

National one-day wages strike called in Belgium; first strike planned at Amazon Italy; Strike of French postal workers against restructuring

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.

Belgian national strike called over wage norms

A national one-day strike for March 29 has been called by Belgian trade unions over a law restricting average salary increases in the private sector to no more than 0.4 percent. The CSC and FGTB unions have a total membership of around three million.

The Belgian state, to prevent wage rises above those in neighbouring countries, sets “wage norms” mandating that companies cannot increase their salary bills above a certain rate. While denouncing the law as “outdated” in an interview with the Belgian state broadcaster RTBF, the general secretary of the CSC accepted the need to protect the profits of Belgian companies, complaining only that the law prevents a pay rise in profitable sectors of industry.

Prison officers in Belgium strike to demand Covid testing of inmates

Prison officers at Saint-Gilles prison in Brussels, Belgium took 24-hour strike action last week to demand that prisoners be tested for COVID-19. The strike ended at 2pm on Friday after an agreement was reached that all inmates in wings A and B would be tested, as well as staff.

Wing B was placed into “partial lockdown,” according to a CGSP union representative, after an inmate there tested positive. As there had been joint activities between wings A and B, staff demanded both be completely locked down until testing took place. Of the 850 prisoners currently in Saint-Gilles prison, close to the pre-pandemic level despite the risk of contagion, 20 tested positive as of Wednesday morning.

German warning strikes at Porsche, with over a thousand workers in protests

On March 11, around 1,000 German workers took part in a motorcade as part of a warning strike at Porsche in Leipzig. The IG Metall union is negotiating with Porsche over pay, and this strike is one of many in a wave of similar actions called by the union in recent weeks over its four percent pay claim this bargaining round.

During the last bargaining round three years ago, IG Metall began negotiations demanding a six percent wage increase and ended by imposing real-terms wage cuts.

Workers at Amazon’s Italian operations to walk out over pay and conditions

Workers in Amazon’s logistics network in Italy are to walk out for a 24-hour strike on March 22, after the collapse of negotiations for improved pay and working conditions, and a reduction in drivers’ hours at external delivery companies. According to Reuters, this will be the first strike at Amazon in Italy to affect its entire logistics operation, comprising workers both at Amazon warehouses and the external companies it uses for deliveries.

Textile workers in Prato, Italy continue strike in face of violent attacks

Workers in Italy at the textile printing company Texprint are continuing their almost two-month long strike for an eight-hour day in the face of violent attacks. The *Corriere Fiorentino* reported that around 30 of the 70 workers at the company, mainly immigrants, have been picketing their workplace in the Tuscan city of Prato.

Police initially brought strikers to the police station when they blocked attempts by loading vans to cross the picket line, and on March 10 again attacked the pickets. Nove da Firenze reported that two days after Texprint was issued an “anti-mafia ban,” preventing other businesses from dealing with them, an unmarked van drove full speed at strikers, and destroyed a table used by them.

Delivery riders in Italian cities strike for contracts

Italian delivery riders have called for a boycott of delivery apps on March 26, during a planned a work stoppage. According to *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, the trade unions involved with the “RiderXiDiritti” network aim to force the online delivery platforms into negotiations to sign a “national collective agreement.”

These “gig economy” workers are among the most exploited layer of workers, lacking basic protections such as an hourly wage, guaranteed hours, sick pay, or parental leave. The Milan Public Prosecutor’s Office recently issued penalties of 733 million euros to delivery platforms which did not make moves towards formalising the employment relationship with their 60,000 riders.

Strike of postal workers against restructuring in Île-de-France region of France

Postal workers across the most populous French region of Île-de-France walked out Monday and protested outside the headquarters of La Poste in Paris. Employees of the national postal service represented by three unions have called for the suspension of restructuring, which cuts jobs and rest times, until the pandemic has ended.

The unions told *Le Figaro* that working conditions were impacting the physical and mental health of their members, who “continued to carry out their duties at times without protection, as at the start of the [COVID-19] crisis.”

