

Further one-day strike by UK rail workers brings rail network to a halt; close vote ends UK barristers' long-running dispute over pay and legal aid with sellout deal; teachers in Hungary continue strikes in defiance of government threats; Transnet port and rail workers in South Africa in second week of pay strike

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.

Further strike by UK rail workers brings rail network to a halt

On Saturday, around 40,000 UK rail workers employed by the 15 train operating companies (TOCs) and Network Rail held a further strike.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members are fighting for improved pay and against attacks on jobs, conditions, pensions and safety. The walkouts led to the rail companies operating around just 20 percent of their normal service.

The current mandate for strike action by RMT members ran out with Saturday's action and the RMT said it will re-ballot for further action but has announced no dates yet. An online meeting for all RMT members will be held on October 20.

TSSA union members at Avanti West Coast, c2c and Transpennine Express TOCs also walked out on Saturday. TSSA members work in ticket offices and on-board administrative roles.

RMT members working for the Scottish state-owned ScotRail were on strike Monday, after rejecting a pay offer of five percent. RPI inflation is at 12.3 percent.

The RMT, the train drivers' union Aslef and TSSA refuse to unite their members in all-out action, instead appealing to the government to negotiate what is non-negotiable—the root and branch restructuring of the railway industry.

Nationwide strike by UK telecom workers

Around 40,000 BT and Openreach call centre workers and engineers in the UK walked out on Monday, following a one-day strike held October 6. On both days they were joined by 999 emergency call staff, who did not

take part in the previous four days of action begun the end of July.

The CWU members oppose management's implementation of a flat rate pay rise of just £1,500 in April this year.

Further one-day stoppages are planned for October 20 and 24.

UK barristers' long-running dispute over pay and legal aid ends with sellout deal

The UK criminal barristers' strike ended after the Criminal Bar Association (CBA) pushed through a deal which left many junior barristers in "despair."

The ballot result announced Monday was a close 57 percent in favour of a 15 percent increase in the payments of legal aid fees. The CBA declared the strike ended 5 p.m. on Monday. The majority of junior barristers voted to reject.

Under Britain's legal aid system, the government pays for barristers so that those who cannot afford lawyers are able to receive representation and professional advice. Decades of cuts to legal aid have led to an exodus from the profession, with criminal barristers in their first three years earning as little as £12,200 annually for a 70-hour week.

Legal news website *Legal Cheek* said the package, "is worth £54 million, [and] includes a 15 percent increase in legal aid rates that is applicable to the vast majority of cases currently in the Crown Court. In addition to this, the deal will see a £5 million uplift per year for fees in the youth court from the 2024/25 financial year, and an extra £4 million for defence barristers involved in pre-recorded cross-examinations... It is understood that the new deal will not only cover cases from September onwards but also the 60,000 backlogged cases."

One quarter of all criminal barristers left the profession in the last five years. Those who remain face impossible caseloads and a legal aid system at breaking point.

The impact of cuts in legal aid was particularly severe on junior barristers and meant some of them earning less than the minimum wage of £12,000 a year. Barristers are self-employed and paid retrospectively according to time spent in court, sometimes several years after a case

ends.

The CBA members had demanded a 25 percent increase in legal aid fees. They began their action at the end of June, with a series of intermittent strikes. They stepped up their action from September 5, when they began indefinite strike action and held demonstrations outside prominent crown courts across the country. In contrast to many strikes, the action continued following the death of the queen, though demonstrations were suspended. The stoppages led to the disruption of more than 6,000 court cases.

The deal now negotiated between the CBA and the Ministry of Justice was the original 15 percent increase in legal aid fees put forward by the Conservative government, with some minor concessions. It did not address the plight of many poorly paid junior barristers, and the split in the vote to accept reflected the opposition of many of them.

A barrister of six years, Kate Riekstina, told the *Guardian* that in a Zoom meeting prior to the vote, of around 200 junior barristers 84 percent indicated their intent to vote no. She is now considering whether she can afford to stay in the profession.

She said, “Juniors can’t afford a mortgage, I don’t know how I’m going to pay rent next month, I’m using my tax money that I saved up to pay for it.”

