

# 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.*

## Civil servants and seamen walk out to oppose anti-strike law in Greece

Workers in Greece are opposing a new draft labour law bill restricting the right to strike and attacking working conditions. The law would require a third of employees at state-run companies to remain on the job during a strike, as well as restricting the ability to picket entrances and occupy premises. According to *Kathimerini*, the major unions also criticised the bill for targeting the eight-hour day and enabling unpaid overtime.

On Thursday, Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY) and Panhellenic Seaman's Federation members joined a 24-hour strike against the law, and another one-day strike is planned by the General Confederation of Employees of Greece (GSEE) on June 10. The unions, with 730,000 members in total, are trying to limit the opposition to one-day protest strikes, with the GSEE calling a one-day walkout on May 4 and ADEDY doing the same on May 6.

The New Democracy conservative government is turning to dictatorial methods to stem workers' opposition as it reopens the economy regardless of COVID cases rising.

## National student strike in the Netherlands against loan system

Students across the Netherlands took part in a "student strike" on Thursday. They boycotted classes, following a call from the National Student Union (LSVb) and youth section of the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV).

A week of protests at individual universities took place last month, to demand the reintroduction of grants and abolition of the student loan system.

According to the *Leidsch Dagblad*, both the LSVb and FNV intend to place pressure on politicians through these protests, following previous reforms in which the loan system was left intact.

## Unions sign new collective agreement for Dutch logistics sector following strike campaign

A new collective agreement has been signed by the FNV and the Christian National Trade Union Federation for the logistics sector, covering over 150,000 workers. Lorry drivers and other logistics workers took part in several 24-hour strikes since the beginning of April to put pressure on the negotiations.

*De Telegraaf* reports that the two-year agreement contains improvements to working conditions, such as heaters and air conditioners in the cabs, as well as easier early retirement and a 3.5 percent pay rise for 2021 and a 3.25 increase in 2022.

## Warning strike by German brewery workers for pay rise

Workers in breweries throughout northern Germany took part in a 24-hour warning strike on May 26, called by the Food, Beverages and Catering Union (NGG) in support of its collective bargaining demands. According to the *Hamburger Abendblatt*, strikes took place in the cities of Bremen, Hamburg, Flensburg and Lübz.

The current offer from the brewing industry representatives is a one-off 500-euro bonus and a pay freeze, but the NGG is demanding a 4.5 percent wage rise.

## Strikes in Spain against job losses at BBVA as union negotiates redundancies

This week, workers at major Spanish bank BBVA continued a campaign of strikes against plans to cut around 3,500 jobs.

*Europa Press* reports that the majority of workers at the bank took part in a two-hour strike on May 31, following a similar one-hour stoppage on May 25. The first and only full-day walkout took place on Wednesday, called by the Workers Commissions (CCOO), Banking Board Association and General Union of Workers.

In negotiations with the company, due to end Friday, the CCOO accepted over 3,300 job losses, merely seeking to negotiate more favourable redundancy terms.

## Firefighters in Jaén, Spain continue strike against cuts to staffing and services

Firefighters in the Andalusian city of Jaén have been on strike for over a month. They are opposing cuts to hours and services threatened by the

Socialist Party-led city council, as well as ongoing staffing levels, which are dangerously low.

The 67 firefighters and five administrative staff say that according to the government's own documents, there should be an extra 25 staff members in the force, reports *Europa Press*.

The strikers refused to perform any non-emergency tasks but adhered to minimum service requirements, which still leaves them too busy to take rest days.

The city council cited the high cost of 28,000 overtime hours in 2019 for the cuts, but the strike committee points out that cutting these hours without hiring extra staff will undermine the city's safety. Revealing the plans, the council official in charge of personnel denounced the "privilege" of the workers and complained of "a rigid work system... that only allowed 24-hour shifts and squads of 14 firefighters."

