimisation of a union rep and the non-implementation of an agreed new pay and reward scheme.

The ferry is run by Transport for London. Under previous owner, Briggs Marine Contractors Ltd, there was a long running dispute over allegations of management bullying. Further stoppages are planned for May 24 and 28, and June 1, 4, 7, 11 and 21.

UK biomedics at Lancashire hospital trust to step up action over pay

Biomedical scientists at the East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust at Burnley and Blackburn hospitals in northwest England are to step up their programme of industrial action. They will begin an all-out strike on May 31, until June 21. They were working core hours Monday to Friday, and refusing to provide emergency cover, or work nights, weekends and late

shifts.

The 21 Unite members, who voted by an 85 percent majority for the stoppages, are in a long-running dispute over the hospital trust's reneging on a 2019 agreement to upgrade their pay. They lost money ranging from hundreds of pounds up to £8,000 as a result of the failure to upgrade their pay.

The biomedical scientists are responsible for analysing patient blood samples. It would be difficult for the Royal Blackburn to maintain its Accident and Emergency department during a prolonged strike.

Walkouts planned by London bus drivers over remote sign on

Around 4,000 bus drivers working for two Metroline bus companies, Metroline Travel and Metroline West in the UK capital are set to hold a 48-hour strike beginning May 25, and a three-day strike beginning June 7. The stoppages will affect over 100 routes and 16 bus depots.

The Unite members oppose plans by Metroline to introduce a remote sign on (RSO) procedure. Rather than signing on at a bus depot, drivers will meet their bus en route. This will lengthen the working day and present health and safety concerns. Drivers would have no access to toilet and canteen facilities and could face parking difficulties for their own vehicles.

Metroline postponed the introduction of RSO while a review is carried out, but has no plans to drop the proposal. The Metroline drivers voted last October by over 95 percent to strike against the proposals.

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

Drivers at London Sovereign and Quality Line, also RATP subsidiaries, walked out 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 died from COVID-19 after working in unsafe conditions.

This week Unite ended the eleven-week dispute of 400 workers at Go North West in Manchester against the company's fire and rehire policy. The union negotiated a sellout deal which includes a longer working day leading to job cuts, unpaid meal breaks, concessions on sick pay and compulsory overtime if a bus runs late.

Ballot of UK job centre staff on return to unsafe workplace ends Friday

A consultative ballot of UK job centre staff who are being pressured into returning to work in the office ends Friday. The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) members are concerned more staff will be forced into face-to-face interviews despite the danger of COVID-19 infection.

Many job centre workers were conducting interviews from home via phone. A survey conducted by the PCS showed 79 percent of members had concerns about returning to work in the office.

Mobility aid workers at plant in Dudley, England to ballot for strike action over pay

Workers employed by Sunrise Medical company in Dudley are to ballot for strike action. The company makes mobility wheelchairs, scooters and other mobility aids. The ballot opened May 13 and runs until May 27. The Unite members are seeking a pay increase, rejecting management's offer.

UK Veolia commercial waste workers to ballot over pay freeze

Workers employed by the Veolia commercial refuse collection company at 25 depots across the UK are balloting for possible strike action. The ballot will run May 21-June 7. The Unite members oppose the company's imposition of a pay freeze for 2021, following a pay freeze in 2020. The workers are around £20 a week worse off in real terms.

UK education workers continue struggles

Following 20 strike days since December 2020 by teaching staff at the Leaways Special school in Hackney, London, National Education Union (NEU) rep Iain Forsyth has been reinstated. The Kedleston group also agreed to pay sick pay for 10 days a year and to recognise the union. In addition, staff will be paid in line with national pay scales from September.

Leaways is a special needs independent school run by the Kedleston group, providing for children aged 7-17 with Autistic Spectrum Disorder and Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs. Forsyth was sacked after complaining to management about work conditions, including sick pay, which was only being paid for only seven days in a year. Staff were also unhappy with the lack of provision for students, which is fully funded by the authority.

Around 100 teachers at City and Islington sixth form college in London held a one-day stoppage on May 12. The NEU members protested the additional workload due to proposals that teachers work additional evenings and afternoons interviewing prospective students.

Staff at Nottingham Academy, Sneinton, Nottingham (part of the Greenwood Academies Trust) who walked out on May 11 were due to strike Tuesday and Thursday this week. The NEU members oppose a forced reorganisation by school management. This would be the second such reorganisation in two years, meaning teachers competing with colleagues in applying for their own jobs. Unsuccessful teachers would be forced to leave the school.

