

French secondary school teachers begin a week of strikes over COVID-19 danger; five-week strike begins at Finnish forestry company UPM over collective bargaining agreement; further protests by Iranian workers and pensioners in defence of livelihoods; strikers at South African dairy group Clover Foods face factory closures

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.

Europe

Italian heads of school demand return to remote learning amid massive COVID surge

Nearly 1,500 heads of school from all over Italy have signed an urgent appeal for the resumption of remote lessons for two weeks. The appeal is directed to Prime Minister Mario Draghi, Minister of Education Patrizio Bianchi and the presidents of regions and provinces, due to the huge numbers of school personnel and students who are sick with the disease.

Public broadcaster RAI reported that the petition reads in part, "For two years we have worked tirelessly to ensure a school service severely tested by the pandemic," but a few days before the start of classes after the Christmas break, during which we have never stopped, we are witnessing with growing concern the escalation of absences. This is an epochal situation, never experienced before, risky and to date already predictable. It is not possible to ignore it. A planned and temporary suspension of classes in presence (with the activation of distance learning) for two weeks is certainly preferable to an unmanageable situation that will cause with certainty fragmentation, interruption of classes and low educational effectiveness."

As of this week, more than 1.2 million Italians are positive with COVID, and the number of daily deaths has increased more than 80 percent over the Christmas and New Year holidays.

Five-week strike begins at Finnish forestry company UPM over collective bargaining agreement

On January 1, around 3,000 workers at the Finnish forestry company UPM walked out following the company's withdrawal last year from the collective bargaining agreement in the sector, reported *Reuters*.

Initially the unions involved announced a three-week strike, which an analyst speaking to *Reuters* said could cost the company at least 60 million euros. Now the Paperworkers' Union has announced its members will remain on strike for five weeks, until February 5.

The Finnish Broadcasting Company reported that UPM biomass plants provide the bulk of heating to many cities, which have either shut down some buildings, lowered their heating, or resorted to more expensive natural gas because of the strike. Last week the Helsinki District Court rejected UPM's demand to limit the number of workers who could strike to guarantee certain services. The court ruled that the Paperworkers' Union must make a submission before any restrictions can be imposed.

UPM reported 568 million euros in net income for 2020, and nearly 700 million euros in dividends to shareholders.

Protesting Turkish metalworkers set to strike over real terms pay cut

Turkish metalworkers have continued to protest against a 17 percent pay increase imposed by the Turkish Employers' Association of Metal Industries (MESS), which amounts to a real terms pay cut.

Evrensel reported that tens of thousands of Türk Metal union members protested on Sunday in Kocaeli. One worker told the newspaper that even a 50 percent pay rise would not be enough, with official inflation at 36 percent and many price rises already topping this as the national currency rapidly loses value.

Türk Metal's chairman made an appeal at the protest "to [the employers'] conscience, to their most innocent, most humane feelings: come to the table, let's finish this. Do not keep us waiting, do not delay. Give us our due, don't leave our hands in the air, let's shake hands, let's get back to work."

Metalworkers throughout Turkey have protested multiple times during the pay dispute, since MESS offered a 12 percent pay rise in December. Türk Metal said it would decide after Christmas whether to call a strike, and the United Metal Workers' Union announced a one-day strike at four factories next week.

Polish miners block coal shipments to demand pay rise

On Tuesday, miners at the Halemba coal mine in Poland blocked shipments of coal to state-owned power plants, demanding pay rises and an increase to weekend pay rates.

The Polish Mining Group (PGG) announced last year that it would not increase pay until the European Commission approved state aid to the mining sector, *Politico* reported. According to *Euractiv*, the unions are demanding an increase in the average monthly salary from 7,800 to 8,200 z?oty, an increase of 5.1 percent, while the latest inflation figure for Poland is 7.8 percent. The National Bank of Poland expects this to rise to more than 8 percent this year.

Around 70 percent of Poland's electricity comes from coal, and PGG is Europe's largest producer of hard coal. The unions announced a strike ballot will take place later in January for an indefinite stoppage.

Portuguese call centre workers strike over pay and job security

On Saturday, workers in call centres across Portugal joined the final of four days of sector-wide strikes called by the Call Centre Workers' Union (STCC). The STCC called a two-day strike from December 24, and another from December 31, to demand pay rises and an end to precarious contracts.

According to *Lusa*, the STCC said it is difficult to estimate how many of the 110,000 call centre workers in Portugal joined the strike. Some stopped work for two of the four days.

Metro workers in Porto, Portugal hold further strikes in pay dispute

Drivers on the metro network of Porto, the second largest city in Portugal, held a third 24-hour strike last week in a pay dispute with the operator ViaPorto, following two stoppages earlier in December.

