

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

Last week, trade unions at CaixaBank, Spain's largest retail bank, agreed to the loss of 6,452 jobs, following token warning strikes and face-saving "negotiations" with management.

The unions and management announced they reached an agreement on July 1, only two days after a 24-hour strike which, according to the unions, shut down over 90 percent of the bank's branches in Spain. The unions called only one other whole-day stoppage, on June 22, following a number of one-hour or half-hour protests.

Reducing the job losses from its initial proposal of nearly 8,300, and increasing redundancy payments, CaixaBank agreed to the main demand of the unions that redundancies be made "voluntarily." The unions claimed to news agency *EFE* the bank would not cut the announced number of jobs if there were not enough volunteers.

After its creation in a merger of La Caixa and Bankia last September, CaixaBank estimated that it had a "surplus" of around 5,000 employees and has cut even more than that goal. The unions put up no more of a fight than at BBVA, another major Spanish bank, where they agreed to 3,000 job losses last month.

This week workers in German retail and mail order businesses continued their warning strikes during collective negotiations in the sector. The United Services Union (Verdi) called strikes in "many various places," spread across the week.

The *Frankfurter Rundschau* reported strikes in the state of Hesse, including a rally in the capital Frankfurt on Wednesday. On Friday, there will be strikes in Kaufland and Lidl stores in the town of Kamenz, according to the *Sächsische Zeitung*.

Verdi is calling for a monthly wage increase of 4.5 percent plus 45 euros, as well as three extra days off and a minimum hourly wage of 12.50 euros. The employers' association has so far offered a three-year contract with pay increases of 2 percent, 1.4 percent and 2 percent in each year. The collective agreement in the retail and mail order sector covers hundreds of thousands of workers.

This week, workers in several regions of Germany at the Sparda-Banks banking cooperative took part in warning strikes called by Verdi. While the union called for a 3.5 percent pay rise, the banks demanded a pay freeze, reported *dpa*.

Despite conducting collective negotiations for around 5,600 workers in all eleven regions where Sparda-Banks operates, Verdi called for warning strikes in only four, and on separate days: Hanover and Baden-Württemberg on Tuesday, Hamburg on Wednesday and Mainz on Thursday.

Around 1,000 Airbus workers joined a protest in Hamburg, Germany on Wednesday, to protest a restructuring plan of the aircraft manufacturing company's German and French operations, reported the *Hamburger Abendblatt*. The demonstration, called by the IG Metall union, follows an earlier rally of 800 workers in Hamburg in May against the plans.

The works council at Airbus in Germany denounced the group for failing to listen to its compromise offers, emphasising its readiness to "bear painful change processes."

The German, French, Spanish and British trade unions organised no joint actions against plans announced by Airbus to cut 15,000 jobs globally. The larger Spanish unions last month accepted plans to close the Airbus plant in Puerto Real, and the unions in France merely opposed compulsory redundancies, calling instead for the company to achieve its goal of cutting 5,000 jobs through "natural erosion."

Metalworkers in the Netherlands joined another round of warning strikes last week, as part of collective negotiations begun in January, covering 160,000 workers.

The *Algemeen Dagblad* reported that the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions and Christian National Trade Union Federation called a nationwide 48-hour strike on July 1 and 2. The unions previously kept to regional strikes, with last week's stoppage the first to be coordinated nationally.

The unions are calling for wage increases above the employers' below-inflation offer of 2.25 percent over two years, but lowered their demand from a 5 percent increase to 2.5 percent this year.

On Tuesday, air transport workers in Italy joined a strike called by the four major unions in all parts of the sector. The unions denounced a number of issues, including the liquidation of Ernest Airlines and Norwegian, redundancies in a number of carriers, and particularly the government's plans to break up and privatise state-owned airline Alitalia.

The unions called a four-hour stoppage of airline workers on June 18, to oppose the sell-off of Alitalia. There have been numerous protests by workers at the company over unpaid wages.

