

Greek workers' 24-hour strikes against draconian labour laws; stoppages in hospitals across France over pay and staff shortages; trade unions betray Spanish bank workers' dispute, accept 2,700 job losses; Lesotho garment workers enter third week of pay strike

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

10 June 2021

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

Greek private sector workers strike against new anti-worker law

On Thursday, workers in the General Confederation of Employees of Greece (GSEE), the largest private sector trade union federation, joined a 24-hour national strike against a new labour law restricting the right to strike and attacking working conditions.

The major public sector union federation, the Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY), held a separate 24-hour strike on June 3. Both federations, with combined membership of 730,000 workers, also held separate, limited one-day strikes in May against the law.

According to the ANA-MPA and AP agencies, Thursday's strike included workers in public transport, seamen in the Panhellenic Seamen's Federation, and workers on passenger ferries, who joined the strike despite a court declaring their walkout illegal.

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. The bill also abolishes the eight-hour day, allowing employers to extend the working day to ten hours without paying overtime.

The New Democracy conservative government is turning to dictatorial methods to stem workers' opposition to its unsafe reopening of the economy amidst rising COVID cases. Fearful of the development of the class struggle, leader of the opposition pseudo-left SYRIZA-Progressive Alliance Alexis Tsipras said the bill would be "abolished as soon as a progressive government is given the opportunity to return society and the country to a direction of social cohesion," reports ANA-MPA.

The eight-hour day was undermined by the PASOK social-democratic government in 2011, which allowed 10-hour days to be written into collective contracts. When SYRIZA was in power in 2015, it not only failed to undo this, but betrayed the result of a referendum which overwhelmingly rejected austerity. SYRIZA implemented its own onerous restrictions on the right to strike in 2018, raising the minimum turnout for strike ballots from 33 to 50 percent.

Norwegian government intervenes to end municipal strikes and impose wage deal

On June 4, the Norwegian government forced an end to an indefinite strike of over 22,600 municipal employees, including teachers, nurses and waste disposal workers.

The strike began May 27 after the Confederation of Unions for Professionals (Unio) rejected a collective agreement offer by the municipal employers' association KS for a pay increase of 2.8 percent, rising to 3.45 percent in the capital Oslo. This had been agreed to by the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), Confederation of Vocational Unions (YS) and Federation of Norwegian Professional Associations (Akademikerne).

Almost 2,000 walked out in Oslo.

The 22,600 Unio members covered by the KS agreement demanded a real terms pay increase. Inflation has been above three percent most of this year.

The government intervened to shut down the week-long walkout on June 2, under the pretext that a recycling plant in Fredrikstad was at risk of catching fire. It cited its power to end a strike when there is a danger to life, despite Unio agreeing to provide minimum services at the plant if the KS requested it.

The strike in Oslo continued until Monday, when the government ordered municipal employees back to work, claiming that patients in the Nordre Aker district were at risk of missing necessary healthcare.

The National Wages Board will decide what wage settlement to impose on the Unio members, and is likely to order them to accept the deal signed by the LO, YS and Akademikerne. Unio accepted the government demand that the strike end, merely blaming KS.

FriFagbevegelse reports that such compulsory wage settlements have never been voted down by the Norwegian parliament.

Wave of hospital stoppages across France over pay and staff shortages

French hospital workers have held several days of protest and walkouts

over low pay and staffing levels.

In the Poitiers University Hospital, pharmacy technicians began an indefinite walkout on June 2, demanding improved staffing levels. Poitiers University Hospital has a capacity of 1,900 beds throughout three sites—in Poitiers, Lusignan and Montmorillon.

France Bleu reports that repetitive movements in the job have left a large number of workers with musculoskeletal damage, affecting their everyday lives. The National Nurses Committee union members are calling for at least three more technicians to be hired at the hospital to spread the most demanding tasks.