A separate strike of around 30 La Poste workers in Fougères and Louvigné-du-Désert, Brittany, begun March 8, continues against restructuring due to take place this Tuesday. The workers are opposing the closure of one site and a reduction in the number of rounds, which will further worsen working conditions. A protest in Rennes Wednesday was supported by other workers.

Meat workers at plant in Brittany, France strike against union-management agreement

Workers at the French meat-processing company Groupe Bigard walked out on March 12, against changes to overtime and pay. The picket of around 100 workers at the Quimperlé plant in Brittany followed the announcement Wednesday of the results of management/union negotiations. The CGT union was forced to support what the local paper *Le Télégramme* refers to as a spontaneous movement, with the steward at the picket explaining that the agreed raise in the base salary is only €20 per month.

According to *Le Télégramme*, the management in Quimperlé expressed surprise, noting that “The CFDT, FO and CGC [the other trade unions at Bigard] have announced their intention to sign the deal.”

Spanish shopworkers at German perfume retailer Douglas strike over closure plans

Workers in the Spanish stores of the German perfume retailer Douglas

held a one-day stoppage March 12. Another was planned for Thursday, against the proposed closure of 103 stores across Spain, affecting around 600 employees. Local papers report that last week’s strikes forced the closure of most of Douglas’ stores for the day.

The CCOO, USO and UGT unions have only proposed keeping open the 45 stores which either turned a profit in 2019 or have “special strategic importance,” according to *Europa Press*. The company did not agree even to this, proposing only that four of the stores named by the unions could be rescued.

Catering workers at Nissan factory in Spain strike over job uncertainty

Workers at catering company Tecнове in Barcelona, Spain began an indefinite strike on March 12, after the company failed to guarantee they would keep their jobs beyond the end of the month.

The Nissan plant in the Port of Barcelona, where the workers provide catering services, ends its contract with Tecнове at the end of the month. According to *el Periódico*, other companies subcontracted at the plant offered their staff guarantees they will not lose their jobs or will be compensated when operations stop. Nissan plans to stop its activities at the plant on December 31, and the law firm Col-lectiu Ronda announced that many of the workers at the plant will be able to retain their jobs by participating in a future “reindustrialisation.”

Spanish transport workers protest breach of agreement and demand 8 hour day

Over 100 transport workers protested in the regional capital of the Spanish Aragón region, Zaragoza on March 11, over the continued refusal of employers to comply with previously agreed demands, and for improved pay and working conditions.

El Periódico Aragón reported that bus and tram workers at the multinational Avanza Grupo are entering their third month of discontinuous strike action, after the company unilaterally broke agreements made for 2015-2019. The workers are demanding an 8-hour day and more frequent breaks, as well as a pay increase of 1.5 percent plus inflation.

Further strike by aerospace workers at UK plant

Around 200 workers at the UK aircraft parts manufacturer SPS Technologies in Leicester are to strike on March 19. They also held a one-day stoppage March 12. The Unite union members are opposing company plans to fire and rehire, imposing a new contract which will mean a loss of between £2,500 and £3,000. A further strike is planned for March 26.

Disputes at two UK hospitals continue

Two disputes at hospitals in the UK are ongoing, as workers continue

their demands.

Around 150 UK caterers, porters and cleaners at Carlisle's Cumberland Infirmary, who have already taken strike action, are planning a further three days of action. The first is due to take place on March 26. The Unison and GMB union members are employed by outsourcing company Mitie.

The strikers are demanding to be paid enhanced rates for working nights and weekends. Directly employed National Health Service staff received the payments for the last 10 years.

Porters at the Heartlands hospital in Birmingham, involved in a protracted struggle, are to strike March 26. The 140 porters have taken 20 days of strike action since last autumn. The Unison union members are protesting the imposition of a flexible rota with several different start times.

The porters had worked fixed rotas and could fit in caring and childcare around them. Under the threat of dismissal, they had to sign up to the new rotas but are still taking action. The Hospital Trust is chaired by former Labour government Home Secretary Jacqui Smith.