Miners in the Mindeli coal mine in the Georgian town of Tkibuli began an indefinite walk out on Saturday, to demand a 60 percent increase to their monthly 500 GEL salary. The company has refused to pay any salary increase, offering a one-off bonus which the miners refused.

The miners arranged a protest on Wednesday, according to *First Channel*, also involving locals. The Mindeli mine, the site of numerous deaths over recent years, is one of the town's major employers. *JAMnews* reported that between 2016 and 2018, sixteen people were killed in the mine.

Last week, the French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT) ended a 25-day strike at the Stanley Black & Decker plant in the city of Besançon. According to *France Bleu*, the stoppage began on June 8, to demand an increase in the profit-sharing bonus for employees at the American tool manufacturer's plant.

In the last few days, the CFDT announced that it would begin blocking access to the plant, after the group's management vetoed a deal the union

and local management worked out. Ultimately the CFDT called off the strike in return for a 20 euro per month pay rise.

A delegation of miners laid off from the Uyar Mining company before it closed in 2011 are camped outside the Turkish capital of Ankara, after police prevented them from entering the city on Sunday.

The miners were planning a press conference together with the Maden-??union to demand the payment of the severance pay which 743 workers are still owed, the ANF news agency reported.

The miners have held multiple protests since the closure of the company, and planned their march to Ankara after government promises to enact a new law to resolve their demands were not carried out. After again being prevented from entering the city on Thursday, the miners continued their protests outside the police cordon.

Workers responsible for processing renewals of car driver licenses at the UK Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) in Swansea, South Wales walked out on Monday and Wednesday, with a strike planned Friday. The stoppages are part of a series over COVID-19 safety at the site, ongoing since April. The strikes led to a huge backlog of unprocessed forms.

Around 1,400 Public and Commercial Service union (PCS) members voted by almost 72 percent on a turnout of just over 50 percent to strike. The DVLA employs around 6,000 staff at its headquarters and call centres across eight buildings in the city.

The dispute began after management insisted more than 2,000 staff keep working in offices despite lack of social distancing. A major COVID-19 outbreak hit the workplace in the second half of 2020, with more than 600 cases and one tragic death.

The company insisted hundreds of staff cease working from home and come into the office from May 17, in line with the Johnson Tory government's "road map" back to pre-COVID conditions. It was lower-paid staff who were most likely to be denied permission to work from home.

The outbreak at the DVLA is the highest number of infections linked to a single employer or workplace in the UK. The site is run directly by the government through the Department of Transport.

The government used private contractor APS staff to print 400,000 car tax forms.

The PCS isolated the strike, which is the only officially sanctioned action taken against lack of COVID-19 safety provision.

Several hundred train conductors and ticket examiners at Scottish rail transport company ScotRail held a further one-day strike on Sunday. They are demanding equal overtime pay with train drivers. Train cleaners working for ScotRail are to ban overtime and rest day working from July 13 over the same issue.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) members began their programme of Sunday stoppages at the end of March. Ticket examiners later joined the series of walkouts over the same issue.

The RMT accuses ScotRail of endangering safety by drafting in managers, who lack safety training and knowledge, to replace the strikers. The union warned that the dispute could continue throughout summer, and called on the Scottish government to intervene.

Transport Minister Graeme Dey met with the union on June 24, but no progress was made. The RMT is calling for a summit meeting with the participation of Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon

Around 30 field service engineers at the Ashby, Leicestershire branch of Brush Electrical Machines, England are now in the seventh week of their all-out strike—planned to last until August 16. At their regular picket and protest on July 2, the strikers were joined by local residents supporting their fight against fire and rehire.

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

contract changes that would reduce overtime rates, allowances, holidays and other terms and conditions, resulting in a pay cut of between £10,000 and £15,000 a year.

The Unite regional officer said engineers 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."

Striking St Mungo housing charity building maintenance workers held a protest outside the charity's triage centre in Oxford, England on July 2.

