

Midwives and nursing assistants strike in France over pay and staff shortages; protests by workers and pensioners across Iran over low pay and pensions; South African dairy workers at Clover Foods in sixth week of indefinite strike over pay, conditions and job losses

## 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.*

### French midwives and nursing assistants strike over pay and staffing levels

On December 24, midwives in France began a seven-day strike to demand an improved salary and increased recruitment into the profession. The three largest unions representing midwives signed a deal in November which increased midwives' monthly salaries by 500 euros. The National Union of Midwives said a large amount of that increase was allocated last year, so the strikes continued.

*France Bleu* interviewed one midwife at Nantes University Hospital who said she believed they required a dozen new midwives to provide a safe service. She said the staffing shortage previously led to the death of a baby when there was nobody to monitor its heart rate.

On Tuesday, nursing assistants at a respite home in the town of Fondettes also ended a four-day strike after they obtained the same 183-euro salary increase as medical staff were granted by last year's Ségur healthcare review.

### Accident and emergency staff begin indefinite protest at Rouen University Hospital, France

On Monday, around 50 healthcare workers in the emergency department of Rouen University Hospital began an indefinite protest strike called by four unions to denounce their working conditions and low staffing levels.

A spokesman for the French Democratic Confederation of Labour told *Le Monde* that 50 beds in the hospital were closed due to lack of recruitment, and there were 40 vacancies for nurses. As is common in French healthcare disputes, workers in the department carried out their duties as normal but wore labels announcing they were on protest strike.

### Waste collection strike over working time continues in Toulouse, France

Around 600 waste collection workers in the French city of Toulouse continued their strike this week, begun on December 15, against the imposition of new working arrangements extending their hours.

Previously, workers went home after completing their collection, whatever time that occurred, but according to *France Bleu* the city government intends to impose regular hours from January 1, citing a law requiring a 35-hour week for public sector workers.

In Marseille, waste collection workers were also on strike for nearly two months against the imposition of this new law, demanding an exemption due to the physical demands of their job. Last week, the Force Ouvrière union agreed to a deal with the Marseille city government, which reduced the new hours to 85 percent of the 35-hour week.

### HGV drivers at French company strike over unsafe working conditions

Twenty heavy goods vehicle (HGV) drivers in the French company Transport G7 Champagne began a strike on December 19 opposing dangerous working conditions. According to *France Bleu*, these include a lack of equipment to protect them from the cold when moving refrigerated loads.

On December 22, the Labour Inspectorate examined the company and found the vehicles were unsafe, so the drivers refused to return to work until repairs are made to the heaters and safety equipment.

### Workers at Greek National Social Security Agency strike following cancellation of leave

On December 23, workers at the National Social Security Agency (EFKA) in Greece began two days of stoppages. This followed a

government order cancelling leave, in order to keep employees at work between December 20 and January 7 to cover increased demand.

Members of the Panhellenic Federation of Employees' Associations of EFKA held a 24-hour strike, while the Panhellenic Federation of Personnel of Social Policy Organisations called a 48-hour stoppage.

According to *Kathimerini*, the EFKA went to court to have the strikes declared illegal, as the unions did not give the four days' notice required in the public sector, although the order cancelling leave was only given at three days' notice. Despite the ruling of the court that the strikes were illegal, the unions announced that "the strike not only took place, but was very massive," reported *efsyn.gr*.

### **24-hour national port strike in Finland**

On Tuesday, the Automobile and Transport Workers' Union (AKT) called a 24-hour national strike in all Finnish ports, after the Helsinki District Court imposed a 1 million euro fine on the union.

Business organisations complained that the stoppage was occurring because of a dispute with one company and estimated it would cost millions as 350 million euros worth of goods are handled in Finnish ports each day.

According to the Finnish Broadcasting Company, the dispute began between the Industrial Union, one of Finland's largest unions, and the Keitele Group, a timber company employing around 550 workers. After Keitele refused to sign on to a collective agreement for the sector, the Industrial Union announced a blockade of its goods, which the AKT joined, calling on its members not to load the company's cargo. Keitele went to court and obtained an order for the AKT to lift its blockade under threat of a 1 million euro fine. The AKT continued the blockade and demanded the fine is lifted.

### **Romanian healthcare workers begin symbolic strike to demand pay rise**

On December 22, healthcare workers in Romania began a symbolic strike, wearing an armband or red ribbon while working, after the government announced they would not receive the full pay rise legislated in 2017.

According to *Spotmedia*, only some groups of workers will receive a pay rise at all, and those who do will receive only a quarter of the previously planned increase. An official from the Sanitas union announced they may escalate the dispute to a genuine work stoppage if their demand for a full pay rise is not met.

### **Portuguese logistics workers strike over pay**

On December 24, logistics workers across Portugal walked out for a day to demand pay increases and the signing of a new collective agreement for the sector. The Union of Portuguese Commerce, Office and Service Workers (CESP) reported "strong adhesion" to the strike, which forced several supermarkets to close, although the union accused Lidl of illegally calling workers who were on holiday to replace strikers.

