

Strikes spread across UK rail network over pay, pensions, conditions; South African construction workers protesting unpaid wages clash with private security firm; strikes continue in Iran over pay and arrears

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.

Weekly 24-hour strikes by train conductors at UK rail company over imposition of inferior contracts continue

Senior conductors working for East Midlands Railways (EMR) held their twelfth consecutive 24-hour strike last Sunday.

The strike of Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) members began on May 16, and is in opposition to imposing inferior terms and conditions on some conductors, including a reduction of £5,500 during the first year of employment, as well as forcing them to work additional hours that are not part of current terms and conditions.

Strikes of rail workers at ScotRail over overtime pay continue

Several hundred train conductors and ticket examiners at ScotRail held a further walkout on Sunday. They began Sunday stoppages in March. The RMT members are demanding equal overtime pay with train drivers. The dispute is one of the UK's longest running.

The RMT said ScotRail were endangering safety by drafting in managers to replace the strikers, as they lack safety training and knowledge. The union warned the dispute could continue throughout summer and called on the Scottish government to intervene.

The team managers, members of the Transport and Salaried Staff Association (TSSA), have now voted for strike action in protest at being deployed as strike-breakers.

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

The RMT noted publication of a report by Abellio, ScotRail's parent company, outlining job and service cuts. According to the RMT, the plans include closing 140 ticket offices across the network and cutting 85,000 rail services annually leading to a loss of 1,000 jobs.

From August 11, gateline workers at ScotRail, also RMT members, will

also begin action over pay rates for rest day working. They will implement an overtime ban, refuse to act up or work rest days. In addition, they will only work Sundays that have already been booked.

Unite union ends strike of parking enforcement staff at London borough

The Unite union has declared the dispute by 45 parking enforcement officers working for Ealing council in London at an end.

The Unite union members, employed by outsourcing company Serco to provide traffic warden services for the London borough, had been taking intermittent strike action since May 5.

The parking enforcement officers voted to end the dispute after Serco issued an apology for targeting union activists for severance and signed an agreement with Unite regarding bullying and harassment. Workers had also accused the company of aggressive use of a new absence procedure to target individuals for dismissal.

Lorry drivers at London delivery firm being balloted for strike action over pay enhancement

Lorry drivers working for Booker Retail Partners, a wholesale company delivering to around 1,500 convenience stores in London and the southeast of England, are to be balloted for strike action.

The 30 Unite members at Booker's Thameside depot are demanding that a £5 an hour temporary pay increase for drivers at the Hemel Hempstead depot also be paid to them. The Hemel Hempstead drivers were awarded the temporary increase in response to the nationwide shortage of Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) drivers. The ballot will take place over the last two weeks of August.

Health staff in London march as health unions begin ballot over pay

offer

On July 30, around 200 National Health Service (NHS) staff marched from London's St Thomas' hospital, near the UK parliament, to the prime minister's residence at Downing Street. They were marching in opposition to the miserly three percent rise recommended by the Pay Review Body.

The three percent offer was a revised offer. Originally, they were offered one percent. With inflation currently estimated to be four percent over the coming year, three percent is still a wage cut in real terms.

Among protesters were GMB and Unite union members. All the health unions have made claims for substantial pay rises to make up for the erosion of pay over the last decade. However, none will back up the calls with the necessary action to win such an award.

The GMB began a ballot of its NHS members over the three percent pay offer on August 6. The ballot will run until September 17. The GMB is recommending members reject the offer, and is calling for a 15 percent rise.

Thousands of Unison union members working in the health service are also taking part in a ballot, which will run until September 10. They are being asked if they accept the government's three percent pay offer and if not, are they prepared to industrial action for an increased offer.

Further strikes by pharmaceutical workers in Nottingham, England against "fire and rehire"

Workers at BCM Fareva's plant in Nottingham, England have held two further 24-hour strikes, on July 30-31 and August 1-2. This follows 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 and The Body Shop.

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 said, "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."

An USDAW press release on July 30 again appealed to BCM Fareva to see reason. It stated, "Usdaw is prepared to talk and reach a settlement, if the company withdraws from 'firing and rehiring' our members. Management should put fairness first, stop the threats and return to the negotiating table." At British Gas (GMB), Go North West and Jacobs Douwe Egberts (Unite) the unions have carried out sellouts of workers terms and conditions, while boasting that they are fighting "fire and rehire" ultimatums.

