

Indefinite walkout by Georgian manganese miners in Chiatura over pay and conditions; pay strikes across the Netherlands in metal and electronics industries; teachers' disputes in France and England over lack of COVID safety and privatisation

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.

Miners in Chiatura, Georgia strike to demand pay increase and improved conditions

Over 3,000 workers in the Georgian mining town of Chiatura joined an indefinite walkout on April 23 to demand Georgian Manganese grant a 50 percent pay rise, health insurance and environmental protections for the area near the mine.

According to the *Governance Monitoring Center*, drivers working for the company in Chiatura wrote to the Minister of Health listing their demands—hiring a lawyer to represent them rather than acting through the union—and walked out on April 19. They were joined on April 23 by miners and other workers at Georgian Manganese.

The trade unions at the company put a deal to the strikers increasing wages by 25 percent, which was rejected. *Kvira* reports the unions signed a deal with the company on Wednesday which still offers a 25 percent pay increase, a 62.5 GEL (Georgian currency) cash bonus four times a year and is indexed to inflation.

Describing conditions at the mines, one miner told Formula TV, “We enter into hell. I have worked for 20 years already, and I have fought this company for 20 years, not alone, but together with people, but nothing has been solved.”

Strikes across Dutch metal and electronics industry as collective bargaining negotiations over pay stall

Workers in metal and electronics plants across the Netherlands continued walk outs this week to demand an improved collective labour agreement for the 160,000 people covered. Negotiations between the unions and employers' association FME broke down in September, after the FME offered a below-inflation pay increase of 1.1 percent, and there have been occasional strikes ever since.

Algemeen Dagblad reports a 72-hour stoppage at DAF Trucks in Eindhoven begun April 28, walkouts at Aurubis in Zutphen and Bosch in Deventer each on April 23 and 26, and the FNV union reports thousands will take part in two days of strikes in Groningen on April 29 and 30.

Spanish Tubacex steelworkers' strike continues

Protests of around 800 striking Spanish steelworkers opposed to 129 redundancies at multinational steel tube producer Tubacex in Alva province continued this week, with a march through the streets of the city of Bilbao to end in front of the Basque Government, reports *Europa Press*.

The indefinite strike against the company's ERE restructuring plan began in February, with the works council organising protests to demand the intervention of Basque politicians, but the redundancies finally became effective on April 15. Another protest is planned for May 1 in Llodio.

Thousands of Spanish workers protest against temporary contracts in Basque public sector

Thousands stopped work and protested on April 22 in the Basque cities of Bilbao, San Sebastián and Vitoria, Spain, to demand permanent employment for at least 60,000 people in the public sector on temporary contracts.

The mass demonstration, called by six unions in the public sector, followed smaller protests at work sites on April 15. An ELA union official speaking to *Europa Press* reports that around 40 percent of all people employed in the public service in the Basque area are on temporary contracts.

Greek healthcare workers strike and protest in Athens against

working conditions during pandemic

Healthcare workers in the Greek capital Athens stopped work on April 22 to join a strike and protest called by the POEDIN union. They marched to the Ministry of Health. Police blocked protestors from entering the building to speak with the Health minister, reports *Ruptly*. Demonstrators demanded improved working conditions and staffing levels in the healthcare system, and denounced the New Democracy government for “leaving hospitals unaided” during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The walkout follows a national one-day strike of Trenord employees on April 23 called by the ORSA union, to demand that transport workers be prioritised for vaccination. Greece has reported 342,908 coronavirus cases and 10,315 deaths.

Teachers in Yvelines, France withdraw labour over COVID-19 danger

The largest education union in France, the FSU, submitted a strike notice for five days, April 26 to April 30 for teachers in Yvelines. Primary schools reopen this week.

Teachers speaking to *Le Parisien* denounced the measures in schools to supposedly prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus, pointing out that many teachers are buying their own PPE, children are not required to wear masks, and school staff have not been vaccinated.

The FSU’s main complaint about the government’s reopening of schools, with middle and high schools due to reopen on May 3, has been that they have not integrated the unions into their planning. The unions announced no plans to fight against the reopening of schools, an unwillingness underscored by the limited and isolated nature of the strike for Yvelines teachers. Even the five days of strikes the union called were to provide “the right of withdrawal”, rather than to prevent school reopenings, according to *Le Parisien*.

