

Strike wave in Iran over pay and arrears continues to spread; warning pay strikes in Germany's retail and mail order sector; strikes over COVID safety by driver and vehicle registration staff in Wales continue; further rail strikes at ScotRail over pay

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 strike by oil production workers employed by contractors is in its sixth week. The number of strikers has grown, with workers from 114 oil refineries across 35 cities are now involved in the action. Some 60,000 contract workers 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 was a growth of contractors operating in the industry, many controlled by Iranian state officials. The contractors cut pay and undermined working conditions.

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

Workers at the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane company in the city of Shush have been on strike for two weeks. Among their demands are the payment of wage arrears, reinstatement of sacked workers, the removal of corrupt company officials and the immediate provision of COVID-19 vaccinations.

On Monday, nurses and other staff at the Khomeini hospital in Karaj held a protest rally over wage arrears. The same day, retired workers of the Iranian state-run broadcasting organisation protested in Tehran against their meagre pensions from their former employers. They held banners proclaiming 90 percent of the broadcasting company retirees lived below the poverty line.

Monday also marked the third day of a strike by water and sewage workers in the city of Izeh, in Khuzestan province over arrears of wages.

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

Protestors in the Iraqi city of Basra, in the oil-rich area of the country blocked highways and set fire to tyres as they protested electric power outages.

In Iran protests took place in several cities over power outages. The

shortages led to an apology by outgoing Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. Protests in the southwestern Iranian province of Khuzestan over water shortages were met with violence by security forces that led to at least eight deaths.

Europe

Over the last two weeks, workers in Germany's retail and mail order sector continued warning strikes to demand a pay rise in their collective agreement.

The United Services Union (Verdi) called multiple short stoppages as part of collective bargaining negotiations covering 280,000 workers, demanding an increase to the monthly salary of 4.5 percent plus 45 euros.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported that on July 22, 200 workers from 11 different stores joined a warning strike and protest in Erfurt, and a further 60 in Seeburg am Süßen See. The paper reported further stoppages on Monday in Leipzig, Chemnitz and Gera, and others reported workers in Hanover, Berlin and Brandenburg joined a warning strike on July 23, and in Osnabrück on July 24. A separate strike in the wholesale sector was also called by Verdi on Monday.

Hospital workers at a clinic in the German town of Bad Lippspringe began a four-day warning strike on Tuesday and joined a protest on Wednesday, following multiple actions including a five-day stoppage in June, reported *Westfalen-Blatt*.

Verdi is calling for the 1,400 staff at the clinic to be included in the same collective agreement as public sector medical workers.

A planned strike by Hungarian air traffic controllers was banned this week, after the country's president Viktor Orbán personally intervened with two decrees extending the list of sectors in which workers are banned from striking.

In March 2020, the president was granted extensive powers to rule by decree, ostensibly to deal with the pandemic, but this was intended to be used against the working class.

Garda World reported that the air traffic controllers planned to strike for five hours each day between July 27 and August 2. The Hungarian Air Traffic Controllers Union is one of three unions involved in three years of negotiations with HungaroControl, and its members were scheduled to

strike after it did not sign the agreement reached by the other two unions.

Workers at Infraestruturas de Portugal (IP), the company responsible for maintaining Portuguese railways, began a campaign of partial strikes on Wednesday, scheduled to last until August 8, reported *Sapo*. They began an overtime ban lasting until September.

Since June, workers at IP and the other state-owned railway company, Comboios de Portugal held multiple strikes to demand safe staffing levels and pay increases.

The unions at Groundforce, the main baggage handling company in Portuguese airports, called off the remaining strikes planned for July and the start of August after the company agreed to pay overdue wages.

After a two-day strike on July 17 and 18 grounded multiple flights at Lisbon airport, the government guaranteed that the state-owned company TAP, which owns 49.9 percent of the shares in Groundforce, would pay the salaries for July.

Logistics workers at the General Cable warehouse in Abrera, Catalonia, Spain, held a third 24-hour strike on Tuesday, following earlier strikes on July 13 and 20, according to *Crónica*.

