

Strike wave continues in France among transport workers over pay and conditions; national one-day strike in Italy against government's budget; pay and conditions strike by teachers across 100 Iranian cities; South African municipal and health workers pay strike in Free State

## 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.*

### National one-day strike in Italy against new budget measures

On Thursday, an eight-hour national strike took place across Italy to oppose measures in the government's new budget. A joint statement by the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) and Italian Labour Union called for "a more effective redistribution of wealth," and according to *Reuters* also opposed measures around pensions, schools, job insecurity and the protection of industrial jobs. There were several mass layoffs this year.

One of the largest unions after the CGIL, the Italian Confederation of Trade Unions (CISL), refused to take part in the one-day stoppage, calling for even greater corporatist cooperation with the government during the pandemic. It stated: "The CISL considers it wrong to resort to a general strike and to radicalise the conflict at such a delicate time for the country, which is still committed to tackling a pandemic that will not let up."

According to *ANSA*, many workers were banned from taking part in the stoppage. Healthcare workers were entirely prevented from joining, as were school staff following their strike last week. Hygiene and postal workers were also required to stay at work, while many transport workers were able to join only at certain points of the day outside of "guarantee bands" at peak commute times.

### Workers in Italian schools hold 24-hour strike to demand additional resources

On December 10, Italian school workers joined a one-day national stoppage to demand improvements to both working conditions and education in schools. According to press agency *ANSA*, there was

"massive participation" in many regions, with members of almost all education unions participating

The CGIL and UIL called their members in schools to join the stoppage ahead of Thursday's national strike, denouncing the new budget for allocating insufficient resources to schools. Other demands included the reduction of class sizes, increase in staffing levels and pay, and for outsourcing of services to be reversed.

### French transport workers continue wave of strikes over pay and conditions

French transport workers held numerous stoppages over recent weeks, in a wave of disputes over pay and conditions nationwide.

Workers at the state rail company SNCF held numerous regional strikes this week. *20 Minutes* reported that on Thursday, workers in the region of Île-de-France, which includes Paris, began a 48-hour strike affecting almost every route. *Le Figaro* reported that throughout the week there were one-day stoppages in the Normandy and Pays de la Loire regions, and a two-day strike in Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes.

The rail unions also filed a strike notice covering every Friday–Sunday period from this week until the end of January on the Bordeaux–Marseilles route. They are demanding the hiring of an extra conductor on the line following an increase in attacks on workers, and an improvement in security as well as payment of a bonus.

Bus drivers for the Keolis group in France also held strikes in the past week. On December 10, drivers at Keolis Armor in the northwest, on both regular and school bus lines, were on strike to demand a 10 percent pay rise. In the town of Caen bus drivers also held a strike on Monday, at two Keolis subsidiaries covering the regular and school bus lines.

One-day strikes also took place among bus and tram drivers in the region of Indre-et-Loire, the town of Cherbourg-en-Cotentin, and the city of Besançon, each in separate pay disputes. Bus drivers in the city of Bourges began a five-day strike on Wednesday, called by the General Confederation of Labour (CGT). According to *France Bleu*, the CGT is calling for the hiring of drivers to replace six who have retired since 2020,

and for a pay increase of 2 percent.

### **Strike of waste collection workers in Marseille, France against increased working hours continues, while unions begin to reach settlement**

The indefinite strike of waste collection workers in the French city of Marseille continues this week, as workers continue to oppose the imposition of longer working hours. While the Workers' Force (FO) union, which represents most of the workers, maintained its strike call, the smaller unions accepted an offer from the city government.

FO members only rejoined the strike last week, after the union previously accepted a deal from the city. Workers, like many in municipal services across France, are opposing the implementation of a new law which would impose a 35-hour week. The FO originally signed a deal which would reduce the hours of waste collection workers by 9.5 percent due to the physical demands of the job, but the smaller unions were demanding a 20 percent reduction. They have now signed an agreement which reduces hours by 15 percent and increases pay slightly. According to *20 Minutes*, FO is now demanding a 38 percent reduction in hours.

