

Pay strike by Iranian contract oil workers continues; resident doctors on indefinite strike in Ekiti state, Nigeria; metalworkers' strike wave in Italy

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.

Middle East

The oil workers' strike begun June 19 in Iran, the largest since the general strike of 1978-79 which marked the downfall of the hated Shah, is continuing. The 60,000 workers employed by contractors are demanding higher pay and job security. They earn around \$300 a month and are demanding \$500.

Their struggle is supported by their families, pensioners and other workers such as teachers.

The main employer in the Iranian oil industry is the state-owned National Iranian Oil Company. There has been a growth of contractors operating in the industry, many controlled by Iranian state officials. The contractors cut pay and undermined the working conditions of employees.

The strikers set up the Strike Organisation Council for Oil Contract Workers.

The Iranian economy is suffering the consequences of the ongoing economic boycott by the United States. Last year inflation hit 30 percent.

Protests in more than 20 cities in the oil-rich Iranian province of Khuzestan which began July 15 continue. Sparked by water shortages, they were met with fierce reaction by Iranian security forces, with reports of at least four people killed.

On Tuesday, a spontaneous anti-government protest broke out among commuters in a Tehran metro station, chanting anti-government slogans. It followed a change in train schedules due to a six-day lockdown in response to a COVID-19 upsurge in the city. The schedule change led to a shortage of trains carriages and the metro station quickly became overcrowded.

On July 11, dozens of fishermen held a protest and press conference at Gaza Port. It was organised by the Fishermen's Syndicate in the Gaza Strip.

They were demanding an end to abuses by Israeli security forces against them and for an expansion of fishing areas. Balloons bearing the photos of Gazan fishermen killed by the Israeli state were released into the sky.

Africa

Resident doctors in Ekiti State, Nigeria walked out on indefinite strike after suffering years of reduced salaries, and receiving no salaries for the last two months of the pandemic.

Since 2018, doctors were paid only net salaries, with no payments such as cooperative or union dues or other benefits to which they are entitled.

The state government urged a return to work saying, "[S]trike actions can be counterproductive, especially in the health sector."

At least six people protesting staff shortages at the Dangote Sugar plant in Adamawa State were wounded after Nigerian soldiers opened fire with live ammunition. Five needed hospital treatment.

Dangote Sugar plc is owned by Aliko Dangote, the richest man in Africa. He requested soldiers disperse the 200 workers.

Education workers at the Abia State College of Education, Umuahia, Nigeria demonstrated July 15, to protest salary arrears going back 31 months. They planned to hold daily protests at the college until yesterday, and then march into the centre of Umuahia, the state capital. If their demands are not met, workers warn of striking indefinitely.

Civil servants at Nigeria's Federal Inland Revenue (FIRS) service are to picket offices nationwide July 26, to protest management closure of their union's secretariat and the stopping of workers' union membership fee deductions.

The Nigeria Civil Service Union says the FIRS management are unlawfully clamping down on them.

More than 40 health workers at the state-run C.H. Rennie Hospital in Kakata, Margibi County in Liberia launched an angry protest on July 19. The protest included barricading the main entrance to the hospital, to demand payment of 30 months' salary arrears.

The strikers used a government mantra against those responsible for their plight: "no pay, no work." They carried banners highlighting that the government won presidential elections in 2017 by pledging "better health care delivery to the suffering masses."

"We are risking our lives for humanity in this pandemic. Payment of salaries is our basic right," said Mayango C. Jallah, protests spokesman.

Liberia is one of the African countries worst hit by COVID-19, and its health infrastructure is buckling.

The strikers were persuaded to end their protest by Margibi County superintendent, Jerry Varnie, also the chairperson of the Margibi County Health Team Board, promising them three months' salary arrears later this week—one tenth of what they are owed.

Health workers in Kisumu, Kenya's third largest city are threatening a stoppage within four weeks if demands over pay and workplace conditions are not met.