In northern France, emergency staff in Roubaix began daily protests on May 31, to oppose a hospital “reorganisation” which will reduce the number of nurses. On June 3, caregivers for children, the elderly and disabled joined a protest called by the French Democratic Confederation of Labour in the city of Nancy to demand a pay increase, granted to many other workers in the medical sector in the recent Sécur healthcare review.

There have been numerous protests and partial or one-day stoppages in French hospitals over the course of the pandemic. Last month saw strikes of nurses in operating theatres and intensive care units, as well as anaesthetists and other specialists. The unions kept these healthcare workers isolated, putting forward no plan to mobilise workers at every hospital in a common struggle.

Strike at Renault foundry in Caudan, France continues despite court ruling against pickets

Workers at the Fonderies de Bretagne auto foundry in Caudan, France are continuing their strike, begun on April 27 following Renault’s announcement of its closure.

On June 3, the Lorient court granted Renault’s demand for the end of a blockade to the plant, ordering the police to use any force to break up pickets if they “prevented access to the site or hindered the free circulation of people and goods.” Pickets prevented management from leaving, as well as the removal of goods. A lawyer for the Stalinist CGT union argued the pickets had not prevented anyone who wanted to enter the site from doing so.

The plant closure would mean 340 job losses, amidst a wave of closures across France and the European Union (EU). Thousands more manufacturing jobs are threatened with the closure of Nissan’s factories in Barcelona, many Lufthansa Technik sites in Germany, and others.

Spanish trade unions betray bank workers struggle, accept over 2,700 job losses at BBVA

Unions involved in the negotiations have agreed plans to cut thousands of jobs at major Spanish bank BBVA. The Workers Commissions (CCOO) union previously indicated that it would accept job losses, merely seeking to reduce the number slightly and negotiate more favourable redundancy terms.

The CCOO agreed to 2,725 job losses and 480 office closures along with the Banking Board Association and General Union of Workers, reports *Europa Press*.

Workers at the bank held numerous one-day protests and strikes in May against the bank’s original plan to cut nearly 3,500 jobs and close 530 offices, marching with banners demanding “No to layoffs at BBVA!” Despite this opposition, the unions merely negotiated higher redundancy

payments for “voluntary” redundancies, and for a scheme with employment agency Randstad to find new jobs or self-employment for laid-off workers. The unemployment rate in Spain is currently close to 16 percent.

According to Reuters, BBVA’s cost-to-income ratio was better than the European average. The mass layoffs were made to boost long-term profits even further at the expense of the workforce, greeted with applause in the financial press. The finance magazine *Invertia* reports the bank spent 960 million euros on the restructuring, mainly on the redundancy scheme, but expects to save 250 million euros per year from 2022, boosting profits over the next decade by billions. Similar plans to cut thousands of jobs are planned at Caixabank and HSBC.

The deal agreed by the CCOO and other unions will set the pattern for future job losses in the financial sector. Caixabank is seeking to make 7,605 redundancies in its own restructuring, and the unions are negotiating along similar lines as at BBVA, calling off a strike for Wednesday as a gesture of “good faith”, according to *Europa Press*. The token protests called by the unions were more limited than those at BBVA, with a one-hour strike called on Monday, following a 30-minute stoppage on June 2, each involving over 30,000 workers opposed to job cuts.

Spanish workers in Barcelona social services walk out over workload and safety

On Monday, staff at the Municipal Institute of Social Services (IMSS) in Barcelona, Spain held a one-day “general strike” to protest the strain placed on the IMSS during the coronavirus pandemic, and the lack of concern shown for workers’ safety.

All the unions represented in the local administration voiced their support for the walkout, reports *Crónica*. The Assembly of IMSS Workers demanded a change in the provision of services to a “preventive” approach to social problems, as well as for them to stop accompanying evictions, and measures to protect workers such as vaccinations.

Protests of Basque public sector workers in Spain against temporary contracts

In the three provincial capitals of Spain’s Basque region, hundreds of public sector workers joined a march denouncing the “scourge of temporary employment,” reports *Europa Press*.

Six unions called the demonstration in Bilbao, San Sebastián and Vitoria to demand the more than 60,000 public sector workers on temporary contracts be moved to permanent employment.