#### **Nissan workers in Spain protest over closure of Barcelona plants**

Workers from the Nissan factories in Barcelona, Spain protested on May 28 against the planned closure of the facilities in Catalonia at the end of this year. They demanded a reindustrialisation plan to save jobs.

*Crónica* reports that a demonstration around the plant was joined by hundreds of workers, who walked out for two hours. Since May 3, workers at eight subcontractors to the car maker have taken strike action, and autoworkers at the company itself have joined numerous protests.

#### **Public sector workers across France strike against law on working hours**

Workers in public services such as school canteens and nurseries throughout France staged walkouts last week to denounce a new law increasing their annual working hours.

The major unions called local one-day stoppages against the law, which would cost many workers a week of leave, but isolated them from each other. *France Bleu* reports that around 2,000 public servants in Rouen went on a one-day strike on May 27, a walkout was called in Clermont-Ferrand on May 25, and around 100 workers took part in a strike on May 29 in Rennes.

#### **New strike of French school workers supporting children with disabilities over pay, contracts and staffing levels**

"AESCH" workers in France, who support students with disabilities attending school, held a second one-day strike on Thursday. They are demanding a pay rise, to be moved to full-time contracts, and increased recruitment into the profession.

The stoppage follows one organised on April 8 by the six unions involved. In a press release the unions denounce ministers for failing to resume discussions, but have limited their opposition so far to two isolated 24-hour strikes.

#### **Protests against closure of auto plant in Caudan, France**

On May 29, around 1,500 people in the commune of Hennebont, France, protested against the planned closure of the Fonderie de Bretagne auto foundry in nearby Caudan, according to *20 Minutes*.

Workers at the plant have blockaded the foundry since April 27, following Renault's announcement of its closure. Renault took the General Confederation of Labour to court to demand the blockade was lifted, and *Ouest-France* reports that a hundred strikers from the Fonderie de Bretagne protested outside the court on Tuesday.

The closure of the plant would mean 340 job losses, and other auto plants across France are threatened with closure, threatening over 1,000 more redundancies. Workers at the MBF Aluminium foundry in Saint-Claude are currently demanding that the Dijon Tribunal of Commerce find a buyer for the plant, and threatened to blow up the factory if it is permanently closed.

#### **Workers at flour mill in Georgia continue strike for improved wages and conditions**

Workers at the Guria Express flour mill in the town of Ozurgeti, Georgia, have been on strike since May 3, demanding improved conditions.

*First Channel* reports that at a rally strikers denounced their treatment by management at the mill, and demanded a wage increase, health insurance and improved working conditions.

Like the strike of 3,000 miners in Chiatura, the workers hired a lawyer to protect their rights during their walkout rather than working through a trade union, although the Georgian Trade Union Confederation has offered verbal and financial support for the strike.

#### **Further strikes at Elica extractor hood manufacturer plant in Fabriano, Italy against redundancies**

On May 28, around 100 workers at multinational extractor hood manufacturer Elica walked out for eight hours in the town of Fabriano, Italy, reports *ANSA*. The stoppage was called by three unions at the plant to oppose plans to cut 409 jobs.

The unions announced a limited campaign comprising only 16 hours of strike action. Another four-hour stoppage took place on May 24.

Elica, which employs around 4,800 internationally, also announced plans to close its plant in Cerreto D'Esi and move production away from three of its Italian sites.

#### **Third strike of vehicle and driver registration staff at UK headquarters in Wales over COVID safety**

Workers at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) headquarters in Swansea, Wales began their third four-day stoppage on Wednesday.

Around 3,300 Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members previously walked out for four days in April and May over lack of basic COVID safety measures at the site. It marked the first major industrial action at a UK workplace over coronavirus safety. More than 600 positive COVID cases were reported at the DVLA's offices.

Up to 2,500 staff were required to attend their workplace in person, despite more than 20 percent of those in the office catching coronavirus. At least one employee at the site died after testing positive for COVID. During the first lockdown, workers were able to work remotely.

PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka said a deal—all but agreed to end the dispute—was withdrawn at the last minute by the Department of Transport without explanation.

#### **Strikes continue at Jacobs Douwe Egberts plant, England against “fire and rehire” as workers receive dismissal notices**

UK workers at Jacobs Douwe Egberts coffee producing factory in Banbury, Oxfordshire facing “fire and rehire” on inferior terms received dismissal notices on Wednesday.

The 271 Unite members face losing up to £12,000 a year, unsocial shift patterns, slashed overtime rates and unpaid breaks. They have taken two 24-hour strikes, and began an overtime ban on May 1. Further 24-hour strikes are planned for June 5, 10, 13 and 16.

Unite national officer for the food industry Joe Clarke said, “This move comes on the back of an unprecedented level of commitment by our members throughout the COVID crisis keeping the nation supplied with coffee, as demand soared by an estimated 40 percent.”

The focus of the union has been to get “fire and rehire” off the table. In Manchester, at Go North West bus company this allowed Unite to claim a victory after an 11 week strike while they signed a sellout deal with the company.

Jacobs Douwe Egberts is part of the transnational JDE Peet’s, the world’s largest coffee and tea producer.

#### **Rally and strike against redundancies by UK Liverpool university lecturers at Health and Life Sciences Faculty**

Around 150 staff and students rallied May 25, in University Square Liverpool, England in support of striking staff in the Health and Life Sciences Faculty.

The 1,300 University and College Union (UCU) members walked out May 10, after an 84 percent vote for a three-week strike over proposed redundancies. The strike follows a programme of working contracted hours and boycotting voluntary activities.

The university initially proposed to axe 47 jobs, although this was reduced to 32. The university devised so-called “rank and yank” criteria to select academics deemed to be the worst performing. UCU members have condemned the criteria as “statistically innumerate.”

Among those slated for redundancy are academics who have carried out leading research on COVID. One striker speaking to WSWS reporters described these redundancies during the pandemic as “baffling” and “completely inhuman”. He also condemned the privatisation of education, saying, “We spend all this public money on research, and then the profits are reaped by shareholders and people who are already very wealthy.”

Louise Kenny, executive pro vice-chancellor at Liverpool is cutting jobs while selling her luxury property in Ireland for 3.5 million euros. The university vice chancellor Janet Beer is paid an annual salary of £410,000, according to the *Liverpool Echo*.

The UCU sold out national strikes in 2018 and 2020 over pay and pensions, and has refused to oppose marketisation and redundancies in a joint struggle across the education sector.

#### **Academics’ dispute in defence of jobs at Leicester University, England diverted into a boycott by union as workers face redundancies at many universities**

The struggle by staff at the University of Leicester against job losses is being isolated and betrayed by the UCU.

In April, academics voted by 70 percent to strike, and by 84 percent for action short of striking. Staff worked to contract and refused additional tasks, attending meetings over 50 minutes, and a marking and assessment boycott.

The employer served redundancy notices on 26 staff members on May 11. The response of the UCU is to announce a global academic boycott of the university.

On its website, the UCU also lists redundancy threats including course closures at the following universities in England: Aston, Birmingham City, Hull, Kent, Kingston, Leeds, London South Bank, New City College, the Universities of Chester and Sheffield, University College Birmingham, and the University of the Creative Arts in Farnham. All face job losses, but the UCU refuses to fight for united strike action.

#### **Stoppage by UK prison educators at 49 prisons over COVID safety concerns**

UK prison education workers walked out on May 11/12, at 49 prisons and young offender institutes in a dispute over COVID health and safety.

The UCU members, who provide education and skills training in prisons, are in dispute with employer Novus for disciplining educators for raising health and safety concerns around COVID. Deaths in prison are three times higher from the virus than in the general population.

Talks at government arbitration service Acas have failed. Novus is the largest provider of prison education in England.

#### **Teachers strike at four independent schools in Coventry, England over job losses**

Teachers at four private schools in Coventry, England went on the first of 10 strike days on May 23, against potential job losses from merger plans.

