

ScotRail's Sunday pay strikes in Scotland enter seventh month; Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency strike in Wales over COVID safety; Firefighters in Gironde, France strike for more resources; Nigerian doctors' stoppage over pay 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.

Scotland's ScotRail workers Sunday strikes over pay hits six-month mark

Several hundred train conductors and ticket examiners at ScotRail walked out on Sunday. The dispute by train conductors begun in March is entering its seventh month of Sunday walkouts. Ticket examiners joined the dispute at the end of April.

Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers Union (RMT) members are demanding equal overtime pay with train drivers. The dispute is one of the UK's longest running.

The RMT said ScotRail is 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, Transport and Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) members, voted to strike in protest at being deployed as strike-breakers.

Train cleaners at ScotRail began an overtime and rest day working ban on July 13.

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

From August 11, gateline workers at ScotRail, also RMT members, will implement an overtime ban, and refuse to act up or work rest days to protest overtime rates. They will only work Sundays already booked.

The RMT betrayed the five-year struggle of railworkers against the introduction of Driver Operated Trains, reaching agreements that undermined the safety-critical role of conductors.

Strike by train managers at UK's East Midlands Railways company

Train managers at the UK's East Midlands Railways company held a 24-hour strike Sunday.

Further strikes are planned every Sunday 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.

Engineers at Scottish rail company ballot for possible strike action for pay increase

Engineers in Scotland at Abellio ScotRail are balloting for possible strike action over pay. The ballot closes September 1.

The Unite union members want a substantial pay offer, the reinstatement of the rest day working agreement, more flexibility over leave arrangements and a pledge of no compulsory redundancies. Unite stated strike action could take place from early September.

Planned strike by rail workers on Hull Trains in England called off by RMT union

A planned strike on Sunday by UK rail workers at rail company Hull Trains was called off by the RMT.

The RMT said an overtime ban and proposed strikes would continue for August 15, 22 and 29 unless its dispute was resolved. 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 broke down.

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

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) staff in Swansea, Wales are in the second week of a month-long strike to run until August 31. The current stoppages are part of a series ongoing since April.

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members are continuing their fight to demand workplace safety. This dispute began after management insisted the more than 2,000 staff work in the offices, despite lack of social distancing. In the second half of 2020, a COVID outbreak led to 600 cases and one fatality.

The section currently on strike is the Drivers' Medical Department, which decides whether drivers with medical conditions are fit to drive. The strike, along with previous action, led to a backlog of over a quarter of a million applications. According to the PCS more than two thirds of the department workers support the strike call.

The PCS opened another consultative ballot on Wednesday to run until September 3. Members are asked if they are prepared to take further strikes 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 rally by academic staff at Liverpool University, England on strike over redundancies

Workers at Liverpool University, England, members of the University and College Union (UCU), walked out for four days last week and are striking all this week against job cuts.

Initially the university proposed the use of compulsory redundancy to cut 47 posts in the Health and Life Sciences Faculty. This was reduced to 24, then two posts.

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."

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

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

The walkouts follow a boycott announced by the union on July 10. 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 began a marking and assessment boycott on June 18. 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 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 action will disrupt the university's clearing process for students applying to the university after the declaration of A-level exam results this week.

Further strike by aero engine engineers in Barnoldswick UK over jobs threat

A group of 17 specialist aero engine engineers at the Rolls-Royce jet engine blade production aero factory in Barnoldswick, England held a one-day stoppage Monday. The engineers are concerned about long-term job security.

The 17 Unite union members previously walked out the week before the annual two-week shutdown, with the factory reopening Monday. A protest outside the factory at midday was joined by Unite officials.

Unite is balloting the whole factory for strike action against the job cuts closing Friday. A yes vote will mean a strike in late summer, said Unite.

Unite members took part in a nine-week-long series of strikes at the factory ending 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 Unite agreed a deal. According to the *Lancashire Telegraph*, the deal would save the 350 jobs earmarked to be transferred overseas. The company said it would establish a training centre of excellence. But 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.