The strike was called by the Workers Commissions (CCOO) union after the multinational company Prysmian dismissed seven workers at the warehouse as part of a plan to shut down its operations in Catalonia, signed off by the works councils, which will lead to the dismissal and relocation of 500 workers.

Workers responsible for waste collection in multiple towns on the Spanish island of Majorca voted to walk out over the next few weeks over poor pay and dangerous working conditions.

Europa Press reported last week that workers at UTE Capdepera, the company which manages waste in the municipality of Capdepera, voted to approve an indefinite strike from August 8, after the company proposed a pay freeze for 2021.

The agency also reported the CCOO union scheduled indefinite strikes in the municipality of Alcúdia and the county of Pla de Mallorca beginning on August 16, stating working conditions were unsafe due to the conditions of the vehicles in the subcontracted companies.

An indefinite strike is scheduled to begin on August 4 by workers at the Herbusa and Ute Es Vedrà cleaning companies in Ibiza over collective bargaining.

Workers at SAS Ground Handling at Denmark's Copenhagen Airport held a one-day stoppage on July 22, after the company terminated its agreement with the local unions and dictated cuts to wages and conditions, *Folktidende* reported.

The strike led to the delay of multiple flights to and from the capital.

The United Federation of Danish Workers (3F) called on the company to negotiate with them again, telling the press they hoped "the parties can find each other and encourage our members to go back to work, as the work stoppage is contrary to the collective agreement."

Workers at Florence and Pisa airports in Italy held a short stoppage on Monday, to protest the sale of the baggage handling section by the company Toscana Aeroporti, *ANSA* reported. Four unions called the 12-hour strike, which stopped a number of flights.

Construction workers demonstrated in Genoa on July 21, to demand the contract for building activities in the province is renewed, and training and recruitment in the industry increased due to the lack of personnel.

According to *ANSA*, the protest was called by all the trade unions in the construction sector, ahead of their meeting on Thursday with industry representatives. The industry body is arguing that an increase in the cost of materials made it difficult to commit to renewing the contract, despite an increase in building activity and access to European and national investment funds.

Eight childcare workers at the Petits Chaperons Rouges crèche in Dijon, France held a one-day strike on July 22, to denounce their working conditions and demand more staff, *France Bleu* reported.

One worker said that there are legally enough staff for the 36 children in the crèche, but that the ten staff regularly work 10-hour days, and the crèche does not employ a doctor as it should.

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) staff in Swansea, Wales are continuing their fight to demand workplace safety. On August 2, workers in the Drivers' Medical department begin a month-long strike.

The stoppages are part of a series over COVID-19 safety, ongoing since April. The strikes led to a huge backlog of unprocessed forms.

Around 1,400 Public and Commercial Service union (PCS) members voted to strike by almost 72 percent on a turnout of just over 50 percent. The DVLA employs around 6,000 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 home working 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 ScotRail are continuing their Sunday stoppages begun March. The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) members are demanding equal overtime pay with train drivers.

Train cleaners working for ScotRail began an overtime and rest day working ban on July 13 over the same issue.

The dispute approaching its fourth month is one of the UK's longest running.

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 summer and called on the Scottish government to intervene.

A recent RMT's press release called for a negotiated settlement: "We continue to press Transport Scotland, the Government and Abellio (ScotRail's parent company) to break their silence, get out of the bunker and sit down with us to negotiate a fair and just settlement."

An RMT press release of July 28 announced another section of ScotRail workers were to take industrial action over pay rates for rest day working. Gateline staff are to begin industrial action, employed on station platforms to assist passengers.

Their stoppage beginning on August 11, consists of an overtime ban, refusal to act up or work rest days. They will only work Sundays that have already been booked.

The RMT press release noted, "With yet another grade taking industrial action at ScotRail over the same issue, we call again on Transport Scotland, the Government and Abellio to face the fact that there is a real problem that needs urgently resolving and sit down with us to negotiate a fair and just settlement for all grades."

Rail staff at Hull Trains will hold 24-hour strikes each Sunday in August, beginning August 8. The RMT members oppose proposed attacks on their pension rights. The action follows previous strikes over the same issue, suspended for talks mediated by Acas which subsequently broke down.