Hamish McCallum, a criminal barrister of two years, explained to the *Guardian*: “If you’re further advanced in your career, then a 15 percent increase on your fee income is probably quite attractive. If you are, like I am, typically doing hearings, which are of a fixed fee, £90 or £125, which often require you to travel a great distance for court—and travel expenses aren’t reimbursed—that change is significantly lower.”

Legal Cheek reported social media responses before and after the vote in an article titled “The day the bar died.” Comments noted, “The Criminal Justice System remains chronically underfunded.” One commenter said, “I feel so broken. And let down. And hurt.”

Others expressed ongoing resistance: “I did NOT vote to accept the MOJ’s offer. I will of course honour the result & I will not criticise any who voted for it, but I do NOT consider myself bound by the commitment to assist in reducing the backlog. I do NOT accept ANY term that comes without definition or description”

Stoppage by UK postal workers over pay and attack on jobs and conditions

Around 115,000 UK postal workers held a 24-hour strike on Thursday. It is the sixth stoppage in a programme of strikes by Royal Mail staff who are responsible for sorting and delivering letter and parcels to homes and businesses.

The Communication Workers’ Union (CWU) members are seeking improved pay and opposing plans to reorganise the postal service, which would entail job losses and increased exploitation.

A further 18 days of stoppages are planned, including October 20, 25 and November 28. The planned action will cover very busy periods for parcels, including Black Friday and Cyber Monday in the run-up to Christmas, which will also include strikes by different sections of Royal Mail.

UK dockers at Liverpool begin second round of pay stoppages as employer issues redundancy notices

Around 600 dockers at the Port of Liverpool, the UK’s second largest, began a week-long strike on Tuesday. This followed an 11-day stoppage begun the end of September.

The 560 engineers and port operatives were joined by 40 control staff who had voted to join the action. The Unite members are protesting a pay offer of between 7 and 8.3 percent.

This week the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company (MDHC) which runs Liverpool docks issued formal HR1 (advance) redundancy notices to 132 workers. The company says redundancies are necessary because of a drop in container volume due to depressed demand. Workers, however, work a 60-hour week.

MDHC is part of Peel Ports, owned by the Peel Group based on the Isle of Man tax haven. Peel Ports paid out around £300 million in dividends the past five years. In 2021, the company’s highest paid director was awarded £4.5 million, up from £1.6 million in 2020. Peel group’s majority owner John Whittaker is worth £1.4 billion.

On September 27, more than 1,900 dock workers at the largest UK container port, Felixstowe on the east coast of England, ended their second round of eight-day strike action. They oppose a pay offer of 7 percent. The two ports handle 60 percent of the UK’s trade.

Workers at biscuit manufacturer in Liverpool, England continue stoppages over pay

Around 700 UK workers at the Jacob’s biscuit and cracker factory in Aintree, Liverpool are continuing their programme of strikes, walking out every other day. The action is scheduled to last the next six weeks.

The GMB members are pushing for an 8.5 percent rise. The company offered 4.25 percent plus a £500 one-off payment and 4.5 percent next year. Jacob’s has been manufacturing biscuits at the site for over 100 years.

Vinyl floor manufacturing workers in Greater Manchester, England continue strike as company profits increase

Around 200 UK workers employed by vinyl flooring manufacturer Polyflor at their site in Whitefield, Greater Manchester, are continuing their three-week pay stoppage, which ends Friday. Polyflor’s parent company just announced a near 10 percent rise in profits, and dividends paid out to shareholders will match last year’s record high.

The GMB union members were due to begin a series of two-hour strikes against low pay on September 7. However, prior to the stoppages the workforce was informed by email not to turn up for their shift and they were locked out for a week. While unions cancelled strikes after the queen’s death, the lockout was not lifted.

The GMB union members rejected the company’s final pay offer of eight percent with strings. GMB regional organiser Stephen Boden said, “Members are struggling with the cost-of-living crisis, all they are looking for is a fair settlement of 10 percent, which is still below inflation. Meanwhile, the company dishes out £24m to shareholders.”

On September 20, the company ended the lockout and employees returned to work. They then held a two-hour strike on September 21 and protested outside the factory before beginning the current action.

Stoppage by barge crew at UK naval base over imposed rosters

A dozen crew members working on refuelling barges at the naval base of Plymouth on the English southwest coast walked out October 7-8 to protest the imposition of rosters. They are employed by outsourcing company Serco.