Strike by refuse workers in London borough of Bexley continues over low pay

Around 140 refuse workers in the London borough of Bexley are continuing their stoppage begun July 12 until at least August 22.

The Unite union members employed by outsourcing company Serco provide 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, 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.

Talks between Serco and Unite took place last week under the auspices of the government mediation service ACAS but failed to reach a resolution. Unite called on the council to intervene.

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.

Strike at vinyl floor manufacturer in Manchester, England over pay

Around 100 UK workers at the Polyflor company in Whitefield, Manchester were on strike Wednesday and Thursday.

The GMB union members, who also walked out last week, are demanding a substantial pay rise to make up for miserly increases the last two years. The company offered a one-off cash increase.

According to the GMB, Polyflor paid out a £20 million dividend during the COVID-19 pandemic and its directors got pay rises of up to 25 percent. Further strikes are scheduled in August.

Ballots of UK health staff over pay offer

Ballots by the major UK health unions of their memberships over the pay offer of three percent are taking place or due shortly.

The GMB is balloting until September 17, the RCN until September 13 and Unison until September 10. Unite begins its ballot August 27 until September 24.

Workers were originally offered one percent. With inflation currently estimated to be four percent over the coming year, three percent is a wage cut in real terms.

All the health unions made claims for substantial pay rises to make up for the erosion of pay over the last decade. None will back up the calls with necessary action.

Junior doctors, excluded from the offer, will be balloted by the British Medical Association (BMA) for possible industrial action. The doctors were told they will only be awarded a two-percent rise agreed prior to the pandemic. According to the BMA, the value of junior doctors' pay has been eroded by 23 percent since 2008-9.

Auto workers at Birmingham, UK plant ballot for strike over closure threat

Around 500 workers at the GKN Automotive plant in Birmingham, England will ballot for possible strike action between August 16 and 31.

An earlier consultative ballot of the Unite union members returned an overwhelming majority in favour of being balloted to strike. They are opposed to plans to close the factory which produces drivelines for automobiles. It is owned by venture capitalists GKN Melrose, who planned to close the factory in 2022, transferring production to Europe.

A Unite press release of August 10 announcing the ballot stated, "In May, company bosses rejected an alternative business proposal put forward by a coalition of GKN workers, the factory's senior management, Unite officials and local politicians, including MP Jack Dromey."

Protest at High Speed (HS2) rail construction site in London over union access

Around 20 workers protested at the HS2 construction site at Euston station in the UK capital on August 6.

The protest organised by the Unite union was against the joint venture company Skanska-Costain-Strabag. The company is refusing Unite access to its site to speak to members. Unite plans similar protests at other HS2 sites nationwide.

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

Production workers at breakfast cereal maker Weetabix in Kettering, England are balloting on a new company offer over shift pay.

USDAW suspended a 24-hour strike planned for August 2 for talks with Weetabix management. After the company made an offer, a strike planned for Monday was also suspended.

The workers originally voted by a 100 percent majority to strike against a change in shift patterns and a cut in premium pay for unsocial hours.

Around 80 engineers at Weetabix face the imposition of "fire and rehire" contracts.

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

London Royal Parks cleaners to hold further strikes over pay, conditions and job threats

Following a strike on July 30, cleaners working for outsource company Just Ask Estates Limited in the UK capital are to strike from August 16 to 30.

The company provides toilet cleaning services to the London Royal Parks. The Public and Commercial Services union members are demanding pay and conditions, including pensions, in line with employees directly employed by the Royal Parks. They are opposing plans to make a third of the workforce redundant.

Unite calls off strikes in London by the cross-Thames Woolwich ferry workers for talks

The Unite union called off strikes planned this week by 57 workers on the Woolwich ferry service in London. Talks were scheduled Tuesday with the employer, Transport for London (TfL).

The workers have taken 24 days of stoppages since May opposing the victimisation of two Unite union reps, the excessive use of agency staff and the failure to give health safety training to newly hired staff.

TfL took over the running of the ferry from Briggs Marine Contractors Ltd in January. Under Briggs, there was a long-running dispute over alleged management bullying.

