

Greek workers in one-day general strike against anti-strike law;
Vehicle and driver registration staff at UK headquarters Swansea
begin further strikes over COVID safety; Midwives walk out and
protest across France against lack of COVID safety

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.

Workers across Greece take part in one-day general strikes against anti-strike law

Two separate national strikes took place in Greece this week, called by the union confederations GSEE and ADEDY. The strikes are the latest in a series opposing a draft law restricting the right to strike.

The law would require a third of employees at state-run companies to remain on the job during a strike, as well as restricting the ability to picket entrances and occupy premises, reports *Kathimerini*.

Both union groups denounced the government's attempt to restrict the right of workers to defend their conditions but limited their response to a single day of protest. The GSEE called its 450,000 members to strike on May 4, and the 280,000 public sector workers represented by ADEDY were called to strike on May 6.

National one-day strike of French midwives against poor working conditions during pandemic and pay

On May 5, midwives across France stopped work for the day to demand improvements to the poor pay and conditions in the profession. A press release announcing the walkout from 12 trade union organisations cited the enormous responsibility carried by midwives, the low salary, and lack of prioritisation for PPE, PCR tests and vaccines during the pandemic.

In Paris, a few hundred demonstrated in front of the Ministry of Higher Education and Research. Protests also took place in Lyon, Marseille and Toulouse.

Two thousand chemical workers in Georgia strike for pay rise

Around 2,000 workers at the Rustavi Azot nitrogen plant in Rustavi, Georgia, walked out on indefinite strike on April 28 after the company rejected demands for a 50 percent pay increase. *First Channel* reports the picket line at the chemical company blocked the movement of all goods from the plant except medical oxygen. The workers also collected signatures to form a union at the company.

The strike was split after Rustavi Azot made an offer which would increase pay by between 8.3 percent and 25 percent, which a section of the workers reportedly accepted.

H&M retail workers in Spain strike against redundancy plans

Workers in the Spanish branches of the multinational retailer H&M began a series of strikes this week. This follows the company's announcement on April 6 of an "ERE" redundancy plan, which would cut almost 1,100 jobs nationally, and close 30 stores.

According to *Europa Press*, the CGT union has scheduled stoppages every Monday and Saturday in May at H&M stores in the cities of Reus and Tarragona.

The CGT and CCOO unions have arranged walkouts in other regions, with workers in Pamplona beginning an indefinite strike on May 3. However, unified national action has been limited to a handful of protests, a two-hour strike next week and two 24-hour strikes on May 19 and 21.

Indefinite strike to save jobs resumes at Nissan subcontractors in Barcelona

An indefinite strike in eight companies subcontracted by car maker Nissan at its Barcelona facility resumed on Monday, after being suspended for "dialogue" with the Japanese multinational auto company.

Nissan plans to close its Barcelona factories at the end of December, and both the companies and the workers whose jobs are at risk, represented by the law firm *Collectiu Ronda*, have demanded a reindustrialisation strategy to save jobs.

Spanish Tubacex steel workers continue strike and protests against cut in working hours

Workers opposed to 129 redundancies at the Spanish steel manufacturer Tubacex's Alva facilities have continued their strike, begun in February, with three further protests this week. On Tuesday, the strikers protested outside the Tubacex site in Derio, reports *Europa Press*. The works committee also arranged a march on Wednesday and to join a protest on Friday of Petronor workers in Bilbao, who are opposing a cut to their hours.

Firefighters in Jaén, Spain, on indefinite strike over cut to overtime hours and shift changes

The 72 firefighters in the Spanish city Jaén began an indefinite strike on April 28 against a "reform" from the PSOE-led city council, which would cut the number of possible overtime hours and allow longer shifts. The strike follows a protest on April 23.

Europa Press reports that the city council cited the high cost of 28,000 overtime hours in 2019 as the reason for the reform, but the strike committee points out that cutting these hours without hiring extra staff will undermine the city's safety. Revealing the plans to worsen working conditions and staffing levels, the council official in charge of personnel denounced the "privilege" of the workers and complained of "a rigid work system... that only allowed 24-hour shifts and squads of 14 firefighters".

Childcare workers in Belgium take second strike day to demand contract reform and COVID safety measures

On Wednesday, workers in childcare centres across the French-speaking region of Wallonia-Brussels stopped work to denounce the continued inaction of the regional government over protection from COVID-19 and in implementing planned reforms.

