Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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The World Socialist Web Site *invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.*

Europe

Workers at airlines and airports throughout Europe continue to fight to improve working conditions, made unendurable by increasing passenger numbers and record low staffing levels, and to win back concessions made by the unions during the pandemic.

Italian pilots and flight attendants will walk out for four hours on Sunday, as part of a national strike at Ryanair, EasyJet, Volotea, and ENAV, ADNreported. The CGIL and Uiltrasporti unions initially called a 24-hour strike, but a government commission restricted it to four hours. Air traffic controllers and ground crew will also stop work. The following weekend, airline workers at Ryanair in France and Belgium will hold a two-day strike, while Spanish pilots at the company continue a series of stoppages begun in June.

In France, 200 workers at Bordeaux airport began a four-day strike on July 8, according to *Ouest France*, and a walkout took place at Lyon airport on Wednesday. A strike at Roissy airport near Paris ended July 8, after workers voted to accept a deal signed by the unions and Aéroports de Paris (ADP). *20 Minutes* reported that the deal involves a general pay increase of three percent, while inflation is approaching six percent, and most unions at ADP accepted a pay cut at the beginning of the pandemic.

Around 900 pilots at the Scandinavian airline SAS continue an indefinite strike begun July 4. They are demanding a new collective agreement, and opposing the company's "recovery plan," which involves vicious attacks on conditions.

Supporting the pilots, 200 mechanics in Denmark began a sympathy strike last week, refusing to service any SAS aircraft until a new agreement is reached. The company was accused by the unions and much of the media of provoking the strike to accelerate its own restructuring plans, as it immediately sought Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in the US.

SAS suggested it will break its pattern of negotiating a single agreement across Scandinavia, and take advantage of strike-breaking laws to impose a separate agreement on Danish pilots. While the union representing Norwegian pilots declared that if the company went ahead with the plan, "an SAS plane will never take off in Norway again," this was an empty threat.

The company behaved ruthlessly towards the strike, briefing the media daily on its claims the pilots will destroy the company, and locking out 650 cabin crew this week. The unions at SAS representing managers and lawyers, economists and senior engineers acted as another press agency for the company, calling the strike "treason" and promoting the "SAS Forward" cost-cutting plan.

Rather than intensifying or broadening the struggle against cost-cutting across the airline industry, the pilots' unions have offered further concessions. In response to the management union's attack, the chairman of the Danish Pilots Association told *Berlingske* they had offered savings to support SAS Forward, saying, "I have done everything I could with the other associations to avoid conflict." Speaking to *E24* after SAS demanded any settlement come with a 10-year strike ban, the head of the Norwegian Pilots' Union said, "In desperation to avoid a strike on Monday, we threw in six years of peace."

On Wednesday, almost all 5,000 workers at Mercedes-Benz in the Spanish city of Vitoria began a three-day strike called by the ELA, LAB and ESK unions against a 1.2 billion euro "investment plan," which the company said would come with increased "flexible working" and real pay cuts.

Spain's two largest unions, the Workers' Commissions (CCOO) and General Workers' Union (UGT), both agreed to the deal after the company withdrew its plan to introduce a sixth night shift. Workers will vote on whether to accept the company/union agreement on Monday.

This week's strike was called after the Basque nationalist ELA, LAB and ESK denounced the CCOO and UGT for signing up to a plan which does not include a real-terms pay rise and full sick pay. The unions report 95 percent of workers walked out, completely stopping production, and are certain to reject the agreement.

Mercedes-Benz workers in Vitoria are heading for a major confrontation with the company. The plant's director told *Europa Press* that a vote against the proposed deal would be "a bet towards the precipice," and mark "the beginning of the end of the growth of this factory."

Defeating the company's plans for increased exploitation and likely attempts to move production away from the plant will require a unified struggle of Basque workers with the working class elsewhere in Spain, and across Europe and the rest of the world, where unions are enforcing attacks on workers' conditions in a worldwide race to the bottom in the name of ensuring each factory is "competitive."

Throughout Spain, workers in street cleaning and waste collection are fighting for pay rises in line with inflation, and to defend working conditions.

On Monday, workers in the municipalities of Alcúdia in Majorca began an indefinite strike after voting down a proposal to suspend the strikes while the city council and unions negotiated. They were joined by workers in nearby Sa Pobla. The strikers are demanding a solution to the poor state of the vehicles they drive, and want mechanics to check them before they take them out.