RMT rail union suspends planned strike by London underground rail staff over abolition of night grade driver posts

A 24-hour strike by drivers on the London underground rail system, due to have taken place on Tuesday, was called off by the RMT rail union.

RMT declared a suspension of the strike to allow talks with the employer Transport for London. The talks will be held under the auspices of the government mediation service Acas. The RMT announced should the talks break down, stoppages over four days will commence August 24.

The drivers are opposed to Transport for London's (TfL) plans to eliminate the grade of night driver. The RMT said this could lead to around 200 job losses, but TfL disputes this. Eliminating the grade will impact on part-time drivers, mainly women, who are able to incorporate part-time working as part of their work/life balance.

Academics at Liverpool University in England hold further strikes over staff cuts

Academics at Liverpool University in England walked out on Wednesday, and will stay out until Saturday. They are also due to stop work from August 9-14.

This is the latest round of action to protest job cuts. Initially the university proposed the use of compulsory redundancy to cut 47 posts in the Health and Life Sciences Faculty. This was then subsequently reduced to 24 posts and now has been reduced to two posts.

The university devised so-called "rank and yank" criteria to select academics deemed to be the worst performing. University and College Union (UCU) members condemned the criteria as "statistically innumerate."

The determination of the academics to fight on is shown by the 97 percent vote to continue the strike action at a meeting held on Tuesday. This followed an 84 percent vote for strike action against the initial redundancy proposal.

The sticking point for the UCU is the use of compulsory redundancies, as the union has assisted in the cutting of many university posts nationally through the use of voluntary redundancies.

The walkouts follow a 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.

Around 1,300 academics at the university began a marking and assessment boycott 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, as instructed by the UCU. 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."

On July 24, staff and students joined a march of around 300 people in the city against the job cuts. Academics previously held a three-week strike beginning May 10, which followed a programme of working contracted hours and boycotting voluntary activities.

The current round of action will disrupt the university's clearing process for students applying to the university after the declaration of A-level exam results.

Bus drivers in Merthyr Tydfil, Wales, balloted over pay

Drivers working for Merthyr Tydfil bus depot of transport conglomerate Stagecoach are being balloted for strike action. They are seeking a pay increase. The ballot began Tuesday runs for two weeks.

The company walked out of talks saying the drivers demand was unaffordable. The drivers want to be paid the same rate as drivers at the nearby Stagecoach depot in Porth. Overall, the drivers want parity of pay for all drivers at the companies six depots in the area.

Those being balloted Merthyr Tydfil are members of the GMB union. Other drivers at the depot are members of the Unite union. Unite is consulting with its members about holding a ballot.

USDAW union suspends strike action by Weetabix cereal production workers in Kettering, England over shift payments

USDAW has suspended a planned 24-hour strike by production workers, due to have taken place Monday at breakfast cereal maker Weetabix in Kettering, England. The union said action planned for August 9 and 10 is still scheduled.

However, an USDAW press release announcing the suspension stated, “We hope that the positive discussions earlier today (August 2) can be maintained, and a resolution can be achieved by the end of this week.”

The production workers voted by a 100 percent majority to strike. The USDAW members were threatened with a change in shift patterns and a cut in premium pay for unsocial hours.

Weetabix is stepping up its offensive with around 80 engineers at Weetabix facing the imposition of “fire and rehire” contracts.

Instead of unifying engineers and production workers, the Unite union, representing the engineers, called off a planned strike by them on June 23, to allow for weeks of talks between the union and the company.

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency staff in Swansea, Wales begin month-long strike over COVID safety

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) staff in Swansea, Wales began a month-long strike Monday. It is due to run until August 31. They are continuing their fight to demand workplace safety.

The section currently on strike is the Drivers’ Medical Department, which makes decisions on whether drivers with medical conditions are fit to drive. The strike, along with previous action, has led to a backlog of over a quarter of a million applications.

Management responded to the strike by threatening to cut annual leave of those taking part. However, following an intervention by the PCS union, management withdrew the threat.