The city government threatened to send the police to force some workers to provide minimum services if the strike continues, and brought in a private sector company to collect waste during the strike. Hiring strike-breakers is illegal in France, so the city claimed this use of private sector replacements is only to replace workers who are on sick leave.

### **Extracurricular school workers on strike across France over pay and understaffing**

On Tuesday, extracurricular staff across France, responsible for looking after children during and outside school hours, began a two-day strike to demand improvements in their pay, working conditions and staffing levels. Hundreds of workers joined local protests, and denounced conditions which deteriorated during the pandemic.

*France Bleu* interviewed several extracurricular staff, who explained that a major issue preventing people joining the profession is the lack of regular hours, with many unable to pay their bills as full-time hours are not available. Others complained of low wages and a lack of sick pay, a particular issue during the pandemic.

### **Dutch metalworkers continue strikes in pay dispute**

In the last two weeks, metalworkers across the Netherlands held a series of short regional strikes in a collective bargaining dispute covering smaller employers in the sector, begun in November.

Last week, the Christian National Trade Union Federation (CNV) and Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV) called one-day stoppages in four cities in the south of the Netherlands, and further strikes took place this week in the regions of South Holland, North Holland, Limburg and Friesland.

A dispute between the FNV, CNV and larger employers in the sector ended in July with a collective agreement which provided a pay rise of 2.3 percent for 2021 and 3 percent for 2022, but this dispute was separated

from those in the smaller metal companies.

According to the *Algemeen Dagblad*, the unions are demanding a 5 percent pay rise in the current dispute, the demand they made of the large employers, while the FNV says the employers are offering only 1.4 percent. The FNV, however, said the 5 percent demand was "not cast in concrete."

### **Greek maritime union calls off strike after four days with below-inflation pay increase**

Following the fourth day of a national sailors' strike in Greece, the Panhellenic Maritime Federation (PNO) announced on Monday that it had signed a collective agreement with the employers' association, containing a pay increase of 3 percent from January 1. Inflation recently increased to 4.8 percent.

The PNO initially called a 48-hour strike on December 10, but announced it would extend the strike another two days over the weekend. The employers offered a 2 percent pay rise, with no back pay to make up for the previous two years with no salary increase.

According to *ef.syn*, one of the PNO's affiliated unions denounced the decision to end the strike as "treacherous," pointing out that most of the unions in the PNO abandoned the demand for a retrospective pay rise and back pay for 2020 and 2021.

### **24-hour strike at Belgium's largest carrier Brussels Airlines**

On Monday, workers at Brussels Airlines, the Belgian subsidiary of Lufthansa, began a 24-hour strike against poor working conditions. According to *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the unions admitted they accepted pay cuts and increased hours for workers to "save the company." While the company has not improved working conditions, the unions point out that it spent 300,000 euros this year on a new logo.

A spokesman from the General Labour Federation of Belgium (ABVV/FGTB) made clear that the unions did their utmost to prevent any threat to the company's profits, saying it scheduled only a 24-hour strike so that "Brussels Airlines can take the necessary measures and travellers can look for another flight for Monday ... We don't want to hit the travellers." Previous "soft" protests and symbolic actions involved workers handing out leaflets to passengers explaining their appalling conditions, where workers do not have hotels to rest in but have to sleep on the planes.

Monday's 24-hour strike was called because the unions were unable to control their members' anger without letting off some steam. *Het Laatste Nieuws* reported that an official from the ABVV/FGTB said the strike was called because of the risk of wildcat strikes.

### **Gig-economy taxi drivers in Volgograd, Russia, on strike against low pay face arrest and fines**

Taxi drivers for the gig-economy platform Yandex began a strike on Monday in the Russian city of Volgograd, to demand a decrease in the company's commission and an increase in the minimum fare. According to one striker speaking to the *Caucasian Knot*, hundreds of drivers took

part in the strike. They gathered in a shopping centre car park and refused to accept requests from the app, following a similar stoppage on December 6.