Tens of thousands of daily coronavirus cases continue to be reported and hospitals are struggling with record numbers in intensive care.

Renault auto-workers blockade plant in Caudan, France to oppose closure

Around 100 workers at the Fonderie de Bretagne auto plant in Caudan, France blockaded the plant entrance on Tuesday morning, after Renault has still not guaranteed the plant will remain open after it’s sold. Renault is searching for a buyer.

The blockade continued into Wednesday, and as well as blocking the movement of parts kept five members of management inside the plant, reports *L’Obs*. The mayor of Caudan said he expects the blockade may last several days.

The foundry, which employs 385 workers, received €8.2 million from national and local government since Renault threatened to stop production in 2009. Workers took a 24-hour stoppage in March after Renault announced it was ceasing operations at the site.

Four-hour strike at Alitalia against plans of Italian government to dismantle company

Hundreds of workers at Italy’s state-owned airline Alitalia stopped work for four hours on April 23 to protest plans to break up and sell off the company, according to *AP*. As a condition for allowing state aid to the company, in receivership since 2017, the EU demanded the luggage handling and maintenance aspects of the business be sold off, and the number of employees will likely be reduced.

The USB union framed the dispute in nationalist terms, referring to the airline as “a symbol of the sovereignty and independence of this nation”.

Italian train workers walk out after attack on a colleague

Members of six transport unions at the Trenord railway company in Lombardy, Italy walked out for an hour on Tuesday afternoon following an attack on a colleague that morning. *ANSA* reports that the driver intervened when he saw five people spray-painting the window of a cab and was sprayed himself.

Transport workers have suffered increasing attacks from passengers over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, as they are often left to enforce social distancing and other safety regulations on their own. Bus drivers in France and Belgium also launched multiple stoppages recently following assaults.

Portuguese miners begin partial strike for pay increase

Miners at the Panasqueira Mines in Covilhã, Portugal, began a campaign of two-hour daily stoppages on Monday, set to last until May 8. *Diário as Beiras* reports the STIM union called the strikes after employer Beralt Tin failed to agree a 6.05 percent pay rise for the over 250 workers at the mine. The union reported “almost total adhesion” to the strike.

The company, owned by Canadian multinational tungsten mining company Almonty, claimed it could not afford more than an average 1.6 percent increase, although the union points out it is still making new investments in exploring new sites, and that a new parent company bought Beralt for over 11 million euros.

Technicians at Irish state energy company ESB strike over outsourcing

Around 500 technicians at the Irish state-owned electricity company ESB took two days of strikes this week and are working to rule to oppose outsourcing. The Independent Workers Union (IWU) union has described this as a “backdoor method of privatising the ESB”, according to the *Independent*.

Two more walkouts are planned next week, while the company threatened to take the IWU to court as it does not recognise the union. *RTÉ* reports that the three technicians’ unions recognised by ESB have not called on their members to join the strike and said that crossing the picket line “would be a matter of individual conscience”.

The IWU offered to call off the strike if the company speaks to them at the Workplace Relations Commission.

Sanitation workers in Prahova, Romania begin strike over unpaid wages

Workers in Prahova County, Romania at the sanitation company Rosal, which collects waste for most of the county, began a stoppage on Monday to demand the payment of wage arrears. This follows another strike in March, after which the Ploiești city government fined the company 22,500 lei (around 4500 euros), reports *AGERPRES*.

Drivers for Yandex Taxi hold protest strike in Rossosh, Russia

Around 10 taxi drivers in Rossosh, Russia working for the “gig economy” platform Yandex Taxi walked out on April 21, denouncing low pay. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* reports the drivers complain that trips of one kilometre and four kilometres are paid at 49 rubles (around 0.50 euros) and demand an increase in the minimum price to 80 rubles.

Verdi and DBV unions call off strike in Berlin and Essen of call centre workers at Germany’s Deutsche Bank

Last week, the Verdi and DBV unions ended a long-running strike of around 650 workers in the Deutsche Bank call centre subsidiary, DB Direkt, in Berlin and Essen in Germany.

Reuters reports that the 13-month-long strike ended with the union’s acceptance of an annual pay increase of 2.7 percent for the workers, who make “barely above the minimum wage” according to DBV, after initially demanding a six percent rise.