In the Galician city of Vigo, around 500 workers will begin an indefinite strike on Friday, calling for a real-terms pay rise from FCC Environment, which operates the city's street cleaning services. They will be joined on July 18 by workers at Urbaser, which holds the concession in Santiago de Compostela.

ANSAreported this week that Italian taxi drivers held a wildcat strike on Tuesday, and large protests following the publication of "the Uber Files"

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by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

Last week, taxi drivers throughout Italy held a stoppage against the deregulation of the sector, which they said would allow Uber to gain a further foothold.

The Uber Files revealed tax dodging and aggressive lobbying by the company for favourable legislation from governments around the world. Taxi drivers in Barcelona also protested on Thursday, demanding the resignation of the president of the National Commission for Markets and Competition, appointed by the PSOE-Podemos government despite having worked as a legal advisor to Uber.

Workers at the At??kan plaster company in the Turkish city of Eski?ehir have begun the third week of their indefinite strike. They walked out on June 30, when the Kristal-?? union did not reach a new collective agreement with the company.

Workers at At??kan are paid only 200 to 300 lira above the minimum wage each month, and Kristal-?? is also demanding an increase in additional payments, such as fuel allowances.

In an interview with the newspaper *Evrensel*, strikers said they could not afford to celebrate the holiday of Eid al-Adha over the weekend, with one saying, "My wife wants to go to her hometown for Eid al-Adha. She wants to see her family. But unfortunately, we cannot go. We can't afford to pay for the travel expenses of three people. We can't go to see our families, we can't sacrifice [an animal], we can't buy holiday clothes for children or ourselves."

The union emphasised its willingness to reach a compromise which would see workers' living standards fall, telling daily paper *BirGün*, "Our demands are not very high numbers. We demanded a net 30 percent increase in the salary we received in 2022." The latest official figure for inflation in Turkey is 78.6 percent, but the independent Inflation Research Group said that year-on-year inflation in June was 175.6 percent.

Amazon workers in several German states began warning strikes last Sunday night, scheduled to last through this week. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported that 300-350 workers in Leipzig joined a seven-day walkout, while around 700 workers in Bad Hersfeld were on strike from Monday to Wednesday.

The strikes were called by the United Services Union (Verdi), as part of a long-running dispute calling Amazon to join the collective agreement which applies to the rest of the retail and mail-order sector. Amazon claimed pay and benefits at the company are good, pointing to the wage of 12 euros per hour, but this is equal to the planned new rate for the national minimum wage. Verdi says that as other companies pay holiday bonuses, Amazon workers often earn below the average for the sector.

On Wednesday, dock workers in Germany's North Sea ports began a 48-hour strike during pay negotiations between Verdi and the Central Association of German Seaports (ZDS). Workers demand a pay rise which compensates for high inflation.

The media widely reported on a previous pay offer from ZDS as "above inflation," with the Green Party-aligned *taz* calling it "a whopping 12.5 percent more wages for the approximately 12,000 employees." However, the *Hamburger Abendblatt* wrote that this rate only applied to workers in some companies, while others were offered between 5.5 and 9.6 percent.

Moreover, these figures would be over two years. At the current rate of inflation, prices will rise by 15.8 percent in two years, leaving even the workers offered the 12.5 percent worse off.

Workers in Greek universities began a two-day strike on Wednesday, called by the Hellenic Federation of University Teachers' Associations (POSDEP) to oppose a new "modernisation" higher education bill, being debated and voted on in parliament at the same time, according to *Kathimerini*.

902.gr reported that one student organisation protesting on Thursday wrote, "This law offers 'upgrades' and 'modernisation' for businesses. That is why it brings tailor-made curricula, why it brings tuition fees, why it is accompanied by the corresponding model of administration and intensity of repression."

Workers in higher education also held a one-day strike last week against the bill.

UK workers at railway operators and Network Rail, which manages track maintenance and signalling, will walk out on July 27. Network Rail workers rejected a five percent pay offer.

Drivers at eight rail operators also voted to walk out. Aslef members at Chiltern, GWR, LNER, London Overground, Northern, Southeastern, TransPennine and West Midlands rail companies voted 9-1 in 80 percent turnouts to strike against a three-year pay freeze**.** They will take action on July 30.