During a previous walkout on April 1, strikers pointed to the lack of a COVID bonus, despite having worked throughout the pandemic, and that they have not been prioritised for vaccination. According to RTL television, under a reform currently being implemented, childcare workers are supposed to be hired as salaried employees by 2024. However, many who do not have such a contract lost a lot of their income during the pandemic and had to obtain their own PPE.

One-day strike in Belgian Lidl warehouses over workload and safety

Four warehouses of the Lidl multinational supermarket chain in Belgium closed after workers walked out on April 30. According to *RTBF*, the ACV Puls union arranged the one-day strike in response to the heavy workload faced by workers in both the company's warehouses and stores. It reported that staff in the supermarkets have faced violence from

customers as they attempt to enforce hygiene measures against the COVID-19 pandemic. The strike remained isolated to the warehouses, and no stores were closed.

Dutch transport pay strike called off by FNV

Following one day of planned strikes at the Dutch government's rail maintenance organisation ProRail on April 28, the FNV union called off a second walkout on May 1 after reaching a deal with the employer.

Previous offers from ProRail were rejected by the union, but it is currently asking members to vote on a deal which according to the FNV's website involves a 2 percent wage increase for 2021 and 0.5 percent plus inflation in 2022.

Unions call off stoppage by Italian agricultural workers

The planned 24-hour strike of agricultural workers on April 30 was called off by the three unions involved after the government made promises to provide bonuses and emergency income support to those working in the sector.

A press release from the Fai-Cisl, Flai-Cgil, and Uila-Uil unions says, "We have obtained assurances from the Minister on the definition of an income support bonus for fixed-term agricultural workers," and cites the government's commitment to advocate for a social interest clause in the reform of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy subsidy scheme.

24-hour stoppage at Italian Taranto port after fatal accident

Workers at the port of Taranto, Italy, walked out on April 30 following the death of a colleague, Natalino Albano, the previous day. He was employed by the Peyrani Sub company and died when falling off a ship onto the quay, according to *la Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*.

The FIM trade union stated that "all the safety procedures required in this work environment have not been guaranteed".

Workers at Spiro construction company in Russia paid salary arrears following strike

Around 120 workers at the Spiro construction company in the North Kuril region of Russia were paid 12 million rubles (around 134,000 euros, or 1,117 euros each) in wage arrears last week following a walkout on April 21, reports *RIA*.

The local prosecutor's office opened a criminal case for the violation of labour rights, after the striking workers denounced a three-month delay in paying salaries, as well as problems with the quality of company housing, food and work clothes.

Vehicle and driver registration staff at UK headquarters Swansea

begin further strikes over COVID safety

Workers at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) headquarters in Swansea, Wales began a four-day stoppage on Tuesday.

Around 3,300 Public and Commercial and Services union members had previously 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 were 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. During the first lockdown last spring workers were able to work remotely.

UK job centre staff to ballot on return to workplace during pandemic

A consultative ballot began on Wednesday of UK job centre staff who are being pressured into returning to work. The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) members are concerned more staff will be forced into face-to-face interviews with the danger of infection. Because of COVID-19 concerns many of the job centre workers were conducting interviews from home via phone calls.

The ballot, conducted electronically, closes May 21. A recent PCS survey showed 79 percent of members had concerns about returning to work in the office.

Strikes of Scottish conductors at ScotRail for equal overtime rates expands

Several hundred train conductors working for Scottish rail transport company ScotRail held a further one-day strike Sunday. Sunday stoppages began at the end of March.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members are protesting being paid a lower rate of overtime than train drivers. They are also working to rule. The strike was joined by ticket managers in a separate dispute but over the same issue.

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

RMT suspends 24 hour stoppage by London underground rail workers to defend victimised union representative

The RMT called off a planned 24-hour strike in UK capital by rail staff over the Central Line of the London Underground rail system.

The strike, due to begin Wednesday night, was to demand the

reinstatement of sacked union representative Gary Carney. Carney had worked for the company for 20 years. The union suspended the walk out pending talks next week between RMT and London Underground.

Further strikes by teachers in Huddersfield school, England over victimization of union rep

Teachers at North Huddersfield Trust high school in Huddersfield, England walked out on Wednesday and Thursday in support of National Education Union (NEU) representative, Louise Lewis. A picket line was attended by supporters. This follows a two-day strike last week.