The NASUWT union members work at Bablake School, Bablake Junior School, King Henry VIII School and King Henry VIII Prep School, part of the Coventry Schools Foundation.

According to Dr Patrick Roach, NASUWT general secretary, said, “The employer has failed to undertake any adequate consultation with its staff or the NASUWT on what these proposed changes will mean for teachers.”

#### **School staff at school in UK capital to strike against victimisation of colleagues**

Teachers and support staff at Oaks Park High School in the London

borough of Redbridge are to strike on June 15, with two days of action the following week, and three days the week after. Legal action is planned against the school and the council.

The National Education Union (NEU) members are striking in defence of four colleagues victimised for refusing to be in “an unsafe workplace” during the second wave of the pandemic in January, in line with Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996.

NEU regional officer Glenn Kelly says the school told the workers “they will not have jobs in September” following their request not to work on site. When Oaks Park threatened they would be in breach of contract and face disciplinary action or a pay cut, NEU members supported the workers. It is claimed the local authority then agreed to them working from home.

Kelly said the school is “seeking to wreak revenge” by ending the workers’ contracts. One has already lost his/her job, and the other three will go in July.

### **UK biomedical scientists at two Lancashire hospitals strike over underpayment**

Biomedical scientists at the NHS East Lancashire Trust, England began three weeks’ continuous strike action against underpayment on May 31. The 21 workers at the Royal Blackburn Hospital and Burnley General Teaching Hospital had been on strike during night, weekend and late shifts since May 7.

The strike will delay test results across the Trust.

The Unite union members are reportedly owed backpay ranging from several hundred pounds to £8,000. The workers have been trying to redress underpayment since 2010. In 2019, the Trust agreed to upgrade them from band 5 to band 6 on the NHS Agenda for Change pay scale, but reneged on that agreement.

According to Unite, the Trust set aside £150,000 to pay a scab workforce to undermine the strike. Unite regional officer Keith Hutson called on the Trust to “return to the negotiating table and agree to pay our members the money they are owed.”

### **Leicestershire engineers in England strike over “fire and rehire” contract changes**

Around 30 field service engineers at the Ashby, Leicestershire branch of Brush Electrical Machines (BEM), England began a three-month stoppage, to last from May 25 to August 16. Unite said its members were threatened with the sack “unless they sign contracts that will see them being paid well below the industry standard.”

The engineers, who service generators around the world, face proposed changes to their contracts that would reduce overtime rates, allowances, holidays and other terms and conditions. According to Unite, the changes would result in a pay cut of between £10,000 and £15,000 a year.

The Unite regional officer said engineers had continued to travel globally for the company during the pandemic, “even though they had to spend weeks quarantining in solitary confinement to do so.” Their reward was “fire and rehire pay cuts.”

### **BCM Fareva workers’ strike vote in Nottingham, England against**

### **“fire and rehire”**

Workers at BCM Fareva, the manufacturer of consumer pharma and beauty products based in Nottingham, England voted by 92 percent on a 61 percent turnout for strike action against proposed new contracts.

The company wants to slash terms and conditions, including sick pay and redundancy payment provisions. It threatened to fire and rehire staff if agreement cannot be reached on the proposals—“before we had even started discussions,” said Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) national officer Daniel Adams. USDAW called on the company to withdraw the fire and rehire threat to prevent the strike.

### **Sunrise Medical workers in Dudley, England set strike dates over pay**

Workers at electric wheelchair maker Sunrise Medical called four days of strike action at the Brierley Hill factory in Dudley, England. The stoppages on June 14, 18, 21, and 25 were called following the breakdown of pay talks.

The Unite members are seeking a three percent pay increase and an additional holiday on Christmas Eve.

Unite regional officer Su Lowe stated the union’s willingness to call off the dispute “either by Sunrise Medical returning to the negotiating table with an improved offer or through constructive talks brokered by [government mediation service] Acas.”