The strike, organised through social media, was targeted by the police. According to *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, two men were arrested for “organising or holding a public event without filing a notice of its holding in the prescribed manner,” and each fined 10,000 rubles. Two more strikers accused of organising an unauthorised event were sentenced to one day in jail.

Yandex is Russia’s largest technology company. In 2020 it had a revenue of nearly 2.7 billion euros and profits of over 150 million euros.

### **Protest outside company accused of breaking scaffolders’ strike in Scunthorpe, England**

On December 8, UK workers protested outside South Shields company Rope Access Trade Solutions.

The protestors accused the company of supplying workers to break a strike by 62 Unite union members at Actavo (UK). The Actavo workers are under contract to British Steel’s Scunthorpe site to provide scaffolding and at-height services.

The strikers are in the third month of an indefinite strike over a pay dispute going back to 2019. They struck previously, and are demanding payment in line with the National Agreement for the Engineering and Construction Industry (NAECI) rates of £17.45 an hour. They are paid 10-15 percent less than NAECI rates.

### **Strike of fast food delivery workers in Sheffield, UK continues and spreads over pay cut**

The strike of Just East fast food UK delivery drivers in Sheffield continues into a second week.

The Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) members work for Just East subcontractor, Stuart which imposed a 25 percent pay cut.

According to reports, the strike could spread to Chesterfield, Huddersfield, Rotherham and Sunderland.

### **Further London Underground strikes against Night Tube rostering continue**

London Underground (LU) drivers will strike again this weekend over imposed rosters on the recently reopened Night Tube service. They are striking against the scrapping of dedicated drivers on the service.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members will walk out on the Central and Victoria lines for eight hours from Friday and Saturday evenings. Twenty-four-hour strikes will also take place beginning 4.30 a.m. on Saturday, affecting the Central, Jubilee, Northern, Piccadilly and Victoria lines.

The Night Tube service, suspended at the start of the pandemic, was reintroduced two weeks ago as part of efforts to reopen the economy. Transport for London (TfL) scrapped a 2016 agreement that established a dedicated grade of Night Tube drivers.

All drivers will now be forced to work at least four weekend Night Tube shifts per year, which LU’s director of customer operations called “reasonable.” The RMT reports that the Central and Victoria lines have already seen a “huge increase” in weekend working and drivers rostered to work Fridays.

The RMT offered to suspend the strikes and operate the disputed rosters “on a temporary basis” if drivers were only expected work Night Tube shifts on a voluntary basis requiring no more weekend working. The union also offered “more ongoing flexibility” so drivers might cover Night Tube shifts on a voluntary basis, but LU rejected their offer.

### **Strike by hospital security workers at London hospital**

Security staff at London’s Great Ormond Street Hospital held a three-day strike last week.

The United Voices of the World members are seeking parity on pay, sick pay, annual leave, parental leave and career progression with staff directly employed by the National Health Service (NHS).

### **Strike by teachers at Hemel Hempstead school in London over “fire and rehire” threat**

UK teachers at Abbots Hill Independent school in Hemel Hempstead held a one-day strike last week, with a further five scheduled over “fire and rehire” threats.

The NASUWT members oppose school management demands that they sign new contracts or face dismissal. The school, which charges pupils £19,000 a year, wants to withdraw from the Teachers’ Pension Scheme (TPS) and attack other conditions.

### **Dates announced for river Thames London ferry workers’ stoppages**

After voting by a 90 percent majority for walkouts, strike dates at the UK capital’s Thames ferry service were announced.

The 58 Unite union members on the Woolwich Ferry, which crosses London’s Thames, will hold a 24-hour strike on Monday January 3, and 24-hour strikes every Monday, Wednesday and Friday until the end of March 2022.

They are involved in a long-running dispute with their current employer TfL and previous employer Briggs Marine Contractor Ltd.

The workers carried out over 30 strike days this year over various issues, including agreement on a new pay and reward scheme, excessive use of agency staff, victimisation of union representatives and a lack of adequate health and safety training for new employees.