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

The Public and Commercial Service union (PCS) is to run a consultative ballot from August 11 to September 3, to ask if members at the DVLA are prepared to take further strike action or action short of a strike over COVID-19 safety concerns.

The PCS isolated previous strikes, which were the only officially sanctioned action taken by a union over the lack of COVID-19 safety provision.

Protest planned in London by outsourced cleaners

Cleaners employed by outsourcing company City West, providing

cleaning services at the British Medical Association (BMA) headquarters, and cleaners working for outsourcing company Churchill Cleaning, who provide cleaning services at Facebook’s London headquarters, are to hold a protest.

The members of the Cleaners and Allied Independent Workers Union were set to hold a protest outside the BMA building in Tavistock Square on Thursday. The cleaners are protesting several issues, including excessive workloads. They are calling for an end to outsourcing, and improved safety measures.

Tubacex strike in Spain continues as ELA union signals willingness to negotiate cuts

Workers at Tubacex in Spain, which manufactures steel tubes, are continuing their strike, begun February, against plans to make 129 redundancies.

In May, the five unions on the strike committee rejected an offer from the company not to make any job cuts until 2024. However, in comments to *Europa Press* this week, the general secretary of the Basque Workers’ Solidarity union stated his willingness to negotiate cuts in hours and job losses.

While denouncing the larger Workers’ Commissions union for “usually signing the ERE [job cuts agreement] directly,” he announced that “we are willing to talk about the ERTE [temporary cuts in hours] and even to talk about an ERE,” insisting only that job cuts be made through “voluntary departures.”

Hungarian healthcare workers protest pay and conditions

Last Saturday, thousands of healthcare workers gathered in Budapest, Hungary to protest their pay and conditions, which deteriorated during the COVID-19 pandemic, AP reported.

The protests were called by the Hungarian Chamber of Health Care Professionals after many hospital workers were excluded from a reform in March, which gave doctors a pay rise.

AP reported that in November the Hungarian government issued an emergency decree banning healthcare workers from resigning, to prevent a mass exodus amidst worsening conditions. The powers granted to President Viktor Orbán were used for multiple attacks on the working class, including last week’s intervention by the president to ban a planned strike by air traffic controllers.

National protests by metalworkers in Italy

July 30 was the last day of a series of strikes and protests by metalworkers across Italy called by the Fim, Fiom and Uilm unions over layoffs and closures.

In Naples, workers at home-appliances manufacturer Whirlpool continued their protests at the 340 layoffs announced by the company. The company has been looking to close the plant for two years, when it began talks on “transition scenarios” with “unions and institutional stakeholders,” i.e., the government. The company ceased production in Naples in October last year.

Whirlpool want to transfer production from the southern city to the northern plant at Cassinetta di Biandronno. It said it hoped workers would make the move across country, but was clearly expecting that this would encourage many of them to quit voluntarily.

Whirlpool was among the first to take advantage of the Mario Draghi's government's relaxation of its ban on layoffs for economic reasons last month. The government has made 13 weeks of furlough funding available to manufacturing companies, during which time the companies cannot advance layoffs. Whirlpool turned the money down.

Francesco Re David, general secretary of the Fiom-Cgil union at the plant, said that if the government did not intervene it would give the impression of "letting multinationals and investment funds dictate industrial policy." The union is looking to a further meeting with government.

Elsewhere, so many disputes have erupted that the unions have been forced to extend even token protests. In Teramo, a two-hour protest was extended to four hours. Fim-Cisl union provincial secretary Marco Boccanera presented this in corporatist terms— saying "we are losing competitiveness."

Portuguese retail workers in Braga strike for pay rise

On July 30, retail workers in Braga, Portugal, joined a one-day strike to demand a pay increase, job security and overtime payments for work on holidays and weekends, according to *Noticias ao Minuto*.

The Commerce, Offices and Services of Portugal Trade Union (CESP) called the stoppage, denouncing a collective agreement signed by the Commerce, Offices and Services Workers Union of Minho that leaves many workers earning the minimum wage.

CESP is demanding a 90 euro pay increase, an increase in meal allowances and overtime payments, and a guarantee of permanent employment.