There have been numerous protests and workplace stoppages against temporary employment in the Basque Country. The Basque Workers’ Solidarity union says 40 percent of public sector workers are on temporary contracts. In April, thousands of workers took part in a strike and demonstration in the three capitals.

National transport strike in Italy over expired collective agreement

Italian transport workers held a 24-hour national strike on June 1, to demand negotiations to renew the national collective agreement in the

transport sector, which expired over three years ago.

La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno reports members of the six unions held stoppages in Rome, Milan, Naples, and six other major cities. The unions ordered their members to adhere to “guarantee bands” in the afternoon in which no strike can take place, reducing the impact of the strike.

Final four hours of planned strikes against restructuring at Elica in Fabriano, Italy

On Friday, Italian workers at the multinational extractor hood manufacturer Elica in Fabriano will walk out for four hours against a planned restructuring that will cut 409 jobs. A demonstration is planned in the nearby city of Ancona.

The unions at the plant announced a limited campaign involving only 16 hours of strike action at local plants, involving four hours on May 24 and a further eight hours on May 28.

According to ANSA, the unions have suggested they may schedule a further “package” of limited strikes, but “the appropriate forum for discussion is the negotiating table.”

Italian gig economy riders in Florence protest Glovo’s pay cuts

Bicycle delivery riders in Florence, who work through the “gig economy” app Glovo protested on June 4, against changes to their payment system that resulted in an average pay decrease of 30 percent.

The Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) helped organised the protest after the company announced its new system on May 26, reports ANSA, and have demanded that the old system of payment be restored. Around 50 Glove couriers also rallied in protest in the Georgian capital Tbilisi on May 16.

Warning strikes of autoworkers in north of Germany over pay

Workers in the auto industry in the northern German states of Hamburg, Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Lower Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt took part in warning strikes this week during collective bargaining negotiations.

The *Hamburger Abendblatt* reported that over 1,000 workers walked out on Wednesday, with more scheduled for Thursday.

The Industrial Union of Metalworkers (IG Metall), with 6,000 members in the north, are negotiating with the employers’ association who want a two-year pay freeze. IG Metall is demanding a four percent pay increase.

German Food, Beverages and Catering Union signs new collective agreement including below-inflation pay deal following warning strikes

The Food, Beverages and Catering Union (NGG) signed a new collective agreement with the Northern Brewers’ Association, covering around 700 workers in the brewery sector in the north of Germany.

Workers joined warning strikes last month to bring pressure on the negotiations, after the employers offered a one-off 500-euro bonus and demanded a pay freeze. Inflation in May was around 2.5 percent. According to the *Hamburger Abendblatt*, the NGG accepted a below-inflation 2.2 percent pay rise as well as the 500-euro bonus, after initially demanding a 4.5 percent wage increase.

Polish nurses hold warning strikes and protests over stagnant salaries

Nurses in around 40 hospitals across Poland joined two-hour warning strikes on Monday, protesting a new law which failed to resolve their continued poor pay.

The Polish National Union of Nurses and Midwives (OZZPiP) called the warning strikes during negotiations with some hospitals for improved working conditions and higher salaries.

In other hospitals, OZZPiP called for protests to support the strikes, citing delayed negotiations which make it “impossible to ...carry out a two-hour warning strike in accordance with the law,” according to *Dziennik Wschodni*.

Dziennik Wschodni reports that the new “Niedzielski” act (named after the minister of health), determines pay on the basis of education rather than responsibility or seniority. The president of OZZPiP explained the law can leave a 1,700 z?oty (380 euro) difference in the monthly pay of two nurses with similar experience and responsibility if one has a master’s degree and the other doesn’t.

Warning pay strike at GE Aviation in Hungary

Around 300 workers at the GE Aviation plant in Veresegyháza, Hungary, held a two-hour warning strike on Thursday, during wage negotiations with the company, reports *Napi*.