Hundreds of TSSA members at rail operator Southeastern voted by 73.9 percent to walk out in a turnout of 69.7 percent. The 350 staff include admin and manager roles. Stations affected include London St Pancras, Victoria, Charing Cross and Cannon Street, Dover Priory, Ramsgate, Ashford International, Dartford and Sevenoaks.

TSSA members at East Midlands Railway, CrossCountry, LNER, c2c, Northern and Avanti West Coast also voted to strike.

Around 40,000 RMT members walked out for three days in June against a restructuring of the rail industry, named the Great British Railways plan, involving attacks on jobs, safety and conditions. The union's only demand is for a below-inflation seven percent pay increase, when inflation has reached 11.7 percent, and no compulsory redundancies.

On Monday, the Conservative government passed legislation enabling the use of agency workers as a scab workforce to break strikes.

UK rail maintenance workers employed by Wabtec at the Flying Scotsman site in Doncaster will move to all-out strike from July 19 over "fire and rehire" plans, as the company seeks to impose an inferior contract.

The 200 Unite and RMT members, who maintain and repair rail stock, including carriages, wheels and bogies, took nine strike days in June and early July. The new contract includes a below-inflation two-year pay offer linked to break cuts and extra hours without pay.

Wabtec clients include LNER, Siemens, Hitachi, GB Railfreight and Freightliner. US-owned Wabtec's total sales for 2021 were £6.43 billion, paying out dividends to shareholders of £76 million.

Around 38,000 UK telecommunication workers at BT are on the verge of a national stoppage over pay.

Workers voted to strike after rejecting BT's below-inflation offer of £1,500 consolidated salary increase, representing an eight percent rise or three percent for the highest paid. The Communication Workers Union (CWU) put in for 10 percent.

Last year CEO Philip Jansen increased his remuneration package by 32 percent.

After appealing to BT for last minute talks to avert the strike, the CWU announced, "BT group CEO Philip Jansen has turned down our offer of talks to avoid the first national dispute since 1987. We will now prepare to serve notice for strike action."

A ballot at EE, part of the BT group, fell short of the government's threshold and workers there will not join any action.

UK bus drivers at Yorkshire depots in Castleford, Dewsbury, Heckmondwike, Selby and Wakefield resumed strike action on Wednesday.

More than 650 Unite members voted 53.7 percent vote to reject Arriva's latest pay offer. The strike began on June 6 against low pay, but was suspended June 30 as workers balloted on a new offer. The German-owned company pays new drivers £9.78 an hour, 28 pence above the minimum wage.

A UK bus drivers' strike at Stagecoach, Merseyside on July 15 and 18 has been suspended, as the Unite union agreed a new deal with management they describe as "significantly improved."

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If the 370 workers based at the Gilmoss depot vote against this, they will walk out on indefinite strike on July 20. They previously struck on July 4.

Drivers are paid just £12.69 an hour, while the company increased its profits from £16.1 to £32.9 billion in the second half of 2021.

Unite have sold out strikes at bus companies throughout the UK, negotiating below-inflation pay deals, and refusing to wage a unified struggle over pay and conditions.

About 2,000 workers at Arriva in the North West plan pay walkouts at the same time as the planned strike by Stagecoach drivers July 20. Around 900 Arriva workers in Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire will ballot from July 13 until August 10 to strike over pay. The admin staff, engineers, cleaners and shunters were offered pay rises of between four and six percent, tied to a cut in overtime pay and an end to payments for duties outside driving.

Strikes are planned July 21-22 by UK Royal Mail office managers against 700 job cuts and pay cuts of up to £7,000.

The Unite members' action coincides with the end of CWU members' strike ballot over pay. The CWU plans another ballot over jobs and conditions.

Crown Post Office workers walked out on Monday over a three percent pay offer, to be joined by Post Office logistics and admin workers on Thursday. They walked out in June and May for one or two days.

Around 150 ferry staff employed by Red Funnel on the route from Southampton to Cowes, Isle of Wight, will walk out on 24-hour strikes on July 27 and August 1, 3 and 5. Cowes Week yachting regatta, from July 30 to August 6, will be affected.

The Unite members rejected a 4.5 percent pay offer, rising to 6.5 percent for the lowest paid. Further strikes are planned for August 9, 11, 15, 17, 19, 23, 26 and 29, at the height of the holiday season.