The ferry service, providing free crossing of the Thames for pedestrians and vehicles, has operated since 1889. Prior to the pandemic around 20,000 vehicles and 2.6 million passengers a year used the service.

UK offshore catering workers reject pay offer in consultative ballot

A consultative ballot of around 2,750 UK offshore catering workers employed by seven companies rejected a one percent pay offer made by the Catering Offshore Trade Association (COTA).

The Unite union members voted by 94 percent against and called for further negotiations to improve the offer. In addition, 80 percent indicated a willingness to walk out if negotiations failed.

Firefighters in Gironde, France strike to demand a safe service

Firefighters in Gironde, the largest department of France, held a four-day strike from August 7 to 10 against conditions which make it impossible to protect the population.

According to *Le Figaro*, four unions called the stoppage against the number of extra services the 1,800 firefighters are expected to provide. They denounced the requirement that fire engines are used when there is a shortage of ambulance drivers, as this leaves firefighters waiting for hours outside hospitals.

Strike over job cuts at wind turbine factory in Ponferrada, Spain

Over one thousand workers at the LM Windpower plant in Ponferrada, Spain walked out over plans to cut nearly 400 jobs. A group of workers picketed the plant on July 26, and the works council called a strike Monday which is ongoing.

There was also a two-day strike last week, and a major rally in the city of Ponferrada on July 31.

The company, which produces wind turbine blades, announced plans to relocate production to France, firing 393 of the 1,063 workers at its Ponferrada plant. According to *ABC*, the president of the works council reminded the company of its previous proposal to cut wages by 25 percent instead of making redundancies.

After the failure of negotiations between the company and unions Tuesday evening, the strikers lit bonfires and blockaded the building where negotiations were taking place, preventing the company's management from leaving. After stones were thrown at the building, police attacked the strikers, breaking up the protest five hours after it began.

Tbilisi sanitation workers in Georgia hold two-day strike for improved pay and conditions

Sanitation workers in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi were on strike for two days from August 6 to demand a 50 percent wage increase and improved working conditions.

First Channel reported the workers complained the Tbiliservice Group used outdated equipment and vehicles, and their hours were recently increased and pay cut. They also demanded new uniforms and health insurance.

The deputy mayor of Tbilisi called the strike "illegal," because the company announced vague plans to address the workers' complaints. The mayor of Tbilisi Kakha Kaladze joined a scabbing operation, loading bins while describing the strikers as "criminals."

Faced with these provocations, the unions quickly called off the strike, entered negotiations and promised to "solve the existing problems within 21 days." The local politicians said pay increases will take place only next January, and workers will have to wait until the end of the tender process "in six to seven months" for the obsolete vehicles to be replaced.

Portuguese banking workers strike for salary increase

On Monday, workers at the Portuguese state-owned bank Caixa Geral de Depósitos (CGD) held a one-day strike to demand the "revision" of their salary scale in September to improve their pay.

The stoppage was called by numerous unions in the sector, and *Lusa* reports around 150 CGD workers joined a protest in Lisbon. The unions

out protest statement claiming they will call a new strike if any job cuts are announced. They demanded to participate in upcoming plans for restructuring.

During the restructuring of two major Spanish banks this year, BBVA and CaixaBank, the unions had the same seat at the table the Portuguese unions are demanding and accepted over 9,000 job losses.

Strike in port of Limassol, Cyprus renewed after four strikers fired

Workers at DP World Limassol, Cyprus, walked out again Wednesday after the company fired four people who took part in last week's stoppage.

The strike last week in Cyprus' largest port ended after three days with the signing of a collective agreement by the unions but was renewed after the victimisations.

According to *Dialogos*, workers walked out spontaneously after the dismissals were announced, with the unions sending representatives to meet them the next day. The unions called the dismissals "an act of revenge" and said that the Ministry of Labour may reverse them. *Philenews* reports workers saying the strike will be indefinite until their colleagues are reinstated.

German construction workers protest for improved wages and conditions

On Saturday, construction workers across Germany protested to demand wage increases and improved conditions. The protests were called by the IG BAU union during collective negotiations which cover 890,000 workers.