The Kenya Union of Nurses (KNUN), Kenya Union of Clinical Officers (KUCO) and Kenya Union of Medical Laboratory Officers (KNUMLO) members complain about working without personal protective equipment since April. Over 400 workers are missing pay from January and February and some since November. Leave and uniform allowances have not been paid.

Health workers in Mombasa County, home to Kenya's second largest city, are also threatening a walkout over delayed salaries. The KNUN, KUCO and KNUMLO union members, who ended a three-month strike in February, say the county government has not resolved their pay issues as agreed.

A spike in COVID-19 cases caused a rise in infections in health workers. They cannot access hospital care because medical insurance deducted from salaries was not paid by the employer.

Hospitals in Kisumu County are reported to be seriously overstretched without oxygen, laboratory supplies and painkillers. Mombasa County is similarly affected with overflowing wards and lack of oxygen and supplies.

Mombasa County Health Chief Officer Pauline Oginga played down the severity of the COVID-19 upsurge, blaming it on people not following Ministry of Health protocols.

Dozens of minibus drivers in Pemba, Mozambique stopped work Monday and blocked one of the main roads through the city, causing disruption for commuters, in protest over police harassment.

Drivers say traffic police are constantly carrying out on-the-spot inspections of their minibuses, known locally as chapas. The police take the chapas to a compound and they are not released until the drivers pay a charge equivalent to \$32.

The police say they check the condition of the chapas, ensuring drivers are licensed and preventing overcrowding in the vehicles.

Europe

Metalworkers in Italy joined numerous strikes and protests the past two weeks against mass layoffs and closures. The workers at GKN Campi Bisenzio in Florence walked out when they were informed by email on July 9 their factory would be closed with the loss of 422 jobs.

ANSA reported that hundreds of people joined a demonstration and a four-hour "general strike" called on Monday by three unions against the closure and layoffs in GKN and Whirlpool.

In Taranto, metalworkers from the Acciaierie d'Italia group's factories joined a 24-hour strike on Tuesday to demand the government announce an investment plan for the sector.

Workers in the wind turbine manufacturer Whirlpool throughout Italy joined an eight-hour strike on Thursday, and a demonstration was held in Rome to oppose the 340 layoffs announced by the company at its Naples plant.

Workers at Groundforce, the baggage handling company in Portuguese airports, held a two-day strike last weekend to demand wages are paid on time, which have been unreliable since February, *Lusa* reported.

Hundreds of flights were cancelled at the major Lisbon airport, where the Union of Airport Handling Technicians reported that close to 100 percent of workers joined the strike.

More strikes are planned at the company, in which the state holds a 49.9 percent stake, on July 31, August 1 and 2, and an overtime ban will last until October 31.

On Wednesday, workers at Altice Portugal, the country's largest telecoms company, held a one-day strike and protested in Lisbon against an announced 200 redundancies, reported *Dinheiro Vivo*.

The Workers Union of Grupo Altice called a demonstration in front of both Altice's buildings and the Ministries of Infrastructure and Labour, calling on the prime minister to intervene.

Workers at the FedEx delivery service in France began a stoppage on July 15, called by the five unions in the company. *Le Figaro* reported massive disruption to the company's operations, but the unions called off the strike the next day.

The stoppage followed a pay offer from the company, which reportedly provided only a 2 percent pay increase to employees of the road transport division, below the 3 percent and 450-euro bonus in the air transport division. The unions said they intend to resume their campaign "from the start of the school year."

On July 13, the French Confederation of Management-General Confederation of Executives and National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions signed a deal with the Aéroports de Paris Group agreeing to pay cuts for the next three years, *20 Minutes* reported.

The majority state-owned company wanted to cut bonuses, which make up a significant part of the income of workers at the Charles de Gaulle and Orly airports. The deal includes a maximum cut of five percent in 2021 and 2022, and four percent in 2023, claiming that pay will return to the 2019 level by 2024, or sooner if traffic at the airport returns to pre-pandemic levels.