The Unite union members oppose the imposed rosters, which mean workers can be informed at very short notice that they are required to work weekends. The uncertainty and short notice make it difficult for workers to plan family life.

Arriva bus drivers in Newcastle, England to strike over plans to close their depot

Around 100 UK bus drivers and engineers based at the Arriva bus company's Portland Road depot in Jesmond, Newcastle are to begin an indefinite strike from October 21.

The Unite union members voted for the walkout by a 97 percent majority in response to Arriva's planned closure of the depot, due to take place October 31.

Arriva sold the site, a listed building in the affluent fashionable Jesmond suburb, some time ago but leased the building to continue operations. The lease will expire shortly. Arriva say workers at the Jesmond site would be offered work at alternative Arriva depots but admitted some jobs were at risk.

UK legal advisors and court associates plan to strike over introduction of IT system

Workers employed as legal advisors and court associates by HM Courts and Tribunal Service (HMCTS), part of the UK's Ministry of Justice, are to walk out October 22-30. The action will affect 65 magistrates' courts.

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members oppose the introduction of the Common Platform digital case management system. They say it led to increased workloads and worsening conditions.

The stoppage, originally scheduled to begin September 10, was postponed by the PCS due to the queen's death.

Among the courts to be affected by the action are Cardiff Magistrates' Court, Derby Magistrates' Court, Liverpool and Knowsley Magistrates' Court, Manchester Magistrates' Court, Portsmouth Magistrates' Court and Tameside Magistrates' Court.

Train managers at UK rail company to strike over imposed rosters

UK train managers employed by the Avanti West Coast rail company will walk out on October 22 and again on November 6.

The RMT union members are opposing the imposition of rosters by senior management. Avanti says the rosters are to avoid cancellations. Avanti has come under criticism for its poor service, yet its contract to run the West Coast mainline service was renewed.

Midwives in England and Wales to ballot over pay

Midwives in England and Wales are to be balloted for strike action over a below-inflation pay offer. The four-week ballot will begin November 11. A ballot of midwives in Scotland is already under way.

The Royal College of Midwives (RCM) represents around 50,000 UK midwives. Consultation ballots returned big majorities in favour of balloting for industrial action. RCM members have only taken strike action once in its 140-year history.

In November last year, midwives, students of midwifery and support staff up and down the country held protest vigils to draw attention to the dire conditions and staff shortages affecting maternity services across the UK.

Protests were held in 50 different towns and cities, with maternity workers marching through Sheffield, Bristol, Manchester, Peterborough and elsewhere.

Hungarian teachers continue pay strikes, defying government repression

Teachers in Hungary will hold another one-day strike on Friday, the latest in a long-running dispute over pay. The Democratic Trade Union of Teachers and the Teachers' Union members are defying threats by the government and courts that their strike is "illegal," and face draconian "minimum service" requirements.

Last week, it was reported that five teachers in Budapest were fired for joining the strikes.

Napi.hu reported that several student organisations also supported the strikes and are planning a solidarity demonstration on October 23. The National Conference of Student Self-Governments said the number of young people applying for teacher training almost halved in six years, in large part because of declining real pay.

Amazon workers strike in Germany

Workers at Amazon sites across Germany joined warning strikes this week, called by the United Services Union (Verdi) as part of a long-running dispute. Verdi is calling for Amazon to apply the same collective agreement as the rest of the retail and mail order sector.

The stoppages were called at different times throughout Germany. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* reported that around 800 workers in Bad Hersfeld stopped work for four days, while according to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 500 workers in Koblenz and around 300 in Leipzig joined two-day strikes.

National strike of medical interns in France against year of redeployment in "medical deserts"

Medical interns and other healthcare workers in France will join a one-day strike on Friday, called by two interns' unions against the new social security financing bill.

The bill will extend the internship for trainee GPs by a year and deploy them "as a priority" in "medical deserts:" remote areas with a lack of

GPs, according to *Le Quotidien du Medecin*.

Unions representing doctors and other healthcare workers also called their members to join the stoppage. *Le Figaro* quoted a press release by the Confederation of French Medical Unions, "Sending interns, alone, to medical deserts would be irresponsible both vis-à-vis the population concerned and our young colleagues."

