

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Great Britain & Northern Ireland (Europe) > Social and labour movements > **UK: London cleaners strike – new unions, new tactics**

UK: London cleaners strike – new unions, new tactics

Tuesday 14 August 2018, by [WALL Tom](#) (Date first published: 5 August 2018).

Workers at the Ministry of Justice and Kensington and Chelsea council plan walk out over conditions

Cleaners at the Ministry of Justice and Kensington and Chelsea council are set to take unprecedented strike action this week in their fight for the [London](#) living wage and decent sick pay.

On Tuesday, cleaners will walk out simultaneously across five different sites for three days in what is being heralded as the first coordinated strike by the capital's vast low-paid army of largely migrant cleaners. The workers hope the strike will pile pressure on the public institutions they claim are refusing to take responsibility for low wages paid to outsourced cleaning staff.

Fatima Djalo, 54, who has been working at the MoJ for five years, said she struggled to live on the £7.83 an hour minimum wage – which the former chancellor [George Osborne rebranded as the “national living wage”](#) – in London. “You have to find a way to survive,” she said on her lunch break outside the 56-floor brutalist fortress that houses the MoJ and the Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service. “But £7.83 an hour is not enough. You have to pay rent. You have to pay bills. You have to pay transport.”

Djalo earns just over £1,000 a month. Well over half of that goes on a single room in Stratford and her travel. She is left with around £400 a month for bills, clothes and food – as well as supporting her son in Portugal. “We are going on strike so we can live, not just survive,” she said.

The [strikers are asking for the £10.20 an hour London living wage](#), which is based on the cost of living in the capital. They are also hoping to raise the issue of sick pay, which they do not receive for the first three days of absence and which thereafter is statutory sick pay of £18 a day.

Oswaldo de Oliveira, 59, recently had to take seven days of leave when he had an operation. “You are always praying to God that you are not going to get too sick to work,” he said.

Although they are employed by the facilities company OCS Group, the cleaners claim the MoJ is ultimately responsible for their pay. “The companies always say we can't change your pay because it is in the contract with the MoJ,” said De Oliveira.

Workers cleaning Kensington and Chelsea town hall, who are employed by Amey, a private contractor, have the same complaints. They, too, are paid below the London living wage and are denied sick pay for the first three days. Alexandra Muñoz, who trained as a doctor in Colombia, said it was hard to buy everything she needs for her two-year-old daughter because the wages are so low. “It is really difficult to get to the end of the month with more than about £2 or £3 in the bank,” she said outside the town hall. “Sometimes we have to use credit cards to buy food.”

Her colleague, Nestor Rueda, added that they were striking for decent pay but, above all, for dignity: “We are considered the worst of the worst. But we want to be seen as equals.”

As well as Tuesday’s strike, cleaners from eight exclusive private hospitals and medical centres, run by the health firm HCA UK, are set to join further coordinated action at the end of the month. The HCA UK cleaners are also paid below the London living wage but have more specific complaints.

The strike has been organised by the [United Voices of the World union](#). Its founder, Petros Elia, said the MoJ, Kensington and Chelsea council and HCA UK had so far refused to talk to him directly about their demands. “They are taking no responsibility for what happens in their buildings,” he said.

Despite its size, the UVW has notched up a series of impressive victories. It has won the living wage, sick pay and holiday pay for cleaners all over London, including at the *Daily Mail*’s offices, Sotheby’s and the London School of Economics.

The MoJ said: “The MoJ cleaners are valued colleagues. The national living wage has helped deliver the fastest wage growth for the lowest paid in 20 years, and the most recent rise in April meant fulltime workers will earn an extra £600 a year. We strictly enforce the living wage in all our contracts but specific pay and terms are for employers to agree directly with their employees.”

OCS Group said it would not be commenting.

A Kensington and Chelsea Council spokesperson said: “These cleaners are employed by Amey and we don’t control what Amey pays their staff, though we do expect them to pay their staff appropriately.”

An Amey spokesperson said: “Our contract with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea predates the voluntary London living wage, so Amey is paid on the basis of the National Minimum Wage.”

HCA UK said it was unable to comment on the terms of employment of “colleagues not employed by HCA UK”.

Tom Wall

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The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/aug/05/london-cleaners-strike-over-living-wage-and-sick-pay>