Strike by lecturers at Scottish college over job cuts

Around 200 lecturers at the three campuses comprising the Forth Valley college in the Stirling area of Scotland held a one-day strike Wednesday. It was the first of a planned 18 days of strike action over three months.

The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) members voted by a 77 percent majority on a 55 percent turnout action for action. They are protesting the cut of 30 lecturing posts and their replacement by support staff roles at lower pay and entitlements.

Forty-day strike of cleaners at London school begins

A 40-day planned strike by cleaners at La Retraite Catholic girls' school in south London began on Tuesday. They voted by 100 percent to strike. The United Voices of the World (UVW) union members, all originally from Latin America, are employed by private contractor Ecocleen.

Following negotiations between UVW, the school and Ecocleen, it was agreed the cleaners be paid the London Living Wage. They were previously on the minimum wage. However, according to tweets from UVW, the school's head teacher, who earns over £110,000 a year, refused to grant the cleaners sick pay in line with teachers, so the strike went ahead.

Industrial action by passport staff at UK major airport

Around 450 UK passport control staff at Heathrow airport will begin a work-to-rule and overtime ban from March 24 to April 21. This follows a near 97 percent vote in favour of strike action on a 68 percent turnout in January.

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members are opposed to roster changes imposed on them by Border Force management. Border Force comes under the auspices of the UK government Home Office. The roster changes make it difficult for staff with disabilities or caring responsibilities to carry out their work duties. The PCS has said it may

escalate action if the work-to-rule and overtime ban does not produce results.

Airport workers at London Heathrow to take further strike action over "fire and rehire"

Thousands of workers at London's Heathrow airport are to take further strike action against Heathrow Airport Limited's "fire and rehire" threats to its entire staff. The Unite union members will take part in targeted action comprising 41 sectional strikes over 23 days beginning April 2 (Good Friday).

Involved in the action will be airside operations, campus security, central terminal operations, engineering, fire services, and landside operations.

According to Unite, 4,000 workers have already had pay cuts of up to £8,000 (for some, 25 per cent of their earnings) and have had to downsize, move to a cheaper home or sell their car.

Unite is seeking to avoid industrial action, with regional coordinating officer Wayne King saying, "There is a fortnight before Unite's spring strike offensive begins and HAL management could still resolve this dispute if it has the will to do so."

Staff at UK insurance group to ballot for strike action

It was announced Tuesday that staff at UK-based multinational insurance group Royal and Sun Alliance (RSA) are taking part in a consultative ballot on whether they would be prepared to take industrial action. The Unite union members are protesting the decision by RSA to impose a pay freeze which would be a cut in real terms. The online insurance group More Than is part of RSA.

Protests by construction electricians in two UK cities against deskilling

UK construction electricians protested outside the offices of construction firm NG Bailey in Cardiff on Wednesday. The Unite union members are opposing plans by the company to introduce an electrical support operative (ESO) grade to replace the use of fully trained electricians in many roles.

ESOs would be paid at a lower rate than fully qualified electricians. The electricians say the use of ESOs would lead to a deskilling of the electrician's role. Last week construction electricians held a protest outside the offices of Balfour Beatty in London.

Teachers and support staff at London school to strike over sick pay

Around 150 UK teachers at the Beal High school in the London borough of Redbridge have voted to strike for six days from March 25.

The National Education Union members voted by a 60 percent majority on a more than 80 percent turnout for action. They are demanding all

teachers and support staff be entitled to the nationally agreed sick pay. They accuse Beacon Academy Trust that runs the school of applying inferior sick pay terms to staff employed after 2016.

Both teachers and support staff will walk out.

Banking business support workers in Edinburgh, Scotland vote to strike

Around 25 workers at the Communitas facility at its Fountainbridge site in Edinburgh, Scotland have voted to strike. The Unite union members voted by a 75 percent majority on a 91 percent turnout to oppose a pay freeze and company proposals to close the workers' non-contributory pension scheme. The workers were employed by Insurance group Scottish Widows until taken over by US firm OSG in 2018. OSG wants to get rid of the pension scheme. Strike action is scheduled for April 6, 12 and 19.