Disabled workers at "adapted" company in France strike against brutal working conditions

On Monday, 30 workers near the French town of Chambéry employed by Scop NEA began an indefinite walkout against their working conditions.

According to *France Bleu*, Scop NEA is an "adapted company," which employs disabled workers and is supposed to make adaptations for their disabilities.

Workers, however, told *France Bleu* the company did not respect their requirements. One said that after major back surgery "they were going to ease my constraints, no more carrying heavy loads... They respected it for a month, but then it was over." They are demanding more respect for their specific requirements, as well as a pay increase of 200 euros.

Greek teachers continue boycott of "anti-education" assessment system

In Greece, teachers continue a boycott of the government's new assessment system, announced the Teaching Federation of Greece (DOE) in defiance of a court order obtained by the government declaring the action "illegal," *alfavita* reported.

Teachers' unions denounced the assessment system as an "anti-educational policy," aimed at categorising schools.

Irish council workers protest against unions' agreement to transfer jobs

Workers currently employed by Irish local authorities to run water services are planning a protest on Friday against SIPTU and the Unite unions. The unions agreed to transfer all jobs to the national state-owned Irish Water, *Independent.ie* reported.

A SIPTU shop steward at Cork City Council, John Mullins, told the news site that workers would march to the headquarters of Unite the Union and then to SIPTU's headquarters.

The unions agreed with the government to transfer a total of 3,000 employees from local authorities to Irish Water on January 1, but workers are demanding a vote on the deal. Mullins said to *Independent.ie* "We don't take any enjoyment out of protests at our own unions, but feel we have no other choice because of the unions' refusal to ballot us on a life-changing document."

Delivery workers hold wildcat strike in Copenhagen, Denmark

Delivery workers for the "gig economy" firm Wolt held a one-day wildcat strike last week to demand a pay rise, *Brave New Europe* reported. The Independent Wolt Couriers members said they were offered cans of soda instead of a pay rise.

They demanded an increase in basic pay of 29 percent, and changes to the way distances are calculated by the app, so it reflects the actual distance they have to travel.

General strike in East Jerusalem in response to Israeli army action against Palestinians

Wednesday saw the shooting death of an 18-year-old Palestinian youth at a refugee camp in the West Bank. He was among more than 100 such deaths this year.

This marked the fourth day of a general strike across occupied East Jerusalem and major West Bank cities and towns in protest at the ongoing siege by Israeli Defence Force personnel of the Shuafat refugee camp and the town of Anata. The strike saw shops and schools closed.

Nursing and health staff at Israeli hospital in Nazareth strike over lack of rights

Nursing and other health workers at the Saint Vincent De Paul French hospital in Nazareth, Israel are continuing their near two-week long strike. They are protesting the lack of employment rights. The strike follows action short of striking. Doctors at the hospital are continuing to provide emergency cover, but the action led to the cancellation of operations.

Lebanese bank workers' union calls for strike action in response to "raids" by depositors demanding their own money

The head of the Lebanese Syndicate of Banks Employees put out a call on October 6 for a strike the next day. The call was in response to bank workers facing daily "raids" by depositors using real or fake weapons to demand the money they deposited in the bank.

The demands for withdrawal are a result of the financial crisis rocking the Lebanese economy and the severely devalued currency. Despite the strike call many banks remained open, fearing to antagonise bank customers further.

Strike by Syrian medical staff in Aleppo over wage arrears

Staff at the al-Bab and al-Rai hospitals in rural Aleppo were on strike Monday, to protest not receiving wages for over two months. Ambulance staff also took part but provided an emergency service.

Transnet port and rail workers in South Africa in second week of pay strike

Tens of thousands of Transnet port and railroad workers are continuing their strike, now in its second week.

The United National Transport Union and South African Transport and Allied Workers Union members are demanding a 12 percent pay increase and rejected the latest offer of 4.5 percent, with additional 5.3 percent annual increases over the next two years. Inflation is currently at 7.6 per cent.

Transnet sent threatening text messages calling the strikes illegal, but the Labour courts overruled this, permitting picketing. Workers in both unions said they intend to intensify picketing in response to appeals by the government to end the stoppage via mediation.