A ferry service across the Thames at Woolwich has been in place since the 14th century.

### **Weapons technicians at Scottish nuclear naval base to strike this week over pay**

Around 70 technicians at the Royal Naval Armaments Depot in Coulport nuclear naval base, Scotland planned a 24-hour strike for Thursday. The Unite union put in a 3.8 percent below-inflation pay claim, which was rejected by the employers.

Further strikes are planned for December 20, January 11, 25 and February 8 and 22. Workers voted by over 90 percent to strike. They have been on an overtime ban since November 16.

The workers are employed by AWE plc, Babcock Marine (Clyde) Ltd and Lockheed Martin UK Strategic Systems Ltd. Formerly employed by the Ministry of Defence, they were transferred to the companies in 2013 under Transfer of Undertaking (Protection of Employment) rules, supposed to protect contract conditions between employers. The technicians provide care and maintenance of nuclear weapons at the base.

### **Two-day strike announced of convenience store delivery drivers in Thameside, England**

Forty-five drivers working for Tesco-owned Booker Retail Partners at its Thamesmead depot, England will hold a two-day strike beginning December 23, after Booker reneged on a previous agreement.

The Unite union members deliver supplies to around 1,500 convenience stores in the southeast. They previously voted unanimously in September to strike beginning October 4. This was because Booker refused to pay the drivers a temporary £5 an hour increase being paid to its drivers in Hemel Hempstead.

Unite suspended a strike in October, when Booker offered a 3.3 percent pay increase and promised to review pay in February 2022. Booker reneged on the agreement.

### **Further strike by leisure workers in Sandwell, UK in long-running dispute over “fire and rehire”**

On Tuesday, UK leisure workers employed by Sandwell Leisure Trust at Portway Lifestyle Centre and Tipton Leisure Centre in the Midlands held a strike protesting further cuts to their terms and conditions.

In March, the trust fired and rehired the 280 Unison union members removing them from national pay and conditions. The workers subsequently held one-day strikes in April, June and August.

### **Gritter drivers in Carmarthenshire, Wales vote to strike over pay agreement**

Winter gritter drivers working for the Welsh county of Carmarthenshire voted to strike over a pay agreement.

The GMB union members voted by a 90 percent majority to walk out after the county council reneged on a comprehensive collective agreement between the council and unions over pay for gritter drivers, made two years ago.

The GMB said strikes would take place in the New Year, after Unite and Unison balloted a further 20 gritter drivers over the same issue.

### **Cleaners at London’s Facebook HQ to strike over workload and victimisation**

Cleaners in the UK capital working for contractor Churchill Cleaning will strike on December 24, in a campaign over workload and for the reinstatement of a dismissed union representative.

The cleaners, contracted to clean Facebook’s London HQ, took part in an ongoing campaign against excessive workloads and the dismissal of Guillermo Camacho. The Cleaners & Allied Independent Workers Union members voted unanimously to strike. Further walkouts could take place in the New Year.

Camacho was dismissed after leading a protest outside the Facebook offices on July 21.

### **Ancillary hospital staff at Barts hospital, London vote overwhelmingly to strike over pay**

Hundreds of hospital ancillary workers employed by outsourcing company, Mitie at St Bartholomew’s hospital (Barts) in the UK capital voted in a 97 percent majority to strike over pay.

The Unite union members, employed as cleaners, porters and other ancillary staff, are paid up to 15 percent less than directly employed NHS staff. In a press release December 10, Unite stated, “Unless there is an agreement on pay and conditions, strikes will be set for January 2022.”

### **Pallet production workers in Manchester, UK to begin indefinite strike**

UK workers at Chep UK Limited, which produces and repairs pallets, are to begin an indefinite strike Friday.

The Unite union members at the company’s depot in Trafford Park, Manchester voted by a 75 percent majority to reject a 2 percent pay offer. They held previous walkouts including a four-day stoppage last week. They began an overtime ban December 3.