In negotiations with the Portuguese Association of Distribution

Companies (APED), CESP is calling for a pay increase and a revision of the collective agreement which has not been renegotiated since 2016. APED is planning to reduce overtime payments, according to *Lusa*.

### **Lawyers in Bosnia and Herzegovina begin indefinite strike over new tax and financial arrangements**

Lawyers throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina are on indefinite strike to demand the tax burden on individual lawyers be returned to the 2018 level, and to oppose the introduction of payment upfront of a court fee.

According to *Nova*, Belgrade Bar Association members in the capital stopped work from December 24, and lawyers in Šabac and other cities joined them from Monday.

Lawyers taking part in the strike will make submissions related only to legal deadlines and where a client may lose the right to access the courts, and the Šabac Bar Association announced its members would provide a minimum level of service.

### **Prison staff in Brussels, Belgium strike against overcrowding and overwork**

Prison staff in the Belgian capital, Brussels, began a strike late on December 23, which ended at 6 a.m. on Christmas Day, to demand either a reduction in the number of prisoners or the responsibilities of the workers.

The General Union of Public Services (ACOD/CGSP) members want the number of activities in the prison reduced in line with the low staffing levels, as current levels meant guards doing three back-to-back shifts at one point.

Workers at the prison in Antwerp were also due to walk out on December 23, but the ACOD/CGSP suspended their strike until January 14 following a "constructive" meeting with management and the government.

Highlighting the danger of overcrowding, two wings of Saint-Gilles prison were placed in quarantine on December 23 before the strike began, after more than 20 prisoners tested positive for COVID-19. This follows another outbreak at the end of October.

### **Gig economy taxi drivers strike in Tomsk, Russia**

Taxi drivers for the gig economy platform Yandex in the Russian city of Tomsk walked out on Tuesday, refusing to accept any orders through the app. According to *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, drivers demanded the distance they drive to pick up passengers be reduced, that they be allowed to see the length and cost of a ride before accepting it, and that weekly shifts be reintroduced.

The strike follows multiple stoppages of other Yandex.Taxi drivers in Volgograd, who stopped work for three days last week, demanding a lowering of the company's commission and increased minimum fares. In previous weeks, organisers of the strikes in Volgograd were arrested and fined by the police for "organising or holding a public event without filing a notice of its holding in the prescribed manner."

## **Strike by train staff at UK rail company over attacks on job role**

UK train managers and senior conductors working for rail franchise company Cross Country went on strike Christmas Eve, over attacks on their job role.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members voted overwhelmingly to walk out. They oppose the company's plans to draft in other staff grades to replace train manager and senior conductor roles. Train managers and senior conductors carry out safety-critical roles which would be threatened by their replacement.

The RMT reported solid support at all the affected depots for the stoppage. They are also set to strike on New Year's Eve.

The strike affected long-distance routes serving the English Midlands, southwest England, parts of Wales and Scotland's major cities.

For the past five years, the RMT and the ASLEF drivers' union has isolated and dissipated struggles by thousands of guards and drivers at private rail franchises throughout the UK against driver only operated trains (DOO)—threatening jobs and passenger safety as drivers take over the operation of train doors.

## **Further stoppages by rail catering workers based in Scottish capital announced over management bullying and harassment**

Following a 24-hour strike Christmas Eve, rail catering workers at Rail Gourmet at Edinburgh Waverley train station, Scotland will begin a 72-hour stoppage on December 31.

The RMT union members have held intermittent strikes since July. They originally voted 100 percent to strike, protesting bullying and harassment by management which led to a breakdown of industrial relations. Rail Gourmet provides food and drink on the London Northern Eastern Railway service between Edinburgh and London.

## **London Underground drivers continue stoppages over Night Tube rostering**

Strikes by London Underground drivers will continue in the New Year over rostering plans for night service.

The RMT union members oppose plans by Transport for London to scrap a 2016 agreement that established a dedicated grade of Night Tube drivers—favoured by female staff and carers. The Night Tube service, suspended at the start of the pandemic, was reintroduced last month. All drivers are now forced to work at least four weekend Night Tube shifts per year.

Following previous stoppages, the RMT members were re-balloted and voted to walk out from 8.30 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays on the Central and Victoria lines. The stoppages, which will begin on January 7, are scheduled to run until June 2022, and could also be extended to other tube lines. If it goes ahead, this would be the longest running dispute on the London underground system.

Also, 10,000 RMT members are balloting on whether to strike over attacks on pensions, conditions and jobs, including the proposed cutting of 600 customer service assistant (CSA) jobs. The ballot closes January 10. CSAs address travel queries, help customers purchase tickets, deal with ticket problems at the gateline, carry out security checks and provide first aid.