Rail station and accommodation cleaners working for contractor Mitie, on behalf of Merseyrail held a one-day strike July 23. The RMT members

oppose a pay offer leaving them below the Real Living Wage figure of £9.50 an hour.

Workers protested outside Rail House in Liverpool where Mitie has offices. The chief executive of Mitie recently pocketed a £5 million bonus.

The latest round of strikes over pay by 140 refuse workers in the London Borough of Bexley, which ended on Sunday, was followed immediately on Monday by another round, due to finish August 1. The Unite union announced a two-week strike to begin August 9.

The workers employed by outsourcing company Serco provide refuse collection for Bexley council.

Strikers hold daily pickets outside the depot on Thames Road. Unite accuses 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, when it will be taken over by Countrystyle Recycling. The council told workers they will then be paid the London living wage of minimum £10.85.

Workers at BCM Fareva's plant in Nottingham, England held a 24-hour strike on July 22. A ballot of the 300 Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) members returned a 90 percent majority in favour of walking out against a "fire and rehire" ultimatum resulting in inferior terms and conditions.

The French-owned company produces pharmaceutical and beauty products for the Boots pharmacy chain.

In a press release USDAW expressed its willingness to help the company impose the changes if it lifted the fire and rehire threat. USDAW national officer Daniel Adams explained, "USDAW has consistently reiterated its willingness to talk should the threat of dismissal be removed, including under the auspices of ACAS if necessary. Sadly, this has been consistently rejected by the company. However, the offer remains, and the company could still prevent industrial action if they withdraw their 'fire and rehire' threat."

USDAW are yet to announce further strike dates.

Cleaners working for Just Ask Estates Limited in the UK capital were to hold a one-day strike Friday. The outsource company provides toilet cleaning services to the London Royal Parks.

A rally in support of the strikers was due the same day at 9.30am outside the Royal Parks HQ. The 32 PCS and United Voices of the World union members voted 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. They are demanding the reinstatement of a colleague, sacked after returning late from leave, despite having informed management the delay was due to COVID-19 restrictions.

A PCS press release of July 26 said the strike was going ahead, although progress was made on three out of the six demands. The outstanding issues were proposed job cuts, forced mobility and the gap between the pay and conditions of the Just Ask Estates Ltd staff and those directly employed by the Royal Parks.

Deliveroo food delivery workers in Liverpool, England held a one-hour strike Monday from 5 p.m., when they refused to accept orders. They gathered on Bold Street in the city centre. The delivery riders are in dispute with the company over the level of delivery fees.

An organiser of the strike told the *Liverpool Echo* newspaper, "The strikes will go on each evening for an extra hour until Deliveroo acts."

Around 40 staff at Aberdeen City housing services, Scotland began a four-day strike Tuesday, over workload. The Unite union members

walked out over the same issues earlier in the year.

They are protesting staff cuts resulting from a reorganisation of the department, merging the roles of housing officers and support officers. They are also protesting increased workloads as a result of mounting housing arrears and the numbers of people registering as homeless. They have mounted pickets outside Marischal College (Aberdeen Council headquarters) each day.

Workers employed by shoe manufacturer Clarks at their base in Street in England demonstrated against the threat of fire and rehire on Monday. According to the news website burnham-on-sea.com, residents from Burnham on Sea, a town about 20 miles away, travelled to support the protest.

Clarks has its headquarters and a warehouse in Street. The Unite union has around 200 members in the headquarters and a few members in the warehouse. The Community union has 100 members in the warehouse. According to a Unite press release, both unions are "considering strike action."

The protest was addressed by Labour MP Barry Gardiner who is piloting an as yet unwritten and ineffectual bill to outlaw fire and rehire in parliament. The unions are campaigning for MPs to pass the bill and are opposed to a struggle to oppose the attacks through a mass mobilisation of the members in united offensive.

Community assistant general secretary John McHugh was quoted in a *Daily Mirror* article July 2, saying, "We strongly urge [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."

Clarks was taken over by equity firm LionRock Capital in February, which invested £100m to acquire a majority stake. It appointed a new executive chairman and chief executive. LionRock Capital is seeking to impose 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.