Chep produces and repairs pallets for prominent companies including food producer Heinz.

### **Support staff at UK airport to strike over low pay**

Workers employed by contractor Wilson James at Luton airport in England are to hold a four-day strike beginning December 19.

The Unite union members assist disabled passengers, while some are drivers transporting passengers to and from planes. They are on the minimum wage of £8.91 an hour, while the drivers—who must have Heavy Good Vehicle (HGV) class 2 licences—are paid only £10 an hour. The workers are demanding higher pay.

### **Refuse collection drivers in Coventry, England to strike over pay and conditions**

Around 70 UK refuse collection drivers at Coventry City Council voted by a 98.5 percent majority to strike over pay and work arrangements over Christmas.

The Unite union members will strike from December 21 to 24, January 5 to 6 and January 11 to 14. The HGV drivers earn as little as £22,000 a year. There is a UK-wide shortage of HGV drivers, and other councils increased pay or made retention payments to keep refuse collection drivers.

### **UK supermarket staff to ballot over pay parity**

Around 40,000 UK shop floor workers in Asda supermarkets will ballot over an equal pay claim. The GMB members, mainly women, are seeking pay parity with mainly male distribution centre workers in a long-running dispute. The ballot closes December 20.

### **Consultative ballot of UK civil servants over pay and pensions**

UK civil servants will take part in a consultative ballot to determine if they are prepared to take part in a ballot over pay and pensions. The ballot organised by the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) will determine whether workers can ballot for industrial action for improved pay and pensions.

### **UK land registry workers to ballot over a new business strategy agreement**

UK workers in HM Land Registry are taking part in a consultative ballot over changes to a Business Strategy Agreement and use of data.

The ballot of PCS members closes on December 21. Included in the agreement is a commitment that any future office closures would be done without compulsory redundancies.

### **Aston Martin car manufacturer workers in England to ballot over pension threat**

Workers at four luxury car Aston Martin sites in southern England and one in Wales voted overwhelmingly in a consultative ballot against attacks on their pensions.

The Unite union members are threatened with being transferred from their current defined benefit pension scheme to an inferior defined contribution scheme, which could mean retired workers losing around £100,000 of retirement income. A ballot for full industrial action could take place in the New Year.

### **USDAW union suspends strike of UK supermarket distribution workers after new pay offer**

The USDAW shopworkers' union suspended a planned strike in the week up to Christmas Eve, after supermarket chain Tesco made what the union claimed to be a "new and much improved pay offer."

The union is also holding two ballots of warehouse workers and drivers at nine Tesco distribution centres in Daventry, Goole, Hinckley, Lichfield, Livingston, Magor (two Welsh sites), Peterborough and Southampton. The ballot began Wednesday, and USDAW is recommending the offer.

### **Unite calls off strike of UK NHS delivery equipment workers**

Around 200 HGV and van drivers working for Unipart under contract to deliver health equipment for the NHS had voted to strike.

However, following intervention by the government mediation service Acas, Unite called off any walkout. A Unite press release of December 9 said the drivers secured a "substantial" pay rise in a two-year deal backdated to April 2021.

### **Unite union suspends pay strike of outsourced workers at Vauxhall's car factory in Luton, England**

A planned strike by UK workers at outsourcing company Mitie, at Vauxhall's Luton car plant, due to begin December 9, was suspended by Unite.

The 30 workers are employed as cleaners and in the jig and tool rooms. They voted by a 96 percent to oppose poverty pay. They earn £9 an hour, 9p above the national minimum wage. The strike was suspended after Mitie made an improved backdated pay offer. This is being considered by the workers.

Middle East

### **Strike by teachers across 100 Iranian cities over pay and conditions**

On Saturday and Sunday, teachers in 100 cities across Iran including Tehran and Isfahan walked out.

Their demands included raising their pay above the current poverty level rate and free education for all children. The teachers held rallies on Monday, including one in front of the parliament in Tehran. On Sunday, police attacked strikers and made arrests.