Lewis was suspended in October while attempting to carry out risk assessments regarding COVID-19. A disciplinary hearing against Lewis took place on Tuesday but a decision has yet to be announced. Further stoppages are planned for Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday next week.

Strike by teachers at special needs school in London over pay, resources and victimisation of union rep

Teachers at the Leaways School in the inner London borough of Hackney walked out Wednesday and Thursday as part of a long-running dispute which began at the end of last year. This follows a two-day strike last week. 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 staff with specialist knowledge to meet the needs of the students, which the school receives funding for. They also protest the dismissal of two teachers since the dispute began, including union rep Ian Forsyth. Further walkouts are planned for May 11, 12, 18 and 19.

Walkout at Beal High School, London over sick pay

Teachers at Beal High School in Redbridge east London (England's largest secondary school) walked out Tuesday and Wednesday this week. This follows a two-day stoppage April 28 and 29 and a one-day strike March 25. The school is run by the Beacon Academy Trust.

The NEU members voted by an 82 percent majority to strike. They are demanding all staff are covered by the nationally agreed sick pay scheme. Currently staff who began working at the school after 2016 are excluded.

Academics at Leicester university, England begin industrial action against redundancy plans

Staff at Leicester university, England began a marking and assessment boycott on Tuesday. The University and College Union (UCU) members voted by 84 percent to take action to protest the planned compulsory redundancy of 145 staff, although this number has now been reduced after

some staff took voluntary redundancy.

The UCU also announced it will organise a grey listing boycott of the university. This would include asking academics not to apply for any posts advertised at Leicester, refusing invitations to lecture at the university and refusing to collaborate on new research projects at the university.

Staff at Thurrock council in England facing pay cuts continue strike

The strike by around 100 UK workers providing refuse, highway maintenance and street cleaning at Thurrock council, Essex which began on April 13 is due to end Friday.

The Unite union members are opposed to plans by the council to cut salaries by £2,000 to £3,500 a year. The council is looking to cut payments for unsocial hours worked, overtime, bank holidays and night shifts.

In a separate dispute, care workers at Thurrock council voted by a 98 percent margin in a consultative ballot in favour of declaring a dispute. The GMB members are opposed to proposals by the council to cut care provision.

Leisure centre workers in Sandwell, England strike over fire and rehire proposals

On April 30, around 280 staff employed by Sandwell Leisure Trust, England walked out over proposals to fire and rehire them on inferior terms. The trust is an arm's length company set up by Sandwell council to run its leisure services. Those on strike include lifeguards, swimming instructors and receptionists.

The Unison union members face being rehired on terms that would no longer be in line with nationally agreed rates. Around a dozen pickets were deployed at the Tipton leisure centre, which remain closed all day.

Strike by housing maintenance workers at London-based charity against bullying and victimisation

Twelve maintenance workers employed by the property services of housing charity St Mungo's in UK capital are continuing their all-out stoppage which began April 22. The charity runs 3,200 accommodation units in Bournemouth, Brighton, Bristol, London, Milton Keynes, Oxford and Reading.

The Unite union members accuse the maintenance section managers of bullying tactics by using inappropriate disciplinary measures against union members. Currently, the planned strike is restricted to the maintenance department, but the union warns it could widen.

The charity suspended a union representative on a charge of gross misconduct for raising a grievance about management bullying. One of the grounds cited was management "distress" at suggestions of bullying.

In March last year, several hundred St Mungo's workers walked out for three days. The Unite members were opposed to changes in sickness policy and the falling number of more experienced senior employees. They were concerned the changes were aimed at creating a lower-paid workforce with inferior conditions.

Staff at London borough library being balloted for strike against changes to working hours

Seventeen staff working for London borough Bromley libraries are being balloted for strike action. The result is due May 14. The Unite members work for Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL), a non-profit social enterprise organisation, which also runs sport and other leisure facilities.

They are opposing proposed changes in working hours at the central library, whereby staff will be asked to work four late nights every two weeks rather than the current one late night every two weeks. Part-time staff who currently do not work late nights will be asked to cover one night per fortnight. They argue more staff should be taken on to cover the extra need.

Fifty library staff employed by GLL at 14 library sites took part in a long-running dispute between June 2019 and January 2020 over issues including pay progression and staff roles.