A spokesperson for the Drivers' Union (SMAq) announced that 100 percent of their members joined the strike, which the company says had a major impact on traffic, closing multiple lines for the day. According to *Lusa*, SMAq called for the company to display "good faith and willingness to negotiate," accusing it of "imposing, unilaterally, [pay] increases which are no more than crumbs."

Strike against layoffs at Italian subsidiary of BNP Paribas bank

On December 28, workers at BNL, the Italian subsidiary of French banking group BNP Paribas, held a one-day strike against job losses as the company outsourced certain services. According to *Reuters*, 900 jobs out

of the 11,500 in the company are threatened by the move.

The company said around 30 percent of the workers joined the strike, but the unions pointed out that it was likely far more as 80 percent of branches closed.

Cleaning workers continue indefinite strike in Córdoba, Spain

Workers in the cleaning sector in the Spanish city of Córdoba on indefinite strike since December 22, joined a large protest on December 30 called by the General Workers' Union (UGT). The UGT denounced the employers' association for refusing to negotiate a new collective agreement, and accused them of paying below the minimum wage.

The regional government imposed a 100 percent minimum service requirement on the strikers, which the UGT said it would appeal in the courts as a violation of the workers' right to strike.

Bus drivers in Córdoba also held three partial strikes this week, stopping work between 11am and 8pm on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, apart from those required to meet the 25 percent minimum service requirement imposed by the government.

Public transport workers in Zaragoza resume stoppages, while long-running strike continues in Lanzarote, Spain

On January 1, bus drivers in the Spanish city of Zaragoza resumed a campaign of strikes which were suspended over Christmas. They stopped work in the afternoon this week, while tram drivers walked out in the morning and evening shifts on Monday, Tuesday and Friday, according to *el Periódico*.

The president of the works council at the operator AvanzaBus called for the company to return to the "negotiating table at the Aragonese Mediation and Arbitration Service." Zaragoza transport workers have been holding partial strikes since September, after the collective agreement with the company expired.

Bus drivers on Lanzarote in the Canary Islands continued their strike, begun at the start of December, demanding an end to split shifts and a new collective agreement. According to *La Provincia*, the 70 workers at the Lanzarote Bus Group who stopped work are also demanding a pay rise in line with inflation, and the payment of an availability bonus. One union representative speaking with the newspaper announced that the split shifts meant some drivers work 18-hour days. The union rep noted that local government imposes a 100 percent minimum service requirement for school bus drivers, effectively banning them from joining the strikes.

Further strikes in Belgian prisons against overcrowding and overwork

Following a strike in Brussels prisons on Christmas Eve, prison staff in the rest of Belgium held 24-hour stoppages to denounce the fact that there are 10,700 prisoners in a system with a capacity of 9,500, and the effect this has on working conditions.

Workers in prisons in the Dutch-speaking Flanders region walked out for 24 hours from Sunday night, and on Monday night their colleagues in French-speaking Wallonia walked out. Guards in Saint-Gilles and Forest

prisons in the capital joined both stoppages.

A spokesperson from the General Union of Public Services (ACOD/CGSP) told *RTBF* that conditions were so poor in Tournai prison that “I wouldn’t put my dog there.” 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.

The ACOD/CGSP also told *De Standaard* that they did not believe the “temporary” addition of 280 new beds to the prison system announced by the government would not become permanent, worsening both overcrowding and the workload of prison staff.

Further strikes by refuse collection drivers in Eastbourne, UK over pay and conditions

Twenty Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) refuse collection drivers working for South East Environmental Services Ltd (SEES) in Eastbourne, England who walked out on New Year’s Eve, plan to strike on January 7 and 10. They will also strike for six days from January 14 to 21. Employer attempted to use strike-breakers on New Year’s Eve.

The GMB union members are protesting low pay and “barbaric” conditions, with only two toilets for 100 employees and inadequate washing facilities. The 20 drivers voted unanimously to walk out. Loaders voted in a separate ballot to ballot for strike action over the same issue. 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.

Further walkouts by refuse collection drivers in Coventry, England over pay and conditions

Around 70 UK refuse collection drivers at Labour-run Coventry City Council began a two-day stoppage Wednesday, over pay and work arrangements over Christmas. It followed a four-day walkout from December 21 to 24.

The Unite members voted by a 98.5 percent majority to walk out. The HGV drivers’ pay starts at just £22,183 a year. It takes 11 years of service to reach the top of the pay scale. There is a UK-wide shortage of HGV drivers, and some councils have increased pay or made retention payments to keep refuse collection drivers.

Coventry council also tried to make last-minute changes to the workers’ contracts, with a buy-out option to make Christmas working compulsory. For the last 20 years, this has been voluntary.