The Chemical Workers’ Union (VDSZ) denounced the company’s offer of a 4 percent pay rise over two years. Inflation at 5 percent makes the offer a real-terms pay cut of 2.9 percent.

GE Aviation, which produces aircraft engines and other systems, is owned by the multinational General Electric, which reported a profit of over 15.7 billion euros last year. GE Aviation reported over 500 million euros in profit for the first quarter of 2021. Despite the company’s massive profits, the VDSZ entered negotiations demanding a below-inflation pay rise of 8 percent over two years, and offered a “compromise” of 5 percent.

Accident and emergency nurses in Brussels hospital, Belgium, protest working conditions and pay reorganisation

On Monday, nurses in the accident and emergency and intensive care departments of the Erasme hospital in Brussels, Belgium joined a strike to denounce their poor working conditions, according to RTL.

Many nurses remained on the job wearing notices reading “on strike,” in order to provide essential care. As well as working conditions, already difficult before the pandemic, the workers have criticised a new pay system.

The National Federation of Belgian Nurses criticised the new system,

which workers can opt in to, as it does not consider time spent in specialist training, and will leave some healthcare workers worse off over the course of their careers.

Stoppages by ScotRail staff in Scotland for equal overtime pay continue

Several hundred train conductors at Scottish rail transport company ScotRail held a further one-day strike on Sunday. They are demanding equal overtime pay with train drivers.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members extended their programme of Sunday stoppages, begun the end of March, to June 20. Ticket examiners joined the dispute.

The RMT accuses ScotRail of endangering safety by drafting in managers, who lack safety training and knowledge, to replace the strikers.

The union warned the dispute could continue throughout the summer and called on the Scottish government to intervene.

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 and the ASLEF drivers' union has isolated and dissipated struggles by thousands of guards and drivers at private rail franchises throughout the UK against DOO—threatening jobs and passenger safety as drivers take over the operation of train doors.

Staff at Leicester University, England walk out against redundancies

Staff at Leicester University, England began a three-day strike on Wednesday in opposition to 26 compulsory redundancies planned for August 3. The departments affected include maths, neuroscience and English.

The University and College University (UCU) members voted by a 70 percent majority to walk out. The strike follows a marking and assessment ban begun in May.

Since the beginning of the year, 115 staff were pressured into accepting voluntary redundancy, on top of 60 staff being moved to inferior contracts. Last year, 100 staff on temporary contracts were let go, in addition to 50 staff taking voluntary redundancy.

Naval civilian workers' dispute at Devonport, England continues over rosters

Around 40 UK tugboat crew workers at the Devonport naval dockyard took part in a further 24-hour strike on Tuesday, as part of a long-running dispute over new rosters.

The Unite union members reballoted last month to continue strike action. They work for outsourcing company Serco Marine, and oppose the three weeks on/three weeks off rosters begun December. The rosters affect their health and present safety risks.

Traffic enforcement officers in London Borough of Ealing continue

strikes against restructuring

More than 40 UK traffic enforcement officers, who oversee parking regulations in the London Borough of Ealing, held a three-day stoppage from June 1, and were to begin another Wednesday.

The Unite union members, who work for contractor Serco, held two three-day stoppages in May, against a restructuring and redundancy programme ongoing since 2019. They accuse the company of unfairly dismissing workers and demand the programme is renegotiated.

The workers are angry an Ealing council officer wrote to Serco asking the company to remove a union rep, in post for 20 years. According to Unite, the council officer accused the rep of bringing the council into disrepute.

Teachers at London school walk out over claims of chaotic management

Teachers at the Pimlico Academy in the UK capital walked out on strike Tuesday. They held a picket at the school gates, supported by parents.

The National Education Union members are protesting the chaotic management at the school. They accuse management of failing to communicate with staff over serious incidents, and say the school does not provide a safe working environment.

The school headmaster, Daniel Smith, was forced to resign in May after imposing a strict school uniform code which some pupils and their parents described as racist. It led to walkouts by some pupils. The trust running the academy backed the former headmaster up to his resignation, and there has been a long-running dispute between the staff and management. Teachers are seeking an apology from the trust over its backing of the headmaster. They are demanding an independent inquiry into the running of the school, which has led to safety and safeguarding issues.