### **DHL logistics workers in Long Eaton, England to strike over redundancy terms**

USDAW members at DHL’s Long Eaton distribution centre voted by 90 percent to take 24-hour strike action on June 9.

The site, which operates a third-party logistics contract for retailer Marks & Spencer, is due to close at the end of July. DHL is refusing demands that staff employed prior to July 2003 receive enhanced redundancy pay when it closes.

### **Bromley library staff in London to strike over late-night opening**

Workers at Bromley Central Library in London announced strike dates against plans for late-night library opening with fewer staff. From June 14 the workers will strike every evening from 6pm.

The 17 Unite union members voted unanimously to strike. Under changes to working hours proposed by employer Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL), staff would be forced to work four late nights every two weeks rather than the one night currently. Part-time staff, who are not currently required to work late nights, would be forced to work one night per week.

The proposed changes follow recent staff cuts, meaning fewer workers to cover longer hours. In June 2019, library staff began an indefinite strike across 14 GLL libraries in the London borough of Bromley against pay progression, restructuring and staff reduction. After eight months Unite settled a deal they claimed “protects jobs.”

## **Strikes continue at ScotRail in Scotland over pay**

ScotRail ticket examiners and conductors in Scotland are continuing their stoppages over pay rates for rest day working. Conductors have held strikes each Sunday since the end of March and were later joined by ticket examiners.

Further 24-hour strikes were announced for every Sunday from 13 June to 18 July inclusive.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members are protesting being paid a lower rate of overtime than train drivers. The RMT accused ScotRail of endangering safety by deploying managers without the necessary safety training to replace striking conductors.

The RMT has repeatedly called on the Scottish National Party government to resolve the dispute. Since March 2020, funding and management of the franchise have been in the hands of the government under operating company Abellio's Emergency Measures Agreement.

RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch threatened a "long summer" of strikes if the company do not "do the right thing." He said, "Instead of backing the bosses of a failed company and prolonging these disputes into the summer [the Scottish government] should be backing the rail worker heroes who have kept our railway moving during the pandemic." Lynch said the RMT is ready for talks "anytime, anyplace, anywhere."

In a separate dispute, two strike dates were announced for maintenance staff at ScotRail's Perth "outbase" for June 15 and 29. This follows a dispute over a manager who was disciplined and moved to another site. Pointing to inequality of treatment, RMT Scotland organiser Mick Hogg said, "If this was one of our members, they would be dismissed. It is one rule for managers and one rule for employees."

ScotRail said the "exhaustive" disciplinary investigation had involved the RMT.

The RMT and other unions are also balloting their members in a dispute over pay rises being made dependent on productivity improvements. Last week, workers at SERCO-run Caledonian Sleeper voted 85 percent to strike. The 11-day strike will run from June 15-26.

## **Scottish supermarket supply workers ballot for strike over "derecognition"**

Supply workers at XPO Logistics in Bellshill, Scotland, which services 54 Morrisons' supermarkets, are balloting for strike action over plans to axe 47 team managers from a key bargaining group.

The GMB union members fear the moves, which would weaken their bargaining position, could be a prelude to "fire and rehire" plans.

XPO, which claimed around £100 million in government furlough payments, classified its staff as "key workers" during the pandemic. It imposed full production on its workforce, including its 600 hourly-paid warehouse workers.

There was an outbreak of more than 60 cases at the Bellshill depot in February, following nearly 70 cases between September and December 2020. The GMB described it as an "avoidable catastrophe," with staff feeling "forced" to work because of the financial hardships imposed by sick pay cuts.

XPO docks the first three days' wages from any absence. The company said this was negotiated with the GMB.

## **Public sector walkout in Lebanon over poverty and unemployment**

Public services shut down in Lebanon May 23, as workers walked out to protest and demonstrate against poverty and unemployment.

The General Labour Union are calling for a "salvation government" as the economy is in freefall, leaving hundreds of thousands without jobs. The economic crisis was exacerbated by lockdowns and the explosion at Beirut Port in August.