London Thames river ferry workers to walk out against victimisation of union rep and pay

Fifty-seven workers on the Woolwich ferry, which operates a service across the UK capital's river Thames, voted by a 97 percent majority to strike. The strike dates are May 14, 24 and 28 and June 1, 4, 7, 11 and 21. The Unite union members are protesting the victimisation of a union rep and the non-implementation of an agreed new pay and reward scheme.

The ferry is run by Transport for London. Under its previous owner, Briggs Marine Contractors Ltd, there also was a long running dispute over allegations of management bullying.

Strike by traffic enforcement officers in west London borough of Ealing against restructuring

More than 40 traffic enforcement officers, who oversee parking regulations in the west London borough of Ealing, are to hold two 72-hour stoppages. The first one was due to begin Wednesday. The second will begin on May 12.

The Unite union members work for the contractor Serco, which has been trying to impose a restructuring and redundancy programme since 2019. They accuse the company of unfairly dismissing workers and that the programme should be renegotiated.

Strike by IT staff at London tenant referencing service against pay cuts continues

Around 20 IT workers at Goodlord in the UK capital are continuing their indefinite strike, begun March 1. On February 22, they began discontinuous strikes, before escalating on March 1. Goodlord provides checks on potential tenants for estate agents.

The Unite union members, employed by the company on rolling fixed-

term contracts, walked out after the company cut pay by 20 percent, a form of fire and rehire. The new contract would see salary cuts of up to £6,000, leaving staff on annual pay of around £18,000, less than the current London Living wage of £21,157. Goodlord has lost its Living Wage Foundation accreditation, as the pay cut means it no longer qualifies. Talks under the auspices of the government mediation service Acas are now taking place. The strikers are mounting regular picket lines at Goodlord HQ in Spitalfields in London.

Protest by hailing app taxi drivers in UK capital over safety

Drivers working for the Bolt hailing app held a protest outside its London office on Tuesday. The Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB)-United Private Hire Drivers (UPHD) arm members were demanding improved safety measures following the murder of Bolt driver Gabriel Bringye in February.

A survey by the union found 71 percent of the drivers had been physically assaulted while working. Those in the protest included the sister and fiancé of Bringye.

Coffee produce workers at Oxfordshire, England plant facing “fire and rehire” vote for overtime ban and strikes

Nearly 300 UK workers at the Jacobs Douwe Egberts coffee products plant in Banbury, Oxfordshire facing “fire and rehire” voted by an 87 percent majority for industrial action.

The company intends to issue “section 188” notices to its employees, enabling an employer who has failed to negotiate changes, to fire and reinstate its employees on worse terms and conditions. The company also wants to replace the current final salary pension scheme with an inferior defined contribution one.

The Unite members began an overtime ban on May 1 and will begin a 24-hour strike at 7am Saturday. On May 1, the workers held a protest outside the Banbury factory. Company representatives are due to have an initial meeting with Unite union officials on Friday under the auspices of the government mediation service Acas.

Naval civilian workers at Devonport, England, to continue dispute against unsocial rosters

Around 40 UK tugboat crew workers at the Devonport naval dockyard are being balloted to renew their strike mandate. The ballot, which opened Wednesday will close May 19. The Unite union members have already held 24-hour stoppages on April 9 and 26.

They work for outsourcing company Serco Marine and are opposed to new three weeks on/three weeks off rosters which began in December. They argue the new rosters affect their health and present safety risks.

Glass workers’ strikes at company in England over pay and conditions suspended

Proposed strikes by 170 UK workers at the ENCIRC glass bottle and distribution centre in Elton, Cheshire to begin Thursday was suspended as Unite puts an offer to its members. Workers voted by a 95 percent majority to walk out.

They are protesting new work practices which have adversely affected pay and a loss of flexibility in taking leave. The new practices reduced staff levels leading to health and safety concerns. The Elton workers say the new conditions leave them at a disadvantage compared to employees at other ENCIRC sites.

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 were to begin partial strike action Friday. They will only work core hours Monday to Friday for a month from May 7. Core hours cover Monday to Friday 8.45am until 5pm and Monday to Friday 7am until 3pm.