London march against harassment of food couriers by police and immigration officials

Around 80 trade union members and other protesters march through Tooting in south London on May 30. They were protesting the targeting of food courier delivery drivers by police and immigration officials in an operation carried out May 18.

Delivery drivers were stopped, and their immigration status checked. Two were arrested for so-called immigration offences. The march included banners of the International Workers Union of Great Britain, which represents courier drivers.

Cereal production engineers in Northamptonshire, England vote to strike against "fire and rehire"

Around 80 UK engineers working for breakfast cereal producer Weetabix in Corby and Kettering, in the Midlands, have voted to strike.

The Unite members oppose plans by the company to "fire and rehire" them on inferior contracts. The contracts would mean changes in work patterns with cuts in shift payments and less night shift work—resulting in

a loss of pay up to £5,000 a year.

A Unite press release announced a series of one day strikes in June, July and August, but no specific dates are set. Unite said it is willing to negotiate changes the company wants to impose: "Industrial action can still be prevented if Weetabix withdraws its fire and rehire threats and engages in constructive negotiations with Unite's representatives."

Scottish air traffic controllers at Highlands airport vote for further industrial action against closure

Around 50 Scottish Air Traffic Control (ATC) workers at Highlands and Islands Airports Limited (HIAL) voted to renew their industrial action mandate. The current action began in January.

The Prospect union members refuse to engage with HIAL's plans to close the current ATC facilities. They are working to roster, refusing to do overtime apart from emergencies, and refusing to train new controllers not on site during the industrial action ballot November last year. The new mandate contains the possibility of walkouts.

HIAL proposes to close ATC facilities in the Scottish islands, and instead remotely base the facilities in Inverness.

Rail workers on UK London to Scotland sleeper rail service to strike over pay freeze

UK rail workers on the Serco Caledonian Sleeper rail service voted by an 85 percent majority to hold a ten-day strike beginning June 16, followed by a ban on overtime and rest day working.

The RMT members are opposed to a pay freeze imposed by rail company Serco.

The sleeper service runs overnight rail services between London and Scotland providing sleeping berths for passengers.

Food preparation workers at London hospital to strike against new rotas

Food preparation workers at the Royal London Hospital in the UK capital will begin a five-day strike on June 21, with further possible walkouts. The Unite union members are opposed to a new rota system imposed by outsourced employer Serco.

They accuse management of bullying in relation to sickness absence and allocation of shift and holiday days. The rota has disrupted their lives, making childcare arrangements and attending part-time education courses difficult. Irregular work shifts are spread over 15 days, and include having to work part of designated rest days.

Serco cancelled all services for the proposed strike period.

Unite were involved in talks with Serco since the overwhelming strike vote in April, and their press release noted: "Even at this very late stage, strike action can be avoided if Serco returns to the negotiating table and brings forwards solutions to the bullying and rota problems."

Exhausted ambulance staff in north west England to hold consultative

strike ballot

Ambulance staff at the North West Ambulance Service trust, which includes Greater Manchester and Merseyside, will take part in a consultative ballot for possible strike action.

The Unite, Unison and GMB union members say a new system of answering emergency calls, in operation over the last year, is leading to exhaustion. The *Manchester Evening News* reported, "The system, introduced by bosses in a bid to tackle patient waiting times, means crews can be called anywhere across the region with up to 40 minutes' driving time."

The service gets up to 5,000 calls a day, half of which are classed as emergency, "blue light" calls. Unite say that under the new system, "The ambulance crews are seeing and treating fewer patients but driving for longer times and further distances."

Staff at University of Sussex, England hold consultative ballot over restructuring

Academic staff at the University of Sussex are taking part in a consultative ballot. The UCU members are opposed to plans by the university to push through a restructuring under its "Size and Shape" programme. The University Executive Group refused to rule out compulsory redundancies, which led to the UCU declaring a dispute.