Workers at Scottish packaging plants take industrial action over contract changes

Scottish workers at Saica packaging at its sites in Edinburgh and Milngavie near Glasgow are undertaking an overtime ban and 24-hour stoppages each Wednesday, beginning March 17. The Unite union members are opposed to the company's plans to bring in new contracts when they move their operation to a new site at Livingston. Under the new contract the working week will be extended, and a banked hours system introduced.

Scottish air traffic controllers to escalate industrial action

Around 50 Scottish Air traffic control workers at Highlands and Islands Airports Limited (HIAL) are to escalate their programme of industrial action, begun January 4. The Prospect union members are opposed to HIAL's proposal to close air traffic control (ATC) facilities in the Scottish islands and instead remotely base the facilities in Inverness.

The current action consists of refusing to engage with HIAL's planning to close the current ATC facilities. The escalation will consist of a work to roster, refusal to do overtime, refusal of extensions apart from emergencies and refusal to train new controllers not on site at the time of the industrial action ballot in November last year.

Strike announced at Northern Ireland further education colleges

A strike by lecturers at all six further education colleges in Northern Ireland has been announced for March 24, to be followed by other continuous action short of a strike, an overtime ban, working to contractual hours and a boycott of additional duties. The members of the University and College Union, who voted by a near 89 percent majority for the strike action, are calling for an improved pay offer. Employers have offered a seven percent pay offer over four years.

Protest over unpaid wages in Yemen

On Tuesday, public sector workers protested outside the presidential palace in Aden over unpaid salaries and lack of services. Dozens of the protestors pushed into the palace grounds, which is the internationally recognised seat of government of prime minister, Maeen Abdulmalik.

Nurses strike grows in Lesotho

Nurses in Lesotho threatened to strike Wednesday, in protest at the government's failure to pay them a COVID-19 risk allowance and provide personal protective equipment in their frontline work.

The Lesotho Nurses Association members say they will join fellow nurses at Queen 'Mamohato Memorial Hospital (QMMH) who have been on strike since February 1, demanding pay equivalence with other hospitals. 346 nurses were dismissed from the hospital on March 12.

QMMH is run in a public-private partnership between the Lesotho government and a consortium controlled by Netcare Group, the largest provider of private healthcare in South Africa and the UK. The tertiary hospital is the only facility in the country which provides a casualty service, intensive care and neonatal intensive care. The dismissal of the nurses could presage disaster for people needing high levels of care, especially those who cannot afford to access it in neighbouring South African provinces.

In April and July last year, doctors, nurses and other health workers walked out over the same issues.

Lesotho has reported 10,530 COVID-19 cases and 309 deaths

South African police kill bystander at university protest

A bystander was killed by police using stun grenades and rubber bullets to disperse a demonstration March 10 by students at Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg, South Africa. Four police officers were arrested and will be charged with murder.

The students are demanding to be allowed to register for university even if they do not have the required fees. Most students are classed as too wealthy to receive financial aid but are still too poor to afford the cost of university education.

South African tyre workers demonstrate in support of suspended colleagues

About 200 workers at Goodyear tyre manufacturers in Kariega, Eastern Cape, South Africa stopped work Tuesday, to protest the suspension of 57 fellow workers for not keeping to their allowed lunch times.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa members burned tyres outside the gates of the factory to show solidarity.

Parents and teachers protest poor conditions at South African school

Parents and teachers demonstrated at Laduma High School, Pietermaritzberg, South Africa March 11, over misused donations, poor conditions and a lack of resources. Protestors held the district education manager captive until police intervened. The school was closed for two days.

Namibian training centre workers strike over low pay

Around 50 workers at the Kunene Vocational Training Centre in Khorixas, Namibia went out on strike on March 11, to demand higher pay. They are paid less than the government-stipulated minimum.

One worker complained, “We are paid N\$13.50; that’s way too low.” He said fear of unemployment had impeded them from striking before. Another worker said when they complained about low pay, they were told some of them would “be let go” to allow the company to pay the normal rate to the rest.

The company, Jandje Investment, is a subcontractor that undercut the main contractor after winning the work through competitive tendering.



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