Workers, many on the minimum wage and having to resort to food banks, complain about substandard accommodation lacking cooking facilities except a microwave, no overnight allowances and days spent away from home.

Unite regional officer Ian Woodland called on the company "to come back with an offer that meets our members' aspirations," without calling for a rise to surpass inflation at 11.7 percent and redress low pay.

The company is owned by the £11.5 billion West Midlands Pension Fund and the £3.5 billion Workplace Safety and Insurance Board of Ontario.

Hundreds of British Airways workers at Heathrow airport in the UK capital began voting July 12 on what the GMB described as a new "improved offer." The ballot closes July 21.

The 700 GMB and Unite union members voted to walk out when the company refused to restore a 10 percent pay cut imposed during lockdown, but reinstated pay for managers.

Council workers in Derry and Strabane, Northern Ireland will strike for four weeks from July 18 against a 1.75 percent pay offer.

Unite suspended a previous stoppage for negotiations. Other councils in Northern Ireland made similar offers. The union reported that workers at two councils are considering offers which "include a consolidated pay improvement element confirming that this is a possibility across the board," but gave no details.

Traffic wardens in Wandsworth, London walked out for five days last week. They have now taken 11 strike days.

The 226 workers outsourced to NSL by Wandsworth Labour council demand pay parity with wardens in nearby Merton, who earn £17.25 an hour, £6 more. They want to be employed directly by Wandsworth. Further stoppages are planned for the end of July.

On Saturday, 150 staff from Roehampton University in the UK capital and supporters protested outside the campus against job and course cuts.

The UCU members are poised to ballot for strike action. They were joined by staff from Brighton, Kingston, Goldsmiths and Royal Holloway universities and Croydon City, City and Islington and Hackney colleges.

In May, 226 staff were told their jobs could go, while some are facing "fire and rehire." Courses are threatened in the arts, education, humanities and social sciences, life and health sciences, and psychology departments.

Meanwhile, staff who struck at Queen Mary University in London face retaliatory course cuts in film studies. Principal Colin Bailey emailed that the university "can't take new students onto programmes where staff refuse to deliver the promised education."

Middle East

Open-ended strikes are spreading across Lebanon's public sector in protest at the collapse of wages. Workers can no longer afford to travel to work, let alone maintain themselves and their families.

Since 2019, the lira has been devalued so far that the monthly minimum wage fell from the equivalent of $450 to $24. More than three quarters of the population live below the poverty line. The International Labour Organization estimated that nearly all the country's public sector workers are now engaged in a stoppage, permanent or partial.

There have been warnings the strike will freeze fuel imports. The price of petrol rose 1,489 percent in the last year.

Action is spreading to Beirut airport. Air traffic controllers announced they will not work nights from August 1 because of understaffing, which is preventing workers from taking rest days or implementing staff rotation.

This follows an announcement by airport technicians that they will go on indefinite strike from July 18 until conditions improve. The technicians suspended a strike scheduled for June 15, but there was no change in conditions. They are protesting being paid in lira, when airline workers at the airport are paid in dollars, and that their travel allowances have gone unpaid for four months.

The strike is causing state mechanisms to seize up. Lawyer Rafik Oreh Ghraizi told press that prisoners eligible for early release remain in jail because their cases are not processed. The early release process requires a psychological evaluation from a doctor, but the currency collapse means the fee offered for this service is less than $2.

Since May's elections, Lebanon has a caretaker government. Caretaker minister of culture Mohamad Wissam Mortada insisted the government has no means to raise salaries above present levels.

Telecom retirees held protests in 18 Iranian provinces on July 12. They demonstrated outside the Ministry of Communications in Tehran and regional telecommunications offices, protesting non-payment of benefits and the disregard of their demands.

Slogans called President Ebrahim Raisi a "Shameless liar," demanding "What happened to your promises?"

Pensioners also protested low payments outside social security offices in Shush and Zanjan. In Tehran, University of Medical Sciences interns and workers at Darugar factory protested at not receiving deferred salaries. Petrochemical workers at Tabriz also walked out against non-payment of their wages.

Pilots at Israel's national airline El Al called off their months-long dispute, after reaching a new collective agreement that will restore their salaries to pre-pandemic levels.