Walkout by workers at Hovis bakery in Northern Ireland over pay parity

Around 200 bakery workers at the Hovis bread bakery Apollo Road, Belfast in Northern Ireland began an all-out strike May 14. The Unite and Bakers Union members are seeking pay parity with Hovis bread bakery workers in Great Britain. That would mean around a ten percent pay increase, but they were offered three percent.

Police turned up at the picket line in force on Monday, ostensibly to ensure COVID-19 precautions were observed. The bakery bakes around 50 percent of the bread consumed in the province, and the strike led to severe shortages.

National Health Service workers plan protest march in Scotland to demand higher pay

A protest march to the seat of the Scottish government at Holyrood, Edinburgh in support of the campaign calling for a 15 percent pay rise for National Health Service (NHS) staff has been organised for Saturday June 5. The Scottish National Party government proposed a four percent rise. This was accepted in a ballot of Unison members, but rejected by GMB and RCN members.

Strike of cement workers at Iranian factory over wage arrears

Saturday marked the fifth day of a walkout by workers at the Jevin Cement Factory in Sabzevar in northeast Iran. They are protesting poor working conditions and wage arrears. That day, service workers in Abadan and Khoramshahr industrial townships walked out over non-payment of wages. In response management threatened to sack them.

Nigerian state government threatens to arrest workers on strike against mass sackings in Kaduna state

Major parts of Kaduna state, Nigeria are without electricity due to a five-day warning strike begun May 16 against the sacking of 7,000 state government employees. Airports, hospitals, schools and other public facilities are closed. Commercial banks, transporters, traders, petrol station attendants and others joined the strike.

On Tuesday, armed thugs threw objects at protesters marching round the Nipa roundabout in the Kaduna metropolis.

Kaduna State head of service, Bariatu Yusuf Mohammed denounced the strike as illegal and said the sackings would not be reversed. State governor Nasir El-Rufai declared the president of the Nigerian Labour Congress Ayuba Wabba and other union executives are wanted for “economic sabotage,” and threatened to arrest strikers.

Strike against government in Mali brings banks and government offices to a standstill

A four-day strike from May 17 by workers in Malian banks and government departments has brought much of the country to a halt. Workers are opposing the army-dominated government, installed after military officers seized power in August.

Most workers at the treasury and the departments of customs and taxes joined the strike, called by the National Union of Malian Workers (UNTM). UNTM official Ousmane Traore said that “[i]n all regions of Mali and in Bamako, the administration is paralysed.”

The current “transitional government” is a front for military rule, backed by French imperialism. Coup leader Assimi Goita is the “interim” vice president.

Ugandan medical interns begin sit-down strike over pay and

conditions

Around 1,400 medical interns from 42 hospitals in Uganda began a sit-down strike on May 17, in opposition to low pay and poor conditions.

Interns include doctors, nurses, pharmacists and dental surgeons with only provisional licenses to practise medicine. In Uganda they treat up to 80 percent of the patients attending hospital.

The Federation for Uganda Medical Interns (FUMI) called on the government to increase monthly salaries for doctors and pharmacists from Shs750,000 to Shs3m, and for nurses from Shs750,000 to Shs2.2m. FUMI said that the figures were in line with recommendations by the Parliament Health Committee in 2019 that had never been implemented.

Interns told the media they were “frustrated, depressed and living in unsafe houses in slums.” They complained of not being able to eat lunch at the hospital. The government response was to claim lack of money and ask for “patience.”

Broadcast workers at Namibian Broadcast Corporation continue stoppage for pay increase, better conditions and permanent contracts

Broadcast workers at the Namibian Broadcast Corporation (NBC) are continuing their strike begun April 22. The Namibia Public Workers Union members are demanding an eight percent salary increase, better transport, accommodation and medical aid allowances. They also want monthly contract workers to be made permanent.

Striking workers in pay dispute disrupt teaching at South African university

Over 300 workers at Sefako Makgatho Health Services University in Pretoria, South Africa have been on strike since May 10.

The National Health Education and Allied Workers Union members are demanding a six percent pay increase rather than the 3.5 percent offered by management. They have demonstrated daily by burning tyres at the university entrance.



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