The *Hamburger Abendblatt* reported that around 500 workers protested in Osnabrück, and according to the *Berliner Morgenpost* hundreds more construction workers from East Germany travelled to the mining town of Ferropolis to join a demonstration.

Workers demand a 5.3 percent pay rise, compensation for the long distances they travel to work, and an end to the lower wages paid in East Germany.

Coal miners plan strike in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Miners at the Kreka coal mine in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, will join a stoppage August 16 against plans to suspend a third of the workforce on partial wages.

The state-owned energy company which runs the mine announced last week that due to low levels of production it would place workers "on hold," receiving 60 percent of their usual wages, according to *Radio Slobodna Evropa*.

The Kreka Mine Union announced it is taking legal action against the decision. There were numerous strikes in the past few months at the Kreka mine, which employs 2,100 people, over delayed payment of wages, including a total stoppage in April.

Workers at liquidated Geox factory in Serbia demand severance pay

Workers in Vranje, Serbia, protested last week against their dismissal without severance pay by the shoemaker Geox. According to *Nova*, the 1,279 workers found after a collective vacation that the local subsidiary of the Italian company had entered liquidation.

Danas reported that a delegation of the workers met with the Major of Vranje, who told them that they had no right to severance pay, while the liquidators refused to talk to them. The laid-off workers protested outside the factory on August 3 and 4, before gathering for a demonstration outside the city administration building the following day.

Serbian tools factory workers demand promised redundancy payments

Workers at the FRA tools factory in ?a?ak, Serbia, demonstrated on Monday to demand the state pay agreed redundancy payments, *Danas* reported.

The state agreed to pay 200 euros for each year of service at FRA, currently entering bankruptcy, but 281 workers at the factory have received no payments.

Laid-off hotel workers protest for wage arrears in Herceg Novi, Montenegro

Former hotel workers in the tourist town of Herceg Novi in Montenegro began an indefinite protest August 5 to demand wage arrears. A spokesman announced to *TVCG* they are owed around 5.5 million euros by the Vektra Boka hotel company, which is declaring bankruptcy.

The former Vektra Boka workers announced their protest in front of the Hotel Plaža would continue until their demands were met. According to *RTCG*, they initially planned a hunger strike, but were forced to cancel that and suspend the protest over the weekend due to the poor health of many protesters.

Strikes planned over death of a packaging worker in Modena, Italy

On August 3, Laila El Harim, a worker at packaging company Bombonette di Camposanto in Modena, Italy, was killed while operating a die cutting machine.

According to *ANSA*, the Italian General Confederation of Labour promised that “thousands of workers are or will be on strike in the coming days” in Modena.

A manslaughter investigation into El Harim’s death opened and revealed that she was not trained in the use of the die cutter, and according to *Fanpage* she reported the equipment malfunctioning in June. Photographs of the machine were found on El Harim’s phone. She was worried the machine was unsafe.

According to data from the National Institute for Insurance against Accidents at Work in May, there were more than two workplace deaths per day in Italy in 2021, with 185 fatal work accidents reported between January 1 and March 31. After reports of these deaths reach the press, the

unions call a one-day strike, or for several hours, to defuse the anger of workers.

Kosovo Tax Administration strike over work conditions suspended

The Trade Union of the Tax Administration of Kosovo last week suspended its indefinite strike until October, stating this was to allow the government time to respond to their demands. Tax Administration workers began a partial strike for four hours per day from July 19 and stopped work completely from July 26.

Kosova Press reported that the strike is now suspended until October 31. The union is demanding improved working conditions, and that the service be made independent of the executive.

Workers sacked at Egyptian razor blade manufacturer after striking

Following a strike by around 2,000 workers at the Lord International razor blade company in Alexandria, 84 of the workers were sacked.

The 2,000 walked out at the end of July demanding the statutory minimum wage of LE2,400 a month, an end to rolling temporary contracts and to be paid promised bonuses.

Following verbal agreement by the Ministry of Manpower to pay the minimum wage, workers at one of company’s three factories returned to work. The company accused those it sacked of illegal strike action and badmouthing the company.