Refuse workers' pay ballot in London Borough of Bexley

Around 140 UK workers at outsourcing company Serco, providing refuse collection for the London Borough of Bexley, are balloting for strike action.

The Unite union members oppose a 1.5 percent pay offer, and seek pay parity with refuse collectors in other London boroughs. They are currently on £10.25 an hour, while refuse workers in neighbouring Greenwich earn a minimum £13.

They oppose the removal of industrial sickness benefit and say many of the workers are owed back pay. Serco refused to include staff such as drivers on a pay progression scale over the last five years. The ballot will close on June 28.

Strike ballot of GE engineers at UK sites over pensions

Around 2,600 UK workers employed by US-based multinational conglomerate General Electric (GE) will likely ballot over company plans to replace the current defined benefit pension scheme with an inferior defined contribution one.

The Unite union members work at GE sites including Cardiff, Cheltenham, Prestwick, Rugby and Gloucestershire. Unite said the changes mean workers could lose thousands of pounds a year in pension incomes. A Unite press release stated, "A ballot for industrial action, including strikes, is very much on the cards for the summer."

Pay strike by garment workers in Lesotho enters third week

A strike by 50,000 garment workers in Lesotho entered its third week. Workers are demanding a 20 per cent increase, as their pay does not cover living expenses.

Wages for garment workers with under a year's experience are LSL1900 per month for a trainee machine operator and LSL2042 for a machine operator. With a year's experience this rises to LSL2120.

The government used the pandemic to justify keeping wages fixed for over two years, despite prices for staples like cooking oil doubling in the meantime.

Unions in Lesotho, including the National Clothing Textile and Allied Workers Union, say they cannot control their members. Strikers blocked roads with rocks, logs, rubbish bins and streetlamps.

The Independent Democratic Union of Lesotho, part of the IndustriALL conglomerate, is negotiating with the government. Police and the army engaged in running battles with strikers, using rubber bullets and water cannons. One woman was shot dead by police and others hospitalised.

Around 95 percent of workers in the Lesotho garment industry are women.

600 Nigerian nurses face dismissal in Kaduna state for taking part in strike

In Kaduna State, Nigeria, 600 nurses face dismissal after taking part in a five-day "warning strike" called by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) to oppose thousands of job cuts.

The state government compiled the names of 1,300 nurses to be replaced, but cut this down to 600.

On May 18, State Governor Nasir el-Rufai announced the dismissal of nurses below level GL14 for being involved in the strike. He instructed the Ministry of Health to advertise for the recruitment of new nurses to replace those dismissed.

The National Association of Nigeria Nurses and Midwives and NLC were told of the sackings, but failed to announce any offensive to win their reinstatement.

South African state-owned utility workers picket for pay increase in Durban

Workers at Eskom, South Africa's largest producer of electricity, are engaging in lunchtime pickets and protests to demand a 9.5 percent pay increase after wage negotiations collapsed on June 2. The utility refused to offer more than 1.5 percent.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa members point out that Eskom agreed to pay 17 percent more to coal suppliers while claiming workers' wage demands are unaffordable. The National Energy Regulator of South Africa recommended Eskom give workers a 5.4 percent rise.

Community Health Workers in Limpopo, South Africa march for permanent employment and improved pay and conditions

Several hundred Community Health Workers in Mopani district, Limpopo, South Africa marched to the district department of health in Giyani Tuesday, demanding to be made permanent employees.

The health workers also want backpay owed by the municipality, a COVID-19 allowance for the last 12 months and a regular supply of personal protective equipment. Some have to buy their own uniforms.

Municipal office cleaners in Pretoria, South Africa demonstrate against outsourcing

South African office cleaners outsourced from the City of Tshwane municipality in Pretoria protested outside the municipal headquarters Monday. They are demanding to be employed by the city rather than subcontracted to small companies, where they faced pay delays and mistreatment.

The 32 South African Funeral, Catering, Retail and Allied Workers Union members say being insourced will give them increased job security and better wages.



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