On Tuesday, doctors held a protest outside the Department of Health in the UK capital. The Unite union members were protesting the lack of enhanced personal protective equipment for medical and care staff.

Academics at Liverpool university in England are to walk out on August 4 until August 14. This is the latest round of action over job cuts.

It follows an international boycott announced on July 10, by the University and College Union (UCU). The UCU is asking academics not to apply for jobs advertised at the university, accept invitations to lecture or organise conferences there.

UCU members voted by an 84 percent majority to protest proposed redundancies in the Health and Life Sciences Faculty. The university initially proposed to axe 47 jobs, subsequently reduced to 24. The university devised so-called "rank and yank" criteria to select academics deemed to be the worst performing. UCU members condemned the criteria as "statistically innumerate."

A marking and assessment boycott by around 1,300 Liverpool University academics began on June 18. The university management announced it would withhold 100 percent of the wages of those taking part. The staff are performing all other duties. A June 18 UCU press release explained, "it [the University] considers all other work staff carry out to be voluntary and not worthy of payment."

Last Saturday, staff and students joined a march of around 300 people in the city against the job cuts. Academics held a three-week strike beginning May 10, which followed a programme of working contracted hours and boycotting voluntary activities.

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 refuse to oppose marketisation and redundancies in a joint struggle across the education sector.

Train managers at the UK's East Midlands Railways company are to hold 24-hour strikes every Sunday beginning August 8 until September 26.

The RMT members are protesting the new working arrangements imposed on them for operating Class 360 trains. They argue that having just one train manager on the 12-carriage trains represents a safety threat.

UK workers employed by outsourcing company Serco providing refuse collection services in Sandwell voted by a 95 percent majority to take industrial action short of a strike and by 87 percent to walk out.

The GMB union members accuse management of bullying and victimisation of those raising safety concerns. The strike to be announced could take place within the next two weeks.

Around 1,000 UK drivers working for XPO Logistics Drinks Ltd balloted from Wednesday for a possible stoppage. The ballot closes August 9. The Unite union members are protesting a below-inflation pay offer of 1.4 percent by the company for 2021.

The drivers, based at 26 depots across the UK, are responsible for about 40 percent of total UK beer deliveries. They estimate they lost around £9,000 over the last year due to being furloughed and loss of overtime opportunities.

Around 2,750 catering workers employed by seven offshore catering companies, operating on offshore oil and gas rigs, are balloting for strike action over a pay offer. The ballot closes August 2, with the result announced August 3.

They were offered one percent by the Catering Offshore Trade Association, the body representing the catering firms. A further one percent is on offer provided they accept a lower redundancy package.

Staff at the Greater Manchester Metrolink tram service voted in a consultative ballot by a 90 percent majority to ballot for industrial action. The Unite union members voted to reject a miserly pay offer by Keolis Amey Metrolink Limited, the company running the tram system serving Greater Manchester.

Regional Unite union official Dave Roberts described the company's offer as "frankly pitiful," adding, "'Workers were due to receive a pay rise in January and it is nearly August.' He declared that "Unite is now actively preparing for a full industrial action," which could "impact the service," before adding "if members vote yes [in another ballot] then strikes could occur later this year."

Unite has not revealed details of the company's pay offer or what they would recommend the workers accept.

UK HGV drivers are threatening to walk out on August 23 in a "stay at home" day. The drivers are protesting low pay and deteriorating working conditions—exacerbated by the shortage of drivers, a by-product of the pandemic and Brexit.

The proposed strike was organised through a Facebook group page, HGV drivers on STRIKE United Kingdom. The Facebook page has over 3,000 members.

Mark Schubert, a lorry driver of 40 years, told the *Guardian*, "For far too many years we have been ignored, exploited and taken for granted. Now our time has come, now we have a window of opportunity to be listened to."

Following its suspension of the 72-hour strike by around 150 UK catering workers, cleaners and porters at Airedale General Hospital, Keighley, the GMB union declared the dispute officially over. This follows the result of a ballot of the union members on an offer from the health trust.

The GMB members were 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 continued to be paid at NHS staff rates, many of those joining after AGHS was established were paid at lower rates.