Jordanian security forces arrest teachers trying to attend rally in Karak

On Tuesday, Jordanian security forces arrested around 30 teachers trying to attend a rally in the city of Karak. The rally was organised by the Jordanian Teachers’ Syndicate (JTS) in defence of union and social rights.

On 25 July 2020, Jordanian police raided the JTS headquarters in Amman and 11 provincial branches, arresting JTS council members and held them for a month.

Nigerian doctors’ stoppage over pay arrears continues

Resident doctors are continuing their pay strike across Nigeria begun August 2.

In Abia state the Nigeria Association of Resident Doctors (NARD) members are owed 19 months’ wage arrears, while those in Imo and Ondo states are owed seven and four months’ wages, after the introduction of a new payment system. They also want an immediate payment of the COVID-19 inducement allowance, and increased hazard allowance for health workers.

Minister of Labour and Employment Dr Chris Ngige called the strike ‘nonsense’ and threatened to enforce the “no work, no pay” rule. This is imposed when a strike is declared either illegal or illegitimate. Ngige

declared, “I won’t meet them (NARD) anymore because I have other things to do.”

Doctors 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 to end strikes.

Court workers in Ogun, Nigeria on indefinite stoppage over pay

Judiciary workers in Ogun State, Nigeria went on indefinite strike August 11 demanding salary shortfalls going back to October 2020.

The Judiciary Staff Union of Nigeria members brought the issue to government in February, but this was held up by a nationwide strike over financial autonomy for state legislatures. Meetings held since have resulted in a stalemate.

University teachers on strike at University of Ghana

On August 2, teachers at the University of Ghana began an indefinite strike to demand improvements to their conditions of service. The strike forced the university to postpone planned second-semester examinations.

The University Teachers Association of Ghana called the strike after the government failed to implement a 2012 agreement. The entry-level monthly salary of a lecturer is less than GHS2,000 (US\$332)

South African engineering and steel industry workers threaten indefinite national strike over pay

Workers in South Africa’s engineering and steel industry are threatening an indefinite national strike in a pay dispute, which is presently with the Metals and Engineering Industries Bargaining Council.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) members demand an eight percent salary increase for 2021 and the rate of inflation plus two percent the next two years. The employers, represented by the Steel and Engineering Industries Federation of South Africa (Seifsa), the South African Engineers’ and Founders’ Association and others, offered 4.4 percent for 2021 and inflation plus 0.5 percent in 2022 and inflation plus one percent in 2023.

Numsa, with 339,000 members, made no demands for wage increases in 2020. General Secretary Irvin Jim admits, “We made such compromises being very clear that preservation of companies should translate to job security.”

Warehouse workers at South African Spar distribution centre dismissed for unlawful picketing

After a March stoppage, 33 Spar distribution centre workers in Gqeberha, South Africa were dismissed July 5. The Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) found them guilty of “gross misconduct” and disobeying a court interdict.

The Transport Retail and General Workers Union members participated

in a strike by 134 workers for an 8.1 percent wage rise. The strike was called off by the union after six weeks when Spar offered a new salary structure and other benefits. The employer insisted on disciplinary action against 36 of the workers for allegedly breaking picketing rules, but the workers blamed local youths who supported them, burning tyres and threatening other employees. The case against three workers was not upheld by the CCMA and they returned to work.

Ugandan lecturers strike at Mountains of the Moon University over lack of funding, low salaries

Lecturers at the Mountains of the Moon University in Kabarole District, Uganda launched industrial action on August 9 citing discrimination as the government takes control.

In 2015, the University Chancellor wrote to President Museveni requesting the government take over the running of the university, citing lack of funding and low salaries.

A petition announcing the walkout was signed by 18 of the lecturers, saying they would not return to work until management addresses their grievances.

Doctor’s union in Democratic Republic of Congo ends pay strike

A strike by doctors in the Democratic Republic of Congo, during which the doctors only treated “extremely urgent” cases, was called off by their union on August 4.

The National Union of Physicians suspended the three-week-old strike when the government promised bonuses and promotions to certain grades.



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