The General Confederation of Labour did not sign the agreement, and between 250 and 350 of its members joined a strike and short demonstration on the morning of Friday July 16, according to *Le Figaro*.

All three unions signed an earlier cost-cutting plan at the company which involved 1,150 redundancies. Workers at the airports joined numerous strikes and protests against the plan, including a three-hour wildcat walkout on June 25.

Workers at Zalain Transformados in Lesaka, Spain, finished an eight-day strike to demand the company provide an acceptable pay offer. *Europa Press* reported that more than 90 percent of the workers at the plant voted in favour of a strike, which began on July 15.

The works council said cuts in hours during the pandemic cost some workers as much as 6,000 euros, while the company made 2 million euros in profit in 2020.

Workers at the wind turbine manufacturer Vestas in three towns in Denmark walked out on a spontaneous strike on the morning of July 15, after the United Federation of Danish Workers (3F) agreed to a mere 90 øre (0.12 euro) pay increase.

3F declared the strike illegal and had a local official order its members back to work, *Sjællandske Nyheder* reported, and work resumed at 11am. While giving comments to the media condemning the strike as illegal, 3F capitulated totally to the company's threat of a lockout when Vestas said that any worker who did not return immediately would be suspended for the whole summer, according to *Jydske Vestkysten*. The union merely promised to take up a fight for better wages after the summer ends.

A campaign of warning strikes by metalworkers in the Netherlands ended, after the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions and Christian National Trade Union Federation signed an agreement with the employers' association last week.

The new collective agreement covers 160,000 workers in the sector, including a pay increase of 2.3 percent for 2021 and three percent in 2022, according to the *Algemeen Dagblad*. Numerous warning strikes and short protests were called by the FNV and CNV, generally isolated to a single region, after rejecting the employers' 2.25 percent pay offer. An FNV official described the pay increase, which is barely above inflation, as "wonderful."

Miners in state-owned uranium mines in the Kirovograd province of

Ukraine began a protest on July 12, against the continued non-payment of wages, blocking an access road, reported *RIA*. The protestors demanded the payment of three million dollars in back pay, and announced they plan to continue their demonstration indefinitely.

Miners have protested, taken part in stoppages and occupied mines recently in protest over the state-owned mining company's failure to pay wages, travelling to Kiev for a major protest in May.

Partial stoppages by Tax Administration of Kosovo (TAK) workers continued this week over demands for improved working conditions and independence of the service.

Following last week's single three-hour stoppage, the TAK Workers' Union called additional strikes every day from 8am to 12pm starting on Monday. *Kosova Press* reported the union threatened to escalate the strikes further to cover the full working day next week.

The Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) suspended a planned three-day strike supposed to begin on Monday, over safety and pay at the Doyle Shipping Group in Dublin, where a worker was killed on the job in May, *The Journal* reported.

In a press release on July 9, the union said members voted "overwhelmingly in favour of industrial action," but suspended it in favour of talks with management. SIPTU's press release did not even mention the fatality, saying the main reason for the vote was "due to the continued refusal of management to recognise SIPTU as their union of choice for the purpose of collective bargaining."

The almost month-long strike of workers at the Nedex Chemical plant in Dilovas?, Turkey, was ended last week by the Petrol-?? union after it agreed to the company's offer of a 1150 lira pay increase in the two-year contract, according to *Evrensel*.

The strike began after the company refused to offer more than 850 lira, while the union demanded 1450. The union said that the offer amounted to a total pay increase of 37.5 percent over the two years, which is approximately the equivalent of the official inflation rate of 17.5 percent annually. However, the rate at which prices are increasing is around 30 percent.

A group of 17 specialist aero engine engineers at the Rolls-Royce jet engine blade production aero factory in Barnoldswick, England walked out on Monday. The strike was to last all week, after which the factory will close for two weeks for its annual shutdown. Following the shutdown, the Unite union members will stop work on August 9 and 20.

The engineers are concerned about long-term job security at the historic site. Unite will ballot the rest of the Barnoldswick workforce. Should the ballot favour strike action, it will only begin late summer, said Unite.