Further strike by Scottish rail conductors over overtime pay

Rail conductors employed by Scottish rail company ScotRail walked out again Sunday. This was the fifth Sunday in a row of strikes. The several hundred train conductors are working to rule. The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members are protesting being paid a lower rate of overtime than train drivers.

A recent RMT press release did not mention further strike dates beyond the final scheduled strike on Sunday, May 2. Instead, it announced its plans to call on the Scottish Trades Union Congress to promote the ScotRail issue as part of a workplace justice campaign aimed at putting pressure on political parties taking part in the Scottish Assembly election.

The RMT recently betrayed the struggle against driver-only operated trains (DOO) at South Western Railway, removing door safety operations from train guards. Over the past five years, the RMT isolated and dissipated the struggle by 6,000 guards and thousands of drivers at many private rail franchises throughout the UK against DOO—threatening conductors’ jobs and passenger safety as drivers take over the operation of train doors.

Scottish local government staff reject pay offer

Scottish local government workers rejected a pay offer put forward by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the employers’ body. The offer included £800 for staff earning under £25,000 a year, a two percent increase for those earning £25,000 to £40,000, and one percent for those earning up to £80,000.

Unite union members voted by an 83.3 percent majority to reject it, while GMB members voted by 93 percent. COSLA said the deal remained on the table and negotiations would continue.

Scottish lecturers’ strike suspended by the Educational Institute of Scotland Further Education Lecturers’ Association union

On Wednesday, the Educational Institute of Scotland Further Education Lecturers’ Association (EIS-FELA) announced it was suspending the strikes by lecturers at 26 further education colleges across Scotland. They had been protesting plans by the employers’ body, Colleges Scotland to replace lecturer posts with lower-paid instructor posts.

The strikes were suspended after the union and employers announced an agreement, but no details have been made public.

A spokesperson for the employers saying, “The Colleges Scotland Employers’ Association has unanimously ratified a resolution to the dispute as agreed with the EIS-FELA last week. We welcome the EIS-FELA’s acceptance of the resolution, and their commitment to end strike action. This is great news for students and their lecturers.”

Unite union calls off London bus drivers’ strike

A strike of UK bus drivers working for French-owned RATP subsidiary London United due on Monday was called off by the Unite union.

The company operates around 50 routes in south and west London. Unite called off the walkout after the company offered a revised offer to be voted on by the membership. Unite regional officer Michelle Braveboy stated, “From the very beginning of this dispute, Unite has always been clear that these matters could and should be resolved through negotiation.” Further stoppages were planned for May 6 and 7.

The drivers, who have struck for a total of 11 days, are opposed to proposed contract changes including remote signing on, which will leave them around £2,000 a year worse off. The strike hit routes across south and west London.

Drivers at two other London RATP subsidiaries, London Sovereign and Quality Line, were also involved in strikes over pay and conditions, called off by Unite after pushing through rotten pay deals. Strikes at London United were suspended for talks, but these broke down and strikes resumed until they were suspended again.

In Manchester, the Go North West bus drivers’ strike against fire and rehire and an inferior contract is continuing. As in London, Unite has done nothing to unite the workers with those in other bus companies who face the same attacks. May 8 is the deadline when workers have to sign or face dismissal.

Strikes by educators at four English schools over pay and victimisations

Around 50 teaching staff at the Marples and Cheadle sixth form college in Southport, England began a two-day strike Wednesday. This follows a 24-hour stoppage last week. The National Education Union members are protesting no pay rise for the last two years.

Teachers at the Leaways School in the inner London borough of Hackney were to strike Wednesday and Thursday as part of a long-running dispute which began at the end of last year. Leaways is a special school run by the Kedleston group, which runs other specialist schools across England. Leaways provides support to children with emotional, social, and mental health problems.

The NEU members are demanding a 2.75 percent parity pay rise as given to local authority teachers, as opposed to the one percent offered. They are calling for additional teaching staff with specialist knowledge to meet the needs of the students and are also protesting the dismissal of two teachers since the dispute began. They accuse school management of bullying. Further walkouts are planned for May 5, 6, 11, 12, 18 and 19.

Teachers at North Huddersfield Trust school in the Fartown area of Huddersfield walked out on Wednesday and Thursday in support of NEU representative, Louise Lewis. He was suspended in October while carrying out union duties. A picket line was attended by supporters calling for the head, Andrew Fell to resign.