The trust agreed to fund the difference in pay to erode the differentials. A GMB press release of July 23 stated, "The GMB victory means the workers will see their pay significantly increase from the date of the agreement—with the hourly pay for the majority of workers will go up from £9.00 per hour to £9.77 per hour this year, aligning fully with the NHS Band 2 hourly rates of pay by next year."

A proposed strike by UPS parcel delivery drivers working at the company's depot in Gloucester, England was suspended by Unite. The drivers were to strike Friday, and August 2 and 3. The drivers voted to walk out over allegations of bullying and safety concerns.

Unite stated talks with UPS were making progress. If the talks fail to reach resolution, strikes could recommence August 4, and further scheduled strikes due in August and September go ahead.

Africa

A two-month strike by workers at the Nestlé factory in East London, South Africa ended with the union negotiating a four percent wage increase and a one-off R3,000 payment despite initially demanding a 7.5 percent rise.

The National Union of Food, Beverages, Wine, Spirits and Allied Workers members want wages aligned with other Nestlé factories in the country. This will be negotiated nationally and include the Food and Allied Workers Union, which did not bring their East London Nestlé factory members out on strike.

Nestlé's global profit after tax in 2020 was USD13.5 billion.

Student nurses in North West province, South Africa rejected a directive forcing them to administer COVID-19 vaccines as they do not have personal protective equipment, training or medical cover.

Many Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa student members have not been vaccinated and are not eligible for compensation if they contract the virus.

They are already behind with their studies because of the pandemic, and being forced to work in the vaccination programme will cause further delays in their education, risking their registration with the South African Nursing Council regulatory body.

A majority of the unions representing public sector workers in South Africa reached an agreement with the government over pay. The Public Servants Association union agreed Monday to sign up to the pay deal for 2021/22, despite its members previously voting for a strike to put pressure on the employer.

The decision to sign, joining other unions such as the South African Democratic Teachers Union, the Health and Other Services Personnel Trade Union of South Africa (Hospersa), the National Professional Teachers Organisation of South Africa and the National Teachers Union, meant that the required threshold of 50 percent was reached.

South Africa's largest public sector union, the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union refused to sign, and hope to overturn the offer of a 1.5 percent salary increase, a one-off payment of R5,000 (of which R4,000 is back pay) and a monthly cash allowance of between R1,220 and R1,695. Annual inflation in South Africa was 5.2 percent in May.

The Hospersa union stated, "The offer is below what its members would ordinarily accept but weighed it against the country's current economic climate."

Staff employed by South Africa's ruling African National Congress (ANC) are threatening criminal action against leading officials over workers' deductions which have not been paid into their pension and provident funds.

They gave their bosses until the end of July to clear medical insurance, pension fund and salary arrears. They are still waiting for June's wages and are not confident about July's payment. A leak from an ANC national executive committee meeting suggests no clear plan to address the party's financial problems.

The ANC staff intend to consult the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration and then the financial ombudsman. If the arrears are still outstanding, they will go to the National Prosecuting Authority.

Staff at the Liberian National Transit Authority walked out on July 21, after working for four months without pay. Many demonstrated outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also the site of the temporary office of the President.

The Liberian government declared the strike illegal, threatening to withdraw the United Workers Union of Liberia's registration certificate for allowing the strike. The government said the union umbrella group should hold workshops to train local bureaucrats to enforce the Labour Law.

The labour minister imposed a settlement including one month's arrears, with 50 workers getting two months. The employers have three months to pay the arrears. Not paying workers' wages is not illegal, but striking to demand payment is.

Also in Liberia, more than 40 health workers at state-run C.H. Rennie Hospital in Kakata, Margibi County protested on July 19 to demand salary arrears. The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning claim the workers are not owed arrears.

Official figures for COVID-19 in Liberia are 5,396 cases and 148 deaths, an underestimate due to the dire state of health infrastructure and low level of testing.

Nigerian university staff are poised to strike again, following the government breaking most of the promises made to end the strike last year.

The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) members walked out last year due to the introduction of the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), a system for payment of salaries directly into the bank accounts of government employees. IPPIS started in 2007 and caused payment problems.

The ASUU ended the strike in December 2020. The ASUU admits only two promises were kept.



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