The 12 workers employed by the property services of St Mungo's in the UK capital began an all-out stoppage on April 22. The charity runs 3,200 accommodation units in Bournemouth, Brighton, Bristol, London, Milton Keynes, Oxford and Reading.

The Unite union members accuse the maintenance section managers of bullying tactics by using inappropriate disciplinary measures. The charity suspended a union representative on a charge of gross misconduct for raising a grievance about management bullying. One of the grounds cited was management "distress" at suggestions of bullying.

In March last year, several hundred St Mungo's workers walked out for three days against changes in sickness policy and the falling number of more experienced senior employees. They were concerned the changes were aimed at creating a lower-paid workforce with inferior conditions.

Unite has 500 members at the organisation.

Teachers at two schools in Derby run by Nottingham-based Archway Learning Trust held a one-day strike on July 1. The National Education Union (NEU) members at Merrill Academy in Alvaston and Lees Brook Community School in Chaddesden were protesting a restructuring exercise.

They claim it will lead to job cuts, the replacement of qualified teachers by less qualified, cheaper teachers and an increase in class sizes.

A two-day stoppage is planned to begin July 13.

Teachers at the Alleyn Court preparatory school, in Southend, England were to begin a three-day strike Tuesday, followed by a three-day strike next week. The NEU members are protesting plans by the Alleyn Court Educational Trust to remove them from the Teachers' Pension Scheme and replace it with an inferior one.

The governing body of Tring Park school in Hertfordshire, England, a private performing arts school, have withdrawn their threat to close the Teacher's Pension Scheme. The NEU members voted for five days of stoppages. Following two days of walkouts, the governing body withdrew the threat to the pensions and the teachers voted to end their action.

Teaching staff at the two sites of Valence Primary school in Dagenham, London were to walk out Wednesday and Thursday. It follows a one-day strike last week.

The NEU members oppose proposed restructuring which would see around 15 of 46 staff facing pay cuts and demotions. The school argues the restructuring follows a fall in roll numbers and subsequent financing. The NEU proposed further strikes on July 13, 14 and 15.

Five days of strikes by UK teachers at the Co-op Academy in Blackley, Manchester were called off by the National Association of Schoolmasters & Union of Women Teachers. The teachers are opposed to management proposals that would lead to cuts in pay, increased workloads and a deterioration in working conditions.

A *Manchester Evening News* article July 6 noted, "A union spokesman said that following eleventh-hour developments announced by the academy, they have taken the decision to withdraw strike action this week to enable further progress to be made through negotiation."

Around 200 UK workers at GKN Wheels and Auto Structures based in Telford, Shropshire held a one-day strike on Monday. Other strikes are planned.

The Unite and GMB union members oppose attempts by the company to tie a proposed pay increase to detrimental changes to the terms of a

collective redundancy agreement. The factory makes wheels for off-road vehicles such as tractors, and among its clients is digger manufacturer, JCB. The company was acquired by private equity firm Aurelius in 2020.

Staff employed by contractor ISS, providing catering, support and security services at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy government offices, voted by over 95 percent on a turnout of over 80 percent to walk out.

The PCS members are demanding increased pay, improved working conditions, an improved bonus for working throughout the lockdown and annual leave entitlement arrears.

Dates of further 24-hour strikes by the 57 workers on the Woolwich ferry, which operates a service across the UK capital's river Thames, were announced by the Unite union. The dates are 9, 12, 16, 19, 23, 26 and 30 July.

The stoppages come after the victimisation of a second union representative by ferry management. In a press release Unite described the victimisations as reaching "obscene levels."

The Unite members, who began stoppages in May, following a 97 percent ballot in favour, have held eight strike days to oppose the failure of Transport for London (TfL) to agree a new pay and bonus scheme.

Unite called on Sadiq Khan, the Labour Mayor of London, to intervene in the dispute to "bang heads together" at TfL. TfL took over the running of the ferry from its previous owner, Briggs Marine Contractors Ltd. Under Briggs, there was also a long-running dispute over allegations of management bullying.