Teachers at school in Sussex, England to strike over academisation

Teaching staff at Peacehaven Primary school in Sussex, England are planning a stoppage May 5. The National Education Union members are opposed to plans by the governors to transform the school into an academy (privately run with public funds). A survey of teaching staff reported two-thirds of them would leave or be likely to if the proposals go ahead.

The decision to become an academy was made by the Interim Executive Board (IEB), imposed in 2019 when the board of governors opposed academisation. Parents at the school accuse the IEB of lack of consultation. Academies are not bound by the teachers' pay and conditions agreement.

Strike of teachers at school in Cheltenham, England

Nine teachers at Greatfield Park Primary school in Cheltenham walked out on Tuesday. They are members of the National Association of Schoolmasters, Union of Women Teachers members are protesting the headteacher's management style of the school's leadership. *Gloucestershire Live* reported the comments of Wendy Exton, a member of the union executive, who explaining the dispute, said, "Striking is an absolute last resort but unfortunately despite two years of trying to sort out issues down many routes, a solution has not been forthcoming. Staff have been working under extreme pressures that have been inflicted upon them and have always had the heart of the child at the centre of everything they do, but working under these regimes takes its toll and unfortunately staff have had enough."

Further stoppages are planned for May 6, 7, 11, 12 and 13.

University staff in Liverpool, England to begin industrial action against redundancies

Around 1,000 staff at Liverpool University in England will begin a programme of industrial action on May 10, planned over the next five months. Following a 90 percent vote in favour, the University and College Union (UCU) staff will work to contract hours and boycott voluntary activities. According to the UCU, the dispute could escalate to include a boycott on marking and assessments as well as strikes.

The UCU members are opposed to plans to make 47 staff in the Health and Life Sciences department redundant, including academics who have carried out leading research on COVID-19.

Further walkout by naval civilian workers at Devonport, England, over change to rosters

Around 40 UK tugboat crew workers at the Devonport naval dockyard plan held a 24-hour strike Monday following up a 24-hour walkout on April 9. They work for outsourcing company Serco Marine. The Unite union members are in opposition to new three weeks on/three weeks off rosters which began in December, which workers say affect their health and present safety risks.

Protest at Chester university England over staff cuts

On Monday, students and staff of Chester University in England protested outside the town hall over plans by the university to make 27 academic staff in the archaeology, engineering, English, geography, history, humanities and media departments redundant by July this year.

Originally, 86 posts were under threat but following talks between the university and the UCU, staff signed up for voluntary redundancy, leaving the university seeking to make 27 compulsorily redundant. At a recent UCU branch meeting, a record attendance of 150 voted by a 96 percent majority to take any action necessary to oppose the job cuts.

Further strike dates set by vehicle and driver registration staff at UK headquarters over COVID safety

Workers at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) headquarters in Swansea, Wales are to walk out for four days on May 4.

Around 3,300 Public and Commercial and Services (PCS) union members walked out for four days on April 6 over lack of basic COVID-19 safety measures at the site. It represents the first major industrial action taken at a workplace in the UK over coronavirus safety. More than 600 positive COVID cases have been reported at the DVLA's offices.

Up to 2,500 staff have been required to physically attend their workplace at the DVLA's offices. This is despite at least 535 members of the workforce (over 20 percent of those in the office) catching coronavirus in the months since the beginning of the year. At least one employee at the site died after testing positive for COVID-19.

Weekend work boycott by biomedical scientists at Lancashire hospital trust, England over pay

Biomedical scientists working for the East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust at Burnley and Blackburn hospitals in England will work only core hours Monday to Friday for a month from May 7. They will not cover emergency, weekend and nights. The 21 Unite union members are in a long running dispute over the hospital trust's renegeing on a 2019 agreement to upgrade their pay. The biomedical scientists are responsible for analysing patient blood samples.

Security staff at Reading hospital, England rebalot as pay dispute continues

Twenty security staff at the Royal Berkshire hospital in Reading, England, are being rebaloted after holding a series of stoppages begun December. The ballot began on Tuesday and will run until May 13.

The Unite union members are employed by contractor Kingdom Services to provide security at the hospital. They are seeking a pay increase to £12 an hour and £13 for supervisors. Kingdom, with a turnover in excess of £100 million, is offering £9.30 an hour for staff and £10 for supervisors.