Unite originally proposed that drivers strike every other hour throughout their shift, returning to depot for the strike hour. The council rejected this proposal as “impractical.” The drivers then took standard strike action, but bin collection workers did not strike.

The council refused to negotiate, with Labour councillors denouncing the strike on social media. A further four-day stoppage is scheduled for January 11-14.

Strike by gritting lorry drivers in Welsh local authority goes ahead

after employer reneges on agreement

Around 70 gritter lorry drivers working for Carmarthenshire County Council in Wales began a two-day strike on Wednesday, with pickets at council depots.

The GMB, Unison and Unite union members, who hold HGV licences, voted overwhelmingly to strike after the council reneged on an agreement signed between the unions and council two years ago.

Strike of logistic drivers in Grangemouth, Scotland over pay

Drivers working for Turners of Soham at their depot in Grangemouth, Scotland began a nine-day strike on Thursday.

The Unite union members voted unanimously on a 100 percent turnout for the action. They are protesting an 8.7 percent pay offer. Drivers working for the same company in northwest England were awarded a 17.5 percent pay rise in October last year. The drivers at Grangemouth work on the Q8 aviation fuel contract supplying major aviation companies.

The company made a £57 million profit last year up nearly 70 percent from the previous year. Managing Director Paul Day is estimated to have a personal wealth of around £350 million. Further walkouts are planned.

Further strikes by workers over pay at Somers Forge defence supplier in England

Following walkouts on December 17 and 21, workers at Somers Forge, Halesowen in England were to walk out on Wednesday. Further stoppages are planned for January 12, 21 and 24.

The GMB union members rejected a 4 percent pay deal over two years, which was not even backdated to April. The employer reneged on the second year of a previous pay deal.

Prior to the strikes in December, Russell Farrington, GMB regional organiser, said, “Rather than trying to pull a fast one, the company should come back to the table, and we’ll hammer this out together.”

Somers Forge supplies metal components for the Ministry of Defence.

Further walkouts planned by hospital security workers at London hospital over pay and conditions

Following a three-day strike in early December, security staff at London’s Great Ormond Street Hospital plan a six-week strike on January 18.

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. They are employed by outsourcing company, Carlisle Support Services.

Teachers at Forest School in London prepare fight over attack on pensions

Teachers at Forest School, an independent day school in the London borough of Waltham Forest, voted by more than 90 percent to take part in a ballot for industrial action over pensions.

Management at the privately run school want to replace the teachers' pension scheme with a cheaper, inferior one. They are threatening to fire and rehire teachers who resist. Following the indicative ballot, the National Education Union members will now take part in a ballot calling for industrial action later this month.

Middle East

Further protests by Iranian workers and pensioners against attacks on livelihoods

On Sunday, pensioners in the city of Rasht in the Iranian province of Gilan held a rally outside local Welfare Organisation offices to protest inadequate pension payments. It was one of several protests this week by pensioners and workers.

Retired steelworkers held protests in Isfahan, Khuzestan and Tehran. Workers at the Rejal Petrochemical company in Khuzestan province protested over not being paid their after-hours bonus payments for the last three years. Workers at the Rangin Nakh textile factory in Semnan held a protest outside the provincial governor's office over payment of arrears going back eight years.

Iranian workers and pensioners are hard hit by the impact of inflation at over 40 percent. Basic food prices have risen by more than 80 percent in the last year. Ongoing US sanctions are impacting the Iranian economy.

Protests by Tunisian teachers over pay

December 28 saw protests of teachers in Tunisia. Organised by the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) and the Syndicate of Secondary Education, it was to protest the Tunisian government reneging on an agreement relating to back-to-school grants.

Israeli Foreign Ministry workers protest working conditions

On Sunday, around 100 Foreign Ministry workers protested outside the Foreign Ministry in Israel and ran up a black flag on the building's flagpole.

It was part of an ongoing campaign against the Ministry's refusal to pay overtime. The workers are also only working regular hours. The ministry staff are paid for two on-call days a month to cover contact with Israeli embassies abroad. They are expected to be available other days in the month without pay. In 2019, when other Israeli government ministries saw an average five percent budget increase, the Foreign Ministry saw a near 15 percent reduction.

Israeli pharmaceutical workers begin dispute over terms and conditions

At the end of December, pharmaceutical workers began a dispute at the Teva Pharmaceutical site in Kfar Saba in central Israel.

The Israeli Trade Union Federation, Histadrut members accuse Teva management of reneging on the terms of a collective bargaining agreement and mistreating union representatives. Under Israeli law unions must declare a dispute prior to taking any industrial action.

Africa

Strike at South African dairy group Clover Foods continues, with factory closures imminent

Around 5,000 South African workers are continuing their stoppage against the Clover food and beverage group. Clