

Finnish paper and forestry workers continue stoppage; one-day public sector strike across Portugal; wildcat strike at South Africa Toyota in Durban

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

7 February 2020

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

Strike by Finnish paper and forestry workers continues

Around 15,000 Finnish paper mill and forestry workers are extending their strike, which began on January 27. It is scheduled to last until February 24.

They are calling for new collective agreements with pay increases and the ending of “kiky” hours. Under the kiky hours initiative brought in by a previous government to increase productivity in the Finnish economy, workers work an extra 24 hours a year.

Talks between the Paperilitto union and the employers’ Finnish Forest Industries Federation are continuing this week. The Finnish forestry industry plays a major role in the economy, with exports of €13 billion a year. It faces competition from Swedish and German forestry industries, with lower production costs.

The latest strikes and strike threats are part of a wave of industrial action that has hit Finland over the last few months. In December, following his mishandling of a widespread postal strike, Prime Minister Antti Rinne was forced to resign, to be replaced by Sanna Marin.

Portugal: One-day public-sector strike

Portuguese public-sector workers, including health staff, teachers and transport workers, held a one-day stoppage on January 31. The strike led to the closure of around 1,000 schools and the disruption of services across Portugal. The workers were protesting a minuscule 0.3 percent pay rise being offered by the government following a 10-year pay freeze.

Hundreds of strikers held a rally in the capital, Lisbon, to press their demands. A vote in parliament to include the 0.3 percent pay rise was to take place Thursday. Discussions between the government and the unions are not due until February 10.

The government has implemented severe austerity measures under the terms of an \$86 billion loan in 2011 provided by the European Central Bank and IMF.

British university lecturers to walk out

University lecturers and other staff at around 74 UK universities are to begin an escalating series of strikes on February 20. The actions will begin with a two-day strike, followed by three-day walkouts beginning Monday, February 24. The third week will see four days of strikes. Finally, a full week’s strike will begin Monday, March 5. Staff will refuse to cover for absent colleagues and work strictly to contract.

The University and College Union (UCU) members are taking strike action over attacks on their pensions, for a pay rise, against excessive workloads and casualisation. Similar action in November and December by UCU members last year impacted around a million students.

UCU members originally took strike action over attacks on their pensions in early 2018. The struggle by around 50,000 lecturers, librarians, administration staff and technicians to defend their pensions and conditions was betrayed by the UCU.

On April 13, 2018, after 14 days of strikes—which the UCU in collaboration with management sought to close down—members voted to accept an offer from Universities UK by a 64 percent to 36 percent majority.

Teaching staff at UK sixth-form colleges to strike

Teaching staff at 34 UK sixth-form colleges are to strike on Wednesday, February 12. The National Education Union (NEU) members are demanding more money for sixth-form education. Underfunding means teachers must cope with high workloads and growing class sizes.

The NEU scheduled further strikes for February 27 and March 10. The union planned a rally and lobby of parliament on February 27.

London bus drivers to be balloted for strike over fatigue

Around 20,000 London bus drivers will begin voting in a consultative ballot on Friday. The Unite union members are concerned about fatigue at work, with a recent report showing 17 percent of drivers experienced

falling asleep at the wheel on at least one occasion last year.

The union has a list of seven demands to prevent fatigue, including full rest breaks, rescheduling timetables for safer working and longer rest breaks.

Strike by carpet manufacturing workers in northern England enters 11th week

The all-out indefinite strike by workers at the Westex Carpets plants in Cleckheaton and Dewsbury in northern England entered its 11th week on Monday.

The 75 Unite union members began their stoppage on November 20, protesting the firm's pay offer. Westex offered a 2.25 percent pay rise but wanted to incorporate bonus pay into their hourly rate. Workers relied on bonus payments for their wage to meet the minimum wage. After the workers rejected the offer, the company withdrew it and imposed a wage freeze until April.

The 2.25 percent pay offer is being paid to workers not on strike. Talks under the auspices of government mediation service Acas have failed to resolve the issue.

Westex Carpets made profits of over £5 million last year.

UK animal protection workers hold strike ballot

Tuesday, workers at the UK animal protection charity, the Royal Society for the Protection of Animals (RSPCA), have begun balloting for strike action. The ballot runs until February 20. The 700 Unite union members, approximately half the workforce, voted in a consultative vote for the strike ballot to take place.