Workers at London care home vote for further pay strikes

Domestic staff and care workers at a care home for the elderly, run by the Sage group in Golders Green in the UK capital, voted 100 percent in favour of strikes in a rebalot result announced April 23.

The United Voices of the World (UVW) union members are calling for a £12 an hour wage, and sickness and leave conditions in line with NHS staff. They held previous work stoppages in this long-running dispute. They also called on Sage to voluntarily recognise UVW as their official union for formal negotiations. Sage however refused. From Monday a ballot of staff began for UVW to be recognised for negotiations. According to the UVW website, some Sage trustees have been putting pressure on workers to join another, bigger union.

Engineers at Brush Electrical Machine in Loughborough, England, to hold strike ballot against "fire and rehire"

Around 30 field service engineers working for Brush Electrical Machines in Loughborough, England, owned by venture capitalist Melrose, are to be balloted.

The Unite union members, who service electrical transformers worldwide, face "fire and rehire", which would include cuts in overtime rates, holiday and other terms. The cuts would leave them £10,000 to £15,000 a year worse off. The ballot closes May 10.

Iranian pensioners continue protests over inadequate pensions

On April 18, Iranian pensioners protested in several cities, including Bandar Abbas, Kerman and Tehran. It was the fifth such Sunday protest in a row. They are demanding a 50 percent increase in their pensions, eroded

by rising inflation, exacerbated by the US blockade. Hundreds of thousands of pensioners and retired government workers have held regular protests since last year.

Hundreds of thousands of South African government employees threaten walkout after second year without pay increase

Public sector workers in South Africa are preparing to strike after pay negotiations came to an impasse. The government renegeed on a 2018 three-year pay deal and refused an increase for the second year running.

The workers, represented at the Public Service Co-ordinating Bargaining Council by eight unions, demand a 7.1 percent salary increase, a housing allowance and 12 percent of for those affected by COVID-19.

Warehouse workers at Spar distribution centre in Gqberha, South Africa continue strike for pay increase and improved conditions

Over 130 workers at the Spar distribution centre in Gqberha (formerly Port Elizabeth), South Africa have been on strike for five weeks to demand an 8.1 percent pay rise, citing the retail franchise's 13.5 percent increase in turnover for the year ending September 2020.

The Transport, Retail and General Workers' Union members also want improved health and safety in the workplace and payments for working shifts and overtime.

"Workers are earning a basic salary of R5,300 per month. Our colleagues at other distribution outlets earn a basic of R12,500 per month," said union organiser Berito Juku.

Temporary municipal workers in East London, South Africa protest for improved wages and conditions

Over 300 Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) workers in Buffalo City townships, East London, South Africa demonstrated outside city hall April 19, demanding the municipal employer end their uncertain work conditions.

The National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers union members, including workers from roadworks, sanitation, recycling, environmental cleansing and other community work programmes, want a living wage, paid leave, safe working conditions and other benefits.

The EPWP is a discredited African National Congress government scheme introduced in 2003 in which unemployed people do temporary work in the public sector but without the salary or benefits afforded to direct employees.

South African mineworkers at MC Mining, KwaZulu-Natal shut down colliery to protest redundancies

Workers at MC Mining, Uitkomst, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa stopped work last week, shutting down production for three days in protest at 42 planned redundancies. The stoppage caused the company to

delay their decision until June.

Teachers in Rivers State, Nigeria protest over salary arrears

On April 22, primary and secondary school teachers from state-run schools in Rivers State, Nigeria, took over the entrance to the State Government House, carrying placards demanding better treatment and payment of salary arrears.

They are owed five years of arrears by the state government. They raised the case of 26 teachers who have since died. Students, family members and supporters joined the protest.

Strike by Nigerian judicial and parliamentary workers continues

The continuing strike by judicial workers begun April 6 has brought the courts in Nigeria to a standstill.

The Judiciary Staff Union of Nigeria (JUSUN) members are demanding that the legislative arm of government is given financial autonomy. The Nigerian Bar Association, the professional body for lawyers, has also given its support and the Parliamentary Staff Association of Nigeria members have joined the stoppage.

Leading figures within the Nigerian state, such as the Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN) have voiced support for the aims of the strike while calling on JUSUN leaders to bring it to an end. JUSUN is trying to rescue Nigeria's judicial system from its blatant corruption. State governors regularly bribe judges using public funds, buying them sports utility vehicles, for example.



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