UK ancillary hospital workers, including porters, cleaners and catering staff at Airedale Hospital, Keighley, are to walk out on July 19. The GMB union members oppose inequalities in pay for the same work.

They are employed by Airedale General Hospital Solutions (AGHS), wholly owned by Airedale NHS Foundation Trust. AGHS was set up in 2018, and while staff transferred from the NHS continue to be paid at NHS staff rates, many joining after AGHS was established are paid at lower rates.

Twenty security staff at the Royal Berkshire hospital in Reading, England, are to begin a three-week strike on July 12. The Unite union members were involved in a long-running dispute with a series of stoppages that began in December last year. They voted by an 84 percent majority for the latest bout of action.

They are employed by contractor Kingdom Services to provide security at the hospital. They want a pay increase to £12 an hour and £13 for supervisors. Kingdom, with a turnover in excess of £100 million, is offering £9.30 an hour for staff and £10 for supervisors.

Around 140 refuse workers in the south London borough of Bexley are to walk out for two weeks beginning July 12. The Unite union members work for outsourcing company Serco, providing refuse collection for Bexley council.

The workers oppose a 1.5 percent pay offer, the removal of industrial sickness benefit and Serco's refusal to implement a pay progression scale over the last five years. This led to a backlog of pay for about 50 workers, who are owed thousands of pounds. Refuse workers in Bexley are on a minimum of £10.25 an hour, which is below the London Living Wage. By comparison, refuse workers in nearby Greenwich are on £13 an hour.

Staff in Scotland working for Rail Gourmet at Edinburgh Waverley train station will hold 24-hour strikes on July 14, 17, 18 and 31. The RMT members voted by a 100 percent majority for the walkouts.

They are protesting the disciplinary proceedings brought against two workers. Rail Gourmet said the two had "knowingly come to work with COVID-19." They accuse the company of harassment and bullying.

A five-day strike by catering staff at the Royal London Hospital in the UK capital, due to have begun Monday, has been suspended by the union Unite. The workers, employed by outsourcing company Serco held five days of stoppages in June. They oppose the introduction of a new roster.

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

The strike was suspended following talks brokered by Acas, the government mediation service. Serco agreed to reconsider the roster details, and a manager accused of bullying was moved to a different department. The new roster details will be considered by the food preparation workers and, if accepted, a five-day strike due to begin July 12 will not go ahead.

Around 500 workers at the GKN Automotive plant in Birmingham will ballot for possible strike action. The Unite union members voted overwhelmingly in a consultative ballot to be balloted for strike action against the planned closure of the factory.

The plant, which produces drivelines for automobiles, was slated for closure by the owner GKN Melrose in 2022, with production transferred to Europe. Unite organised a lobby of parliament on Tuesday in protest.

Thirty-six parking wardens, known as civil enforcement officers, working for the London borough of Hackney, will begin a strike ballot on July 21, ending August 18.

The Unite union members, employed by Apcoa Parking UK Ltd for Hackney Borough Council, want a pay increase. Currently they are paid the London Living Wage of £10.85 an hour, while wardens in other London boroughs are paid more. In Greenwich, they are paid £15 an hour.

The council agreed the contract for providing parking wardens will come back inhouse in March next year, when Apcoa's contract finishes.

UK workers employed by British Sugar at its plants in Norfolk, Northamptonshire and Suffolk will take part in a strike ballot. The ballot, begun on Monday will run until July 26.

The 500 Unite union members, who work as engineers, supply chain operatives and technicians, voted by an 86 percent majority in a consultative ballot to reject a two percent pay offer.

Staff working for outsource company Just Ask Services, working as toilet cleaners/attendants in London's Royal Parks, are balloting over several issues. The PCS members are seeking union recognition, no job cuts and pay parity with directly employed Royal Parks staff. The ballot is due to close July 14.

Refuse collectors working for outsourcing company Serco in Sandwell, England are balloting for strike action. The GMB union members are protesting the sacking of disabled colleagues who had to shield at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. One was awaiting a kidney transplant. They also accuse management of bullying.