They are opposing the RSPCA's attempts to introduce a new employment contract based on performance rather than the current incremental pay contract. The deadline for staff to sign the new contract is March 31.

Unite accuses RSPCA management of bullying tactics to get staff to sign before the March deadline. It says management used one-to-one meetings with staff to impose the contract, successfully coercing some to sign.

Engineers at Scottish factory vote to strike over closure threat

Around 130 engineering jobs at the Cummins diesel engine factory in Cumbernauld in North Lanarkshire, Scotland, are under threat. Around 80 Unite union members voted unanimously to strike in opposition to the company's plans to close the factory.

The company announced its plans at the end of last year. It refused financial incentives from the Scottish government to keep open by converting production to hydrogen power technology. Strike action is expected to begin at the end of the month.

Irish teachers strike over pay parity

School teachers in Irish secondary schools held a one-day strike on Tuesday. The Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) members are protesting pay disparity. Secondary school teachers recruited since January 2011 are paid at a lower rate. The strike led to the closure of around half the country's 700 secondary schools.

The Association of Secondary School Teachers Ireland instructed their members to cross picket lines set up by TUI pickets.

Two-day strike by Dutch teachers

A two-day strike on January 30 and 31 by primary and secondary school teachers in Holland led to the closure of nearly 4,000 primary and nearly 200 secondary schools. They were demanding higher pay and lower workloads. Primary school teachers are also seeking pay parity with secondary school teachers. Protests and marches were held in major cities such as Rotterdam and The Hague.

Teachers are demanding the government pump more money into education to address teacher recruitment and retainment. Recent research highlighted "hidden vacancies," showing over 300 teachers' posts filled by unqualified teachers or education support workers.

Turkish metalworkers' unions accept sell-out pay deal

Two unions representing Turkish metalworkers accepted a sell-out pay offer by employers on January 29, while a third union signed on Sunday. The two-year deal, valid from September 2019, will give workers a 17 percent pay rise in the first six months, followed by 6.5 percent rise for the next six months. The rise for the third and fourth six-month periods will be 6 percent, with a proviso of an additional amount if inflation is running above 6 percent.

In January, the 130,000 metal workers threatened to strike in support of a 26 to 34 percent pay rise and improved working conditions. The employers' body, MESS, representing around 200 companies, sought a three-year contract. It offered an initial pay rise of around 6 percent, upped to 10 percent.

The metalworkers held protests and stoppages in the city of Bursa and the district of Gebze. Their wages have been undermined by high inflation and devaluation of the Turkish currency.

Underground protest by Ukrainian miners

Following their shift on Monday, 33 coal miners at the Ukrainian state-owned Kapitaina mine refused to return to the surface. The underground protest was over three months of unpaid wages. The Independent Trade Union of Miners of Ukraine representatives are to meet with government ministry officials to discuss the issue of widespread wage arrears.

Protests by Spanish farmers

Hundreds of Spanish farmers held a rally on Wednesday in the centre of

Madrid. They were protesting low prices for their produce and cuts in Common Agricultural Policy subsidies. Farm incomes fell by 8.6 percent last year. The general secretary of Madrid's Farmer and Agriculture Organisation told the *El Pais* newspaper, "Our main demand is for a fair price. ..."

A further protest has been called for February 19 in the region of Navarre in northern Spain.

Iranian miners sacked after protest

On January 30, 300 miners working at the Chadormalu iron ore mine were sacked after they walked out on January 25 protesting low wages. The mine employs 5,000, but different contractors employ the workforce. The sacked workers employed by the contractor Bahavand Barad tried to form a union to oppose poor pay and conditions.

Another group of 300 workers employed by the contractor Hatami had their wages cut after protesting against their working conditions.

Disabled protest in Israel

Hundreds of disabled people protested in Tel Aviv last week over the government's failure to raise disability benefits. Banners were carried reading, "Promises are meant to be kept."

Disabled Israelis pursued a long campaign last year including setting up roadblocks. The Israeli government promised to raise the monthly disabled benefit payment to NIS 3,700 a month. Because of political stalemate, the rise did not happen.

South African car workers at Toyota Durban take wildcat strike action

Thousands of car workers went on unofficial strike Wednesday at the Durban Prospecton Plant of Toyota South African Motors (TSAM) last week to demand their end-of-year bonus.