## **Refuse collection drivers and loaders in Eastbourne, UK to strike over pay and conditions**

HGV refuse collection drivers and loaders working for South East Environmental Services Ltd (SEES) in Eastbourne, England plan to strike on New Year's Eve, January 7 and 10.

The GMB union members are protesting low pay and "barbaric" conditions. The 19 drivers voted unanimously to walk out. Loaders voted in a separate ballot to join the drivers' walkout. The drivers who hold HGV licences are paid at near-minimum wage levels. The stoppage would affect around 50,000 households in the Eastbourne area. SEES is wholly owned by Eastbourne Council.

## **Gritting lorry drivers in Welsh local authority set to strike in New Year after employer reneges on agreement**

Around 70 gritter lorry drivers working for Carmarthenshire County Council in Wales will strike in January.

The GMB, Unison and Unite union members who hold HGV licences voted overwhelmingly to strike January 6-7, 17-21 and 24-28, because the council reneged on an agreement signed between the union and council two years ago.

## **GMB union calls off strike of refuse workers in Charnwood, UK over low pay**

Refuse collectors working for outsourcing company, Serco, under contract to Charnwood Borough Council near Leicester, England, voted to walk out on December 29 and 31 over an unacceptable pay offer from Serco.

Following talks between Serco and GMB, the company put forward a new offer which the GMB members accepted, and the action was called off.

## **Protests by workers and pensioners across Iran over low pay and pensions**

On Sunday, protests were held by retired steel workers in several cities across Iran, including Tehran, Isfahan and Ahvaz. They were protesting the low value of their pensions from the Steel Fund, leaving them unable to buy necessities. Their pensions are often delayed.

The same day, around 40 workers at the Khoy Communication Company in the northwest city of Khoy protested after being locked out of their workplace for demanding new contracts and a pay rise.

Also, on Sunday, workers at the Qom Province Health Community protested outside the Medical Sciences University followed by a march to the governor's office. Employed by contractors, not directly by the Qom Province Health Community, they are demanding job security with permanent contracts.

The Iranian economy is hard hit by the US-led boycott, leading to inflation above 40 percent and an 80 percent loss in value of the Iranian currency the last few years.

### **Protests by lecturers and engineering graduates in southern Iraq**

On Monday and Tuesday, unpaid lecturers and engineering graduates protested in front of the Education directorates in the southern Iraqi governorates of Diyala and al-Diwaniyah.

The lecturers and teachers, who are not regularised, work unpaid before eventually gaining paid employment, but the period of unpaid work is not determined, leaving some of them working unpaid for years. The unemployed engineering graduates demanded work contracts.

### **South African dairy workers at Clover Foods in sixth week of indefinite strike over pay, conditions and job losses**

Around 4,000 South African workers employed by the Clover food and beverage group are in the sixth week of their strike over pay cuts, redundancies and longer working hours.

The General Industrial Workers Union of South Africa and the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) members faced heavy security at factories, despite picketing peacefully.

Clover plans to close several factories and save R300 million by retrenching workers and introducing 12-hour days, worked over four days in every six, without overtime pay. Some 760 employees already face retrenchment unless they accept a 20 percent pay cut. The firm also intends to increase workloads by reducing the number of delivery assistants from two per truck to one. The company blames the poor economy and resulting low consumer demand.

The FAWU is calling for government intervention, demanding that the Israeli-owned company be nationalised.

### **Nigerian pilots' wildcat strike ends**

Pilots employed by Arik Air returned to work after an unofficial stoppage begun on December 21. Arik Air threatened to sack them after the union called the strike off.

The strike took place because the company manager refused to hear the pilots' complaints. The company managers dismissed the pilots, saying correct procedures were not followed, including that they did not act through the National Association of Airline Pilots and Engineers (NAAPE).

The NAAPE instructed the pilots to return to work. The chairman of the union claimed the company is like a family. The union met with the managers and negotiated an end to the dismissals. There was no report on whether the original complaints by the pilots were addressed.

### **Workers and poor in Otuasega, Niger Delta demand electricity and employment at Shell oil company and**

A protest was mounted on December 25 by workers in Otuasega against the Shell Development Company of Nigeria Limited (SPDC), during which they shut down the SPDC's Kolo Creek manifold. Their demands include provision of electricity and employment chances at the facility for the Otuasega, Yiba-Ama (Oruma), Imiringi and Elebele peoples.

The chairman of Otuasega Community Development Community, Abah Raniyar, one of the protest leaders, accused the SPDC of breaking its promises. He said, "Shell has been operating in Otuasega community for more than 50 years now without giving us electricity. We have not had any single person employed in Shell."

### **Zimbabwe teachers strike threat over pay and conditions**

Teachers in Zimbabwe warned they will refuse to return to work after the Christmas and New Year holidays unless their demands on pay and conditions are met.

Schools increased their fees by over 350 percent, but teachers' salaries were not increased. In December, inflation rose to 60.7 percent.

Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union president Obert Masaraure called for teachers to be paid in US dollars. The government claims to be unable to pay salaries in US dollars, without explanation.



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