Avi Edri, head of the Histadrut transport workers' union, said pilots agreed to "significantly" reduce their salaries at the start of the pandemic "so the airlines could survive." As passenger numbers returned to pre-pandemic levels following the reopening of Israel's borders, said Edri, "with the aviation industry recovering, it is time to return to the previous situation."

The pilots' dispute forced El Al to cancel 78 flights in June, and 30 in

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the first week of July. Under Israeli law, the airline is responsible for compensating passengers for cancelled flights.

Last month, a labour court rejected the airline's demand that pilots are forced back to work, insisting it negotiates a deal instead. Pilots were seeking adherence to their 2017 pay deal. The new agreement, which runs through 2025, will only restore pilots' salaries to pre-pandemic levels by the beginning of 2023. However, it will also allow for the operation of leased planes through the expansion of commercial operations.

Africa

The nationwide strike, begun May 25 by 12,400 tax and customs duty collection workers at the South African Revenue Service (SARS) and then suspended by their unions, resumed on July 12 after most workers voted for it to continue.

The Public Servants Association and National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union members demand a 12 percent and 11.5 percent wage increase, respectively. SARS has not moved from its initial 1.39 percent offer, blaming a central government funding shortage. The offer amounts to a pay cut, as inflation is running at 5.9 percent.

Power station workers at Eskom, South Africa's state-owned utility company, who engaged in unprotected wildcat strikes could face disciplinary action after their unions, representing most of Eskom's 42,000 workers, negotiated a pay rise just 0.5 percent above the rate of inflation.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, National Union of Mineworkers and Solidarity unions agreed a seven percent rise with Eskom on July 5, after initially demanding 15, 10 and 5.9 percent, respectively.

The unions distanced themselves from the strike after Eskom obtained an injunction against any disruptions, saying the utility was an essential service. The workers driving the strike now face accusations of sabotage, with the company vowing to make criminal charges and take disciplinary measures against them.

Taxi drivers and truck drivers in Nelspruit, Mpumalanga, South Africa, blocked roads into the central business district July 6, protesting rising fuel costs.

Local residents joined the protest, saying the rising petrol costs were increasing food prices. One told the media, "People in government don't know the lives we are living because they are fed from our taxes. They don't buy food. That is why we decided to join the taxi drivers. We are saying an injury to one is an injury to all."

Police arrested eight as the disturbance spread to other areas, and the provincial government notified its employees to work from home until July 11.

Hundreds of fulfilment workers at the Cape Town, South Africa warehouse of online retailer Takealot stopped work in a wildcat strike on July 8. The mostly agency workers demand permanent positions and want an end to racism within the company.

According to online news site GroundUp, they complain of "long hours, few days off, insults from supervisors and rough treatment by security." Pickers and packers work 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. shifts for R34 an hour.

Nigerian medical and public health workers are continuing their strike, begun June 22.

The Medical and Health Workers Union of Nigeria members in the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) branch demand additional hazard allowances for members of staff and full payment of 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 promotion arrears.

A meeting of the union with government representatives on July 6 failed to make any progress.

The NAFDAC staff joined other research institutes and associated workplaces in their eight-month-old strike action. The three unions involved are the Academic Staff Union of Research Institute, the Senior Staff Association of University Teaching Hospitals, Research Institutes & Associated Institutions, and the Non-Academic Staff Union. Between 2011 and 2018, the unions held 33 fruitless meetings with the Federal Government, and began indefinite strikes from October 13, 2021. The Federal Government failed to grant their demands or make any attempts to solve the disputes.

Medical experts raised concerns on public health and safety as there are no staff to monitor use of chemicals and biohazards. Yakubu Dodo, the Director of Public Relations at the Institute of Agricultural Research, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, predicted food shortages and health crises if the dispute is not resolved.

Striking teachers rejected a plea by Ghana's president, Nana Addo Akufo-Addo to return to work. The plea was framed as a moral appeal on behalf of school pupils.

The Teachers and Educational Workers Union, the Ghana National Association of Teachers, the National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT) and the Coalition of Concerned Teachers members walked out on July 5 over the government's refusal to pay the 20 percent Cost of Living Allowance (COLA).

The NAGRAT said, "We have heard His Excellency but we need to consult our rank and file." The union agreed to attend a negotiating meeting on July 12, but needed "something tangible" to call off the strike.

On July 13 Senior Staff Association of the Universities of Ghana members joined the action.

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