Lebanon's currency has fallen since late 2019, as the Central Bank's dollar reserves dried up, used by the government to subsidise fuel, flour and medications.

Lebanon currently has a caretaker government.

## **Factory worker in Maseru, Lesotho killed by police during general strike over low pay**

A general strike to demand a 20 percent pay increase by 50,000 factory workers in the textile industry entered its second week.

Female striker, Motselisi Manase, was shot dead by police in Maseru, Lesotho after police attacked peaceful protests. The police used the excuse of clamping down on those acting "in contravention of COVID regulations" to justify their violence.

Tensions flared when the government brought in the International Labour Organisation to mediate, without the agreement of the unions. Reports cited damage to some businesses in the capital Maseru. Workers blocked roads with rocks, logs, rubbish bins and streetlamps, which the police cleared with water cannons. Armed police and the army were deployed.

Unions in Lesotho, including the National Clothing Textile and Allied Workers Union, say they cannot control their members, whose earnings lost value since the first lockdown. The price of cooking oil doubled. Unions pleaded with the government to make up for two missed increases in the minimum wage for 2020/21 and 2021/22—due to be granted by the government each April, but on hold indefinitely.

Last month, three workers shot by police rubber bullets were hospitalised. The majority—95 percent—of workers in the garment industry are women.

## **Further strike threat in Kaduna state, Nigeria against mass sackings in public sector**

Major parts of Kaduna state, Nigeria were without electricity after workers walked out on May 16, against the sacking of 7,000 state government employees. Airports, hospitals, schools and other public facilities closed. Commercial banks, transporters, traders, petrol station attendants and joined the strike.

The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), the trade union umbrella body, threatened to renew the five-day strike action in Kaduna State, while emphasising it was prepared to negotiate away the jobs and conditions.

The body that NLC would negotiate with is that led by governor Nasir El-Rufai, which threatened to jail NLC leaders and ordered its supporters to attack demonstrators.

The NLC stated that it would "continue to keep its doors open for dialogue and amicable resolution of the industrial crisis..."

## **Strike by Nigerian judicial workers enters eighth week**

The strike by Nigerian judicial workers entered its eighth week, and the Nigerian legal system, including the courts, remains closed.

The Judiciary Staff Union of Nigeria members are calling for the legislative arm of government to be given financial autonomy, and for an end to the corrupt practices through which state governments ensure that judges do their bidding.

Lawyers complain they are unable to run their businesses as most of their work depends on the courts being open. The courts were also shut down for much of last year due to the pandemic.

#### **Shop workers strike and protest against job cuts at major South African retailer Massmart**

Hundreds of employees at Massmart stores, majority-owned since 2010 by retail giant Walmart, stopped work and demonstrated in Durban and Johannesburg May 27, against store closures, reductions in working hours, demotions and redundancies. Massmart is the largest general merchandise, liquor and DIY retailer and wholesaler of basic foods in South Africa.

The South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union members are demanding the company halt the consultation process regarding job cuts, and re-engage the estimated 1,440 workers previously made redundant.

In Durban, hundreds of workers marched to Massmart's Game store, where 88 were made redundant, and then demonstrated outside city hall. In Johannesburg, hundreds of Massmart employees from across Gauteng province protested at the company's head office.

On Wednesday, Massmart said workers who protested must isolate for seven days by taking paid annual leave, unless they could prove they followed COVID preventative measures whilst demonstrating.

#### **Municipal workers in Tshwane, South Africa stoppage and march to demand wage increase**

More than 500 striking workers employed by the City of Tshwane municipality, Gauteng, South Africa marched through the centre of Pretoria Tuesday. They are demanding salary increases, housing allowances and a 25 percent pension contribution. They threaten total shutdown of services if their demands are not met within a week.

The South African Municipal Workers Union members are concerned they will not get annual pay rises after Tshwane's mayor said the city was financially bankrupt.



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