A joint statement by the Minister of Public Enterprises Pravin Gordhan, Minister of Employment and Labor Thulas Nxesi, and Minister of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development Thoko Didiza issued October 13 stated, "Government is extremely concerned about the negative impact on the South African economy, particularly, those sectors that are dependent on Transnet for their logistical services. We need to remind all that if we are able to, as soon as possible, resume exports of agricultural products (for example citrus, grapes, berries), mineral resources (for example coal, iron ore, etc.), and other manufactured products, we will be contributing to sustaining hundreds of thousands of jobs across the economy."

The transit workers' struggle intensified this week when police, trying to stop strikers blocking the N8 national route, used stun grenades and tear gas against strikers outside a rail depot in Bloemfontein. Two workers were wounded and needed clinical treatment.

According to SABC News, Juanita Maree, South African Association of Freight Forwarders (SAAFF) CEO, said a strike at Transnet would kick off logistics delays to the supply chain, costing the economy anything between R100 million and R1 billion per day. She said, "The strike is throttling our economy to the point of no return. We need decisive, urgent action now."

Business Leadership South Africa CEO, Busisiwe Mavuso, called on the government to consider declaring port workers to be essential workers. He told SABC News, "Given the economic situation we are in, this is an option to seriously consider. Without ports operating the whole country could collapse."

Maternity ward nurses at South African hospital strike for more beds and staff

Midwifery nurses at the Dora Nginza Hospital in Gqeberha, Eastern Cape, South Africa walked out last week. Their strike is over lack of resources, including beds and staff to nurse mothers and babies.

The nurses told *Groundup* they are overwhelmed and have to move mothers as soon as they give birth to make way for the next patient. The National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers members say management continually refuse to listen to their concerns and continue to admit patients.

Nigerian courts, government threaten criminal action to end lecturers' strike

University lecturers in Nigeria are facing criminal proceedings if they continue with their eight-month-long strike.

The strikers walked out February 14, demanding better salaries and

funding, and an end to problems with payroll software that caused years of late payment of salaries.

Following the first court ruling against them, leaders of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) launched an appeal while the strike continued.

The court of appeal in the federal capital, Abuja, ruled that lecturers must return to work before any appeal can be filed against the injunction to end the strike. The ASUU has limited itself to "purely legal" opposition to the government crackdown and is not appealing to other sectors for solidarity action. In banning university lecturers from exercising their right to strike, the Nigerian government is attempting to set a precedent to ban any strike.

The judge based his original decision to demand a return to work on Section 18 of the Trade Dispute Act, which gives the courts the power to ban strikes "in the interest of the nation." The judge hypocritically cited the suffering of the students whose education has been hit by government cutbacks, which the lecturers are striking to get reversed.

The government lawyer also cited Section 18 of the Trade Dispute Act to justify throwing out the ASUU's appeal: "ASUU is in contempt of court, it is illegal for ASUU to remain on strike in the face of the Industrial Court order. Section 18(1) of the Trade Dispute Act, does not allow a party in contempt to come before the Court of Appeal with the type of ASUU's application."

Minister of Labour and Employment Chris Ngige stated on national television on October 7 that labour controllers across all the Nigerian states are monitoring workplaces to ensure compliance with the court edict.

Teachers and other university staff plan walk out in Ghana over travel-time expenses

University teachers belonging to the Teachers and Educational Workers' Union will walk out from October 13, to oppose a change in their conditions of service that cuts the amount paid for their travel.

University Teacher Association of Ghana, Senior Staff Association of Universities of Ghana, Federation of Universities Senior Staff Association of Ghana, and Ghana Association of University Administrators members will also strike.

A statement issued by the unions the previous week said, "the intended strike action of all labour unions in the public universities in Ghana takes effect from Thursday 13 October, 2022. This gives the employer and all stakeholders of tertiary education in Ghana one crucial week to reverse the directive that seeks to negatively compromise the Conditions of Service of University Workers."

At a press conference on September 28, the unions warned Vice Chancellors at the universities not to implement a government directive cutting travel expenses. However, what aggrieves the union leaders is that they were not consulted in the "blatant unilateral variation of service in the face of hostile economic conditions." Media reports called for the National Labour Commission to step in to allow a compromise.



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