They will not cover emergency, weekend, nights and late shifts that they are contracted to work. The 21 Unite union members who voted by an 85 percent majority for the stoppages, have been in a long running dispute over the hospital trust’s reneging on a 2019 agreement to upgrade their pay. The biomedical scientists are responsible for analysing patient blood samples.

Algerian firefighters suspended for protesting pay and conditions

Algerian firefighters marched through the capital Algiers on Sunday calling for increased pay and bonuses and improved living conditions. Police met the peaceful protest with teargas.

Following the protest, 230 of the firefighters were suspended from their jobs by the Ministry of Interior and accused of treason for taking part in the protest.

Municipal water workers to strike in Gauteng, South Africa in defence of bonuses

Water workers at Rand Water, a South African water utility supplying 15 million residents in Gauteng province and other areas, plan to walk out indefinitely from May 13. They are in dispute after performance-related bonuses were referred to the Labour Court to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA).

The South African Municipal Workers Union members say Rand Water removed their incentive bonuses without consultation. The CCMA issued a certificate of ‘non-resolution’ meaning the workers can conduct a legally protected strike.

South African bus drivers at Metrobus, Johannesburg halt work demanding pay increase

Over 100 striking bus drivers at the city owned Metrobus in Johannesburg, South Africa brought the city to a standstill Monday when they did not report for work.

The Democratic Municipal and Allied Workers Union members raised 28 demands around pay and conditions. The Samwu union, which has 700 members at Metrobus and is officially recognised by the company, did not instruct its members to support the strike saying it was having its own separate wage negotiations.

Workers suspended after strike over safety at South African milling company in Tweespruit

Four workers were suspended by the OVK milling company, Tweespruit, South Africa following a month-long strike over unsafe conditions in the workplace.

The National Emancipated and Allied Workers Union of South Africa members say the company refuses to report accidents, so workers cannot claim compensation. They also accuse OVK of discriminating on racial grounds.

Firefighters in Cape Town, South Africa march in protest over pay and conditions

Hundreds of South African Fire and Rescue workers marched to the civic hall in Cape Town May Day, protesting long working hours, and for increased salary and a danger allowance. They were joined by other municipal workers whose contracts had been terminated.

Over 500 firefighters, South African Municipal Workers Union members, face dismissal over their involvement in a 2019 strike against contracts stipulating a 56-hour working week.

Namibian quarry workers' pay strike continues into third week

A pay strike by quarry workers in Karibib Quarry, Namibia entering its third week is in danger of being sabotaged by the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN).

MUN leaders met the managers of Best Cheers Investment Namibia (Pty) Ltd at the end of April, with Lea Shimbamba from the Office of the Labour Commissioner overseeing. The employers put forward no salary increment, claiming that 2020 had been "difficult".

MUN region coordinator George Ampweya admitted the union had already "reduced our position" to a N\$1000 salary increase, with six months of back pay.

Best Cheer Investments Namibia (Pty) Ltd is part of a China-based international corporation Best Cheer Stone Group, with quarries in Nigeria on the outskirts of Karibib and Omatjete.

Liberian dockworkers, truckers and customs brokers at Freeport Monrovia begin go-slow in defense of suspended colleagues

Liberian dockworkers, port truckers and customs brokers at the Freeport of Monrovia Bushrod Island, Monrovia embarked on a go-slow from May 4.

They are demanding improvements in work conditions and the reinstatement of 24 dockworkers, suspended by APM Terminals several months ago. Those suspended called for improved work conditions, including the imposition of extra fees for delays in loading falling on customers instead workers.

The National Custom Brokers Association of Liberia, the Port Truckers Union and the Dock Workers previously called off many threatened strikes. Union leaders blamed the problems on inefficient machinery in use at the port.

"Our people are suffering; people [customers] are spending their money but they can't get their goods loaded, Truckers are sleeping in the port without a result..." said unions' spokesperson James Hinnah.

Kenyan KCSE exam markers in Nairobi stop work to demand allowances

Teachers tasked with marking Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) exams at two centres in Nairobi stopped work on May 3 and 4. The action delayed the release of national exam results May 4.

The teachers are demanding payment for their work and a risk allowance for working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One teacher said, "We were told due to the current COVID situation, the allowances have been cut by half to Sh10,000."

"We have had to deal with poor diet, congestion in hostels and harassment by KNEC officials. Some of our colleagues have been assaulted and it is only fair that we get our allowances before we head home."



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