Workers at Portuguese brewery begin five-day strike

Workers at the beer company Super Bock in Portugal began a five-day strike on Thursday, as part of a campaign of strikes begun in December, according to *Impala*.

The Union of Agricultural Workers and the Food, Beverage and Tobacco Industries of Portugal members are demanding a 90 euro increase in monthly salary, 25 vacation days and a 35-hour week. In February, the company proposed a pay freeze for 2021.

The union stated the company paid nearly 100 million euros in dividends to shareholders in 2020 and 2021 so far.

Cabin crew at Brussels Airline protest working conditions

On Monday, cabin crew at Brussels Airlines in Belgium protested to denounce their working conditions, *RTL* reported.

Leaflets distributed to passengers reported workers lack rest times between flights, and are even forced to sleep on a plane not in a hotel.

The National Centre of Employees union told the *Belga* agency "working conditions were revised downwards in exchange for saving the

company" in a restructuring last year. All the union requested was an "internal control body" at the Lufthansa subsidiary to monitor working conditions.

Spanish airport security workers to strike at Malaga airport over unpaid bonuses and roster changes

The CCOO union has announced that 300 workers employed by the Sureste Group to provide security surveillance will begin an indefinite strike on August 12.

The union accuses Sureste, which took over the contract in December last year, of systematically breaching their collective agreement. Sureste have not paid 100 percent of the agreed bonuses, leaving 100 workers owed an average of 800 euros.

Sureste have also changed rest day arrangements, abandoning the five-day notice of shift changes in the collective agreement.

Health and social care workers strike vote against privatisation in Galway, Ireland

Health and social care workers at St Brigid's Mental Health Intellectual Disability Services in Ballinasloe, County Galway, Ireland, last week voted to strike over outsourcing, *Galway Bay FM* reported.

The Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) members balloted after management began a privatisation tendering process, which SIPTU says violates public service agreements.

French unions at Sermix agree factory closures and job losses

The multinational animal food company Sermix has signed an agreement with the unions at its French subsidiary to close two factories and cut over 60 jobs.

According to *Ouest France*, the agreement follows walkouts and partial strikes begun July 1 against the company's restructuring plan. The paper reported that 37 jobs will be lost in Argentan, and 27 at the Morbihan site.

It quotes company president saying they achieved the closures as "the result of a constructive social dialogue between the management and the trade unions."

One worker interviewed denounced the low redundancy payment agreed by the unions, saying "€20,000, that doesn't go far! We won nothing at all."

Industry news site *Feednavigator.com* reported in March that Sermix's parent company, Archer Daniels Midland, began plans for a restructuring in 2019 after acquiring another company, Neovia, for \$1.81 billion. This restructuring led to 120 job losses at Neovia.

French nursing home staff walk out in Brittany protesting staff shortages

Around 20 workers at the Menez Kergoff nursing home in Penmarc'h,

Brittany walked out Thursday last week. The CFDT union members, a majority of the home's staff, were raising concerns that the home is regularly understaffed by nurses, putting residents in danger.

Only two of five nurses are currently present, and they regularly work at a bare minimum emergency staffing level in order to ensure necessary care for residents.

A previous shortage of nursing assistants was addressed by the recruitment of temporary workers. The workers warn that the current shortage could leave the home operating illegally without a nurse, and could result in administrative closure.

The workers say that they notified the ARS (Regional Health Agency) in Brittany of the situation over a month ago, without any development.

Cypriot dock workers in Limassol walk out over collective bargaining dispute

Dock workers at the DP World company in Limassol, Cyprus spontaneously walked out Monday on indefinite strike.

The dockers learned that the company had made variations to the collective agreement shortly before it was to be signed. The SEK and PEO unions told press the strike would continue until the company signed the terms they originally agreed.

The unions called off a strike at DP World Limassol in March after the company promised to delay a planned 16 layoffs until after the end of negotiations.

Striking Johannesburg construction workers clash with employer's private security force

Thirty striking construction workers in Johannesburg, South Africa were arrested July 28, after a conflict with a private security firm brought in by the employer to police the dispute.

Around 500 workers employed by P&G Construction protested at their building site over unpaid wages. They say they will not leave the site until they receive the two months' wages they are owed.