Unite members took part in a nine-week long series of strikes at the factory which ended in January. Rolls-Royce wanted to cut back the workforce by transferring around 350 posts to its Singapore facility. The 500 finish inspectors, machinists, electricians and instrumentation staff voted by a 94 percent majority to strike.

On January 8, the company and the Unite union agreed a deal. According to the *Lancashire Telegraph* newspaper, the deal would save the 350 jobs earmarked to be transferred overseas. The company said it would establish a training centre of excellence. Rolls-Royce is now pushing for only 200 jobs to be retained on site.

Rolls-Royce is the major employer in Barnoldswick, and began production at the site in 1943.

The 140 refuse workers in the London Borough of Bexley are continuing their strike, begun on July 12, until July 25. The Unite union members work for outsourcing company Serco, providing refuse collection for Bexley council.

Strikers hold daily pickets outside the depot on Thames Road. Unite accuse the police of using heavy-handed tactics against lawful pickets.

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, owed thousands of pounds. Refuse workers in Bexley are on a minimum of £10.25 an hour, which is below the London Living Wage. Refuse workers in neighbouring Greenwich are on £13 an hour.

The contract for refuse collection for Bexley currently held by Serco expires in October. Bexley council announced the contract will be taken over by Countrystyle Recycling, and promised workers they will be paid the London living wage of minimum £10.85.

Staff employed by contractor ISS, providing catering, support and security services at the UK Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy government offices began a three-day strike Monday. They 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.

Further industrial action by rail workers on UK London to Scotland sleeper rail service over pay freeze

From July 30, UK rail workers on the Serco Caledonian Sleeper rail will not perform any higher-grade duties, work rest days or do overtime.

In June, the workers held an 11-day strike after voting by an 85 percent majority. The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members are opposed to a pay freeze imposed by rail company Serco. The further action was sanctioned after talks between RMT and Serco under the auspices of Acas (government mediation service) broke down. According to the RMT, Serco only offered an improved pay offer if the agreement included "efficiency savings."

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

UK call centre workers employed by Capita in Bury are holding regular protests Fridays, outside its site in the town. They have also protested outside Capita headquarters in London.

Capita, which runs the call centre on behalf of mobile phone company, Tesco Mobile, wants to close the Bury operation by the end of September, and transfer the posts to a site in Runcorn. Around a quarter of the staff will be offered the option to work from home, but the remainder would have to relocate.

The Communications Workers Union (CWU) says means a 70-mile round trip to get to the call centre in Runcorn, and that public transport links are not good. They requested Capita rethink its proposals and maintain a site in Bury. Manchester regional mayor, Andy Burnham called on Capita to reconsider.

Cleaners working for the Churchill Group protested outside Facebook's offices in London on Wednesday. The Cleaners & Allied Independent Workers Union members were protesting unsafe working conditions, bullying and cuts in hours.

Around 50 Scottish Air Traffic Control (ATC) workers at Highlands and Islands Airports Limited (HIAL) will hold a one-day strike on July 29. They began industrial action in January, including working to roster, refusing to do overtime apart from emergencies, and refusing to train new controllers who were not on-site during the industrial action ballot last November.

The Prospect union members refuse to engage with HIAL's plans to close the current ATC facilities. HIAL proposes to close ATC facilities in the Scottish islands, and instead remotely base the facilities in Inverness.

Twenty-one biomedical scientists at the East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust in Burnley and Blackburn, England are rebalotting for further strikes

over pay when their current strikes end July 28. The ballot will begin July 21, and close July 27. They began all-out strike on May 31.

The Unite union members, who voted by an 85 percent majority for their current walkout, are in a long-running dispute over the hospital trust reneging on a 2019 agreement to upgrade pay. They are seeking a lump sum payment to cover the pay loss. The workers are owed up to £8,000. The scientists are responsible for analysing patient blood samples.