Shoe manufacturing workers employed by shoe manufacturer Clarks at their warehouse in Street, Somerset face the threat of fire and rehire. Around 100 of the 145 workers who were already employed at the site when it was taken over by an equity firm in February face being transferred to a new contract.

The contract would cut pay by 15 percent, cut holiday leave provision, impose inferior sickness terms and eliminate work breaks. The company began a 45-day consultation prior to imposing the fire and rehire conditions.

The Community union members are considering strike action. However, Community assistant general secretary John McHugh was quoted in a *Daily Mirror* article on July 2, saying, "We strongly urge them [Clarks] to come back around the table and reach a solution... we are ready and waiting for productive discussions on how we can succeed together going forward when they are."

Middle East

On Monday and Tuesday, around 25,000 Tunisian finance workers came out on strike. The FGBEF-UGTT union members in banks, finance companies, insurance and other institutions are demanding a pay increase, improved working conditions and an end to precarious employment. They rejected the below inflation pay offer made by the employers' body.

Staff at the Israeli Clalit Health Fund held an eight-hour strike on Monday. Clalit is the largest of the four mandatory insurance health funds Israeli citizens must belong to in order to access health and care services.

The strikers include accountants, administrative workers, janitors and technicians who walked out to demand increased pay for administration employees.

Africa

The indefinite strike for the minimum wage of N30,000 by workers in Nasarawa state, Nigeria, was called off by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) umbrella groups after three weeks. Work will resume on July 6.

After Nasarawa state governor, Abdullahi Sule, said strikers would be hit by a "no work, no pay" rule, the NLC and TUC entered negotiations to end the strike based on a memorandum of understanding on phased implementation of the minimum wage in August, plus commencement of outstanding promotion allowances owed since 2011 at the same time.

The state governor and union umbrella leaders exchanged compliments with each other and traditional rulers who called for an end to the dispute. The governor thanked the unions for suggesting where to make cuts to fund the agreement.

The NLC also failed to respond when the Katsina state government deducted N200m from 22,000 state-employed workers and primary school teachers.

Workers held strikes in 2019 for a national minimum wage of N30,000, up from N18,000, which is still not secured.

Judicial and parliamentary workers in Rivers state, Nigeria, on strike for two months to demand financial autonomy for the courts to end corruption, are being victimised. After returning to work last month, their pay has been stopped.

The state governor, Nyesom Wike, announced he would enforce a "no work, no pay" order against strikers. The Parliamentary Staff Association of Nigeria (PASAN) and the Judiciary Staff Union of Nigeria said the governor failed to comply with a memorandum they signed. The Chairman of PASAN said the action was unacceptable but failed to say what the union intended to do about it.

South African municipal workers voted nationally by a majority to reject a deal proposed by the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), representing the country's 257 municipalities—the first steps towards declaring an official dispute with the employers.

More than 80 percent of the South African Municipal Workers Union members have been balloted to date. They are demanding a single year agreement of a R4000 salary increase, a R15,000 minimum wage, and a R3,500 housing allowance. Workers also want an 80 percent employer medical insurance contribution, six months paid maternity leave, one month paid paternity leave, 25 percent employer pension contribution and absorption of all Extended Public Works Programme and Community Work Programme workers into the municipal workforce.

SALGA's three-year wage proposal was a four percent rise in the first year, "consumer price index" less 1 percent for the remaining years, with a freeze on pension and other benefits for two years. They say employees in "designated essential services" are prohibited from engaging in strike action, but the union pointed out that municipal workers were not classed

as essential when they were refused a COVID-19 allowance.

Local government workers in Bungoma County, Kenya are preparing to walk out on July 13, after two months without pay.

The Kenya County Government Workers Union pleaded with state governor Wycliffe Wangamati to intervene to resolve the dispute. Local chairman Evans Manyilila said delayed salaries caused a lot of hardship, with workers unable to buy food, pay the rent, or pay school fees.



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