### **Lebanese transport workers to strike Thursday over rising fuel prices**

Road transport workers planned a Lebanon-wide strike on Thursday in response to rising fuel prices. The deteriorating value of the Lebanese currency means fuel prices are adjusted upwards twice a week instead of the previous weekly, and may be adjusted three times a week in future.

### **Strike by Lebanese mobile phone network workers**

On Monday, workers at Lebanese state owned mobile phone operators, Alfa and Touch began an open-ended strike.

The Mobile Operators Employees Syndicate members are demanding the companies pay health care and other dues to which they are entitled.

### **Israeli nurses to strike over violence against health workers**

Israeli nurses planned a 24-hour strike on Wednesday.

The National Association of Nurses members demand the implementation of a plan to combat violence against health staff. Nurses will operate a weekend service, and non-urgent procedures will not be carried out.

Africa

### **Municipal workers in Free State, South Africa strike over pay**

South African municipal workers in Kopanong, Free State are refusing to work until they receive their full salaries.

Many of the South African Municipal Workers Union members have not been paid for three months, and money deducted from wages for pension funds, medical and funeral insurance is not passed on.

Kopanong council say they cannot pay employees until they receive grants withheld by central government, due to non-compliance with expenditure and performance targets. The council owes R1m to the pension fund, R30m for water and R9.5m for electricity. The municipal manager was suspended.

### **Health workers strike over pay and conditions at hospital in Free State, South Africa**

Health workers including nurses, porters, cleaners and security staff, went on indefinite strike December 7 at the Pelonomi Hospital, Blomfontein, Free State, South Africa complaining of unsafe working conditions, staff shortages and mismanagement.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union members say their parts of the hospital have been under construction for a decade, causing danger to staff and patients. They also demand overtime pay, the filling of vacant posts and the removal of the hospital's Chief Executive Officer

### **Teachers in rural Limpopo, South Africa threaten pay strike**

Over 6,000 teachers in Limpopo province, South Africa threaten to strike if they fail to receive annual allowances given to attract and retain staff working in remote rural schools.

The South African Democratic Teachers' Union members say the Limpopo Department of Basic Education plans to halt the incentive payments in January 2022, making it unaffordable to travel the distances to schools in rural areas. The education department blames the effects of the pandemic and budget cuts.

### **Senior Ugandan doctors join strike by medical interns over pay and conditions**

Senior doctors in Uganda are to join a strike by interns (junior doctors).

Doctors and interns are struggling with insufficient medical supplies, including Personal Protective Equipment, substandard working conditions and poor pay.

The Ministry of Health sacked all striking medical interns and ordered them to leave the premises within a week to make way for new starters. The new starters, however, refused to do the work left undone because of the strike.

### **Teachers in Central African Republic continue strike over pay and conditions**

Teaching staff at the University of Bangui in the Central African Republic this week began a further 21-day strike. Previous actions were over periods of three days and eight days.

The long-running dispute is over pay and conditions, including staff vacations.

### **Striking Liberian palm oil workers return to work**

Striking palm oil workers employed by LiBINCO Oil in Grand Bassa County, Liberia returned to work. It was not reported how long the strike went on for. It was called in response to the company's decision to demand birth certificates before employees' dependents could receive tuition assistance and other benefits.

Management conceded to workers' demands, while insisting on documentation for the next school year.

### **Planned walkout by university workers in Plateau State, Nigeria over pay held back by union**

University workers in Plateau State, Nigeria plan to walk out indefinitely over non-payment of allowances and entitlements.

The chairman of the local branch of the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities said they were waiting for the national leaders to give the go-ahead. Before the latest strike threat, there was a seven-day ultimatum that expired on December 8, a 21-day ultimatum that expired on July 23 and a four-week ultimatum that expired on September 3.

The union held a three-day "peaceful protest" from November 29 to December 1.

On the eve of a strike by lecturers in Anambra state over vacation days, the Academic Staff Union of Universities split. One faction opposed a stoppage, proposing to "approach the VC [Vice Chancellor] who has a listening ear."



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