The company claimed that workers had not met the targets needed to warrant the payment and declared the strike illegal.

The workers ignored a court order to return to work in 24 hours while the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) complained the strike put them in a position of weakness as it was made illegal. Toyota closed the plant, relying on a reserve stock of vehicles.

Toyota is expanding its operations in South Africa with a R4.28 billion investment programme. The CEO of TSAM said investment in the car and parts production in South Africa is a part of the development of a central hub in expectation of a larger expansion of industrialisation in the rest of Africa.

Strikes and protests by staff and students close the University of South Africa

Staff at seven campuses constituting the University of South Africa

(UNISA) are striking over pay, supported by students.

Workers came out at the Pietermaritzburg campus, KwaZulu-Natal, last Monday. Protesting students with separate grievances were driven away by police while staff continued to operate the entry gate, restricting other staff and students entering the campus. The students were demanding a change in the selectivity of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme.

National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) members initially demanded a 10 percent wage increase; UNISA offered 6 percent. When NEHAWU reduced its demand to 9 percent, the university reduced its offer to 5.5 percent. The union promised UNISA it would get its members to work overtime to regain lost education time.

NEHAWU members have been striking at UNISA's campus in Pretoria since last week with a demand for an 8 percent increase. Meanwhile, management received their bonuses.

At the Gauteng campus, NEHAWU almost halved the initial 15 percent claim, to 8 percent.

Other demands include bringing casuals onto the books, promotions and safe working conditions.

UNISA is the largest university in Africa, with 420,000 students.

Sellout of Zimbabwe teachers' union strike

The Zimbabwe Teachers Association (ZIMTA) has instructed its members to return to work.

The largest teaching union has accepted the government's cushioning allowance of around 140 percent, which was rejected by the membership. Civil servants including teachers and doctors are demanding salaries paid in US dollars to offset inflation at around 600 percent.

Most teachers stayed away from work since the school year started January 14, claiming incapacitation because they cannot afford to travel to work.

Zimbabwe miners' union halves minimum wage claim

The Associated Mineworkers Union of Zimbabwe (AMWUZ) halved its minimum wage demand with the Chamber of Mines (C of M).

At a meeting with the C of M January 28, the union put in a demand for Z\$8,500 minimum wage, with the employers responding with a 67 percent increase on the poverty wage of Z\$1,200.

The AMWU responded by reducing its claim by almost half, to Z\$4,600, while the C of M doubled its opening offer to Z\$2,800. A further meeting will take place February 11.

Zimbabwe: Telecommunication workers strike over lack of resources

Zimbabwean private-sector telecommunications workers walked out Monday over lack of resources.

Telecel Zimbabwe, the country's third largest telecommunications provider, is facing meltdown, with its customer base contracting by 4.9 percent last year, while its competitors expand.

Workers are concerned the provider is not servicing its customers adequately, putting their jobs in jeopardy.

A Business, Communications and Allied Workers Union of Zimbabwe

spokesperson said workers couldn't do their jobs because of material shortages, lack of updates to its customers since January this year and managerial inefficiencies.

Nigeria: Niger State to strike over unpaid minimum wage

Workers are planning strike action in the Niger State in Nigeria to force the governor to pay the agreed N30,000 minimum wage.

The regional government claims that public sector wages take up 80 percent of the state budget.

A 21-day ultimatum to strike has expired. The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) have instructed workers to stay away from work from midnight on February 4 until the state government "demonstrate a clear and adequate commitment" to pay the minimum wage.

Other demands include restoring pension plans, the repayment of embezzled pension funds and annual leave grants paid.

The NLC and TUC instructed members not to engage in any kind of protest and remain at home until otherwise instructed.

Nigerian power workers threaten a return to striking over renege deal

Nigerian power workers are to resume their suspended strike to demand the implementation of agreements made with the government December 11.

The National Union of Electrical Employees members said they will resume action in 14 days. They walked out in December, putting the country into darkness, to demand redundancy pay for 2,000 workers who lost their jobs through privatisation, underpaid termination benefits and the implementation of a 7.5 percent pension element.

Kenyan Meru County health workers to strike over unpaid dues and staff shortages

Health employees in Meru County, Kenya, are threatening to walk out on February 5 if their demands are not met.

The strike will follow a 21-day notice ignored by the county employer.

Involved are doctors, clinical officers, nurses, lab technologists and pharmaceutical technologists.



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