Unite complain management refuse to involve the Acas government mediation service. In a July 15 statement, Unite said, “Our members are reluctantly holding a second strike ballot which could mean, if successful, industrial action into the autumn. However, we are keen to avoid that outcome and Unite’s door is open 24/7 for constructive talks—and, once more, we invite the trust management to show a maturity that they have failed so far to demonstrate in getting around the table and resolving this dispute.”

Lecturers at 15 further education colleges across England voted to strike over low pay. In addition, lecturers at three colleges comprising the Capital City College Group in London voted for action over pay, working conditions and redundancy threats.

The University and College Union (UCU) members voted by an average majority of 89 percent on an average turnout of over 62 percent, at colleges including Bristol, Lambeth, Liverpool and Sheffield.

Compared to teachers in secondary schools, the pay gap of college lecturers is around £9,000. The UCU estimates the pay of college lecturers eroded by around 30 percent over the last decade. No specifics were given on what action might be taken in the Autumn. The union called on the employers’ body the Association of Colleges to negotiate.

The University Executive Board (UEB) of Sheffield University, England is planning to close the university’s archaeology department. The department is ranked seventh among UK archaeology departments. A meeting of around 200 University and College Union (UCU) members voted to ballot for sustained industrial action during the autumn semester. They are calling on the UEB to reverse its decision to close the department.

An online petition opposing the closure of the renowned department attracted 45,000 signatures, including international support.

Between March 1 and September 20, UK universities carried through over 3,000 redundancies with no opposition from the UCU. The UCU listed 536 ballots for industrial action up to August 31, 2020, testifying to members’ desire to oppose the marketisation of higher education and redundancies, but UCU sanctioned only 12 stoppages.

A vote by the six gravediggers employed by Barry council in Wales was unanimously in favour of walking out. The GMB union members oppose Barry council’s imposed change to their working conditions, meaning working until 7pm in the summer. The GMB did not issue any notice of strike dates but said it was consulting on dates in August.

Cleaners working for Just Ask Estates Limited in the UK capital voted to hold a one-day strike. The outsource company provides toilet cleaning services to the London Royal Parks. No date was set, but the strike could be as early as July 30. The 32 PCS and United Voices of the World members voted by 100 percent on an 81 percent turnout to strike.

They demand pay and conditions, including pensions, be brought in line with employees directly employed by the Royal Parks. In addition, they are demanding the reinstatement of a colleague, sacked after returning late from leave, in spite of having informed management that the delay was as a result of COVID-19 restrictions.

Around 50 UK workers at UPS logistics in Gloucester voted for a series of strikes. The Unite union members have been raising concerns for 18 months, including over health and safety issues and bullying.

According to Unite, the company depot is under investigation for health and safety concerns by the Health and Safety Executive.

The workers voted by a 100 percent majority to walk out. The stoppages

will begin with a 24-hour strike July 30, followed by a week-long strike beginning August 2. A series of 24-hour strikes will take place in August. A three-day strike is slated for September 1 together with a one-day strike September 6.

The strike of 12 UK housing maintenance workers employed by the housing charity St Mungo’s begun April 22 was suspended by the Unite union. The charity runs 3,200 accommodation units in Bournemouth, Brighton, Bristol, London, Milton Keynes, Oxford and Reading.

The strikers accused the maintenance section managers of bullying. They returned to work after St Mungo’s and Unite agreed an independent review would examine the charges.

A Unite representative, suspended for initially raising the bullying grievances and placed on a charge of gross misconduct for raising the grievance, remains suspended pending the outcome. He was accused of causing “distress” to management.

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 would create a lower-paid workforce with inferior conditions.

A planned 72-hour strike due to begin midnight on Monday was called off by the GMB union. UK ancillary hospital workers, including porters, cleaners and catering staff at Airedale Hospital, Keighley, GMB members are opposed to 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.

The GMB called off the walkout after the hospital trust agreed to increase funding for the pay of outsourced staff. The union balloted members this week on the deal and the result is due Friday.



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