Construction worker Enoch Mnisi told press that this was not the first time they had been in dispute with the company over unpaid wages. When they protested unpaid wages last year, "The company called the police and afterwards we were paid. We are having the same problem again."

South African bus workers stop work in protest over non-payment of wages

Bus workers at Autopax, an intercity bus service owned by the state-run Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA), picketed July 30, in protest at the non-payment of wages for July.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa members say salary delays are the norm. Workers are aggrieved that promised pay increases have not materialised even though negotiations were concluded in April. They blame management incompetence and call for the resignation of the CEO of PRASA.

South African union suppresses strike action over corruption

A strike due Wednesday at the Sol Plaatje municipality in Kimberley, South Africa was called off by the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU).

The planned strike was over corruption and irregular practices at the municipality, and the failure of local labour forums to convene for the last three months. It was cancelled because gatherings of more than 100 people are prohibited by lockdown restrictions. SAMWU equated industrial action with illegal acts, stating, "In view of recent incidents of lawlessness and looting, we do not want opportunists to take advantage of the situation or any acts of criminality to take place."

Resident doctors in Nigeria in further strike to demand wage arrears

Resident doctors in Nigeria went on strike on Monday over non-payment of salaries. In Abia state they are owed 19 months' arrears, while those in Imo and Ondo states are owed seven and four months' respectively.

The Nigeria Association of Resident Doctors (NARD) members first walked out in April, but failed to win their demands. NARD instructed a return to work based on a Memorandum of Action (MOA), a ploy used countless times to end strikes.

NARD president Dr. Uyilawa Okhuaihesuyi complained that the government was yet to contact the union. He said, "We are tired of them promising us on paper without actualising them."

Union supports pay cuts for hundreds of local government workers in Yobe state, Nigeria

Hundreds of local government workers in Yobe state, Nigeria are facing substantial pay cuts. Some workers voiced their opposition to the cuts to local media.

The Chairman of the Nigeria Union of Local Government Employees, Yobe state chapter, Bashehu Mustapha sided with the state government, telling the local press that the Yobe state government should be commended and the pay cut is "a temporary thing because of the economic situation."

Kenyan sugar workers on strike over non-payment of salaries

Hundreds of Kenyan sugar workers went on strike at the Chemilil sugar plant on July 28. The employees are owed salary payments dating back three years.

Rapid Deployment Unit officers from Songhor intervened after some transporters and farmers gathered at the entrance to the plant to support the company against the strikers. One of the strikers said that it was done "simply to scuttle our peaceful protests to push for payments," and alleged it was organised by the company.

The branch secretary of the Kenya Union of Sugarcane Plantation workers, Jack Osida, said the lack of payment meant the workers cannot pay school fees or feed their families.

The company has 600 permanent employees and 469 workers on contracts. It claims it cannot afford to pay salaries because it is operating below capacity.

Strikes and protests continue across Iran

The strike by workers at the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Company is entering its fourth week. On Tuesday, strikers held a rally outside the governor's office in the city of Shush. Their demands include payment of arrears of wages and the reinstatement of workers dismissed as a result of taking strike action.

The strike of oil, gas and petrochemical contract workers against low wages and poor conditions is in its seventh week. The strike has spread since it began on June 19, and now involves workers from 112 companies comprising 35 cities.

On Monday, farmers in the city of Darcheh in the province of Isfahan used diggers to refill a canal that had been dug. Security forces on site failed to intervene. The farmers claim the canal, which had been dug to channel water to a nearby oil refinery, would divert water away from their fields.

Also on Monday, retirees of the Iranian Broadcasting Organisation held a rally in Tehran to protest the inadequacy of their pensions. These have been eroded by inflation, leaving them living below the poverty line.

On Sunday, retired steel workers from central and western Iran held rallies in front of the offices of the Isfahan and Khuzestan steel companies. They were demanding increases to their pensions.

Staff at Lebanese hospital declare strike over pay

Staff at the Rafik Hariri University Hospital in Lebanon declared a strike July 29. The hospital is a lead hospital for treating COVID-19 cases and giving inoculations. The staff were protesting the dwindling value of their salaries. The majority of health staff are paid in lira, which has been losing its value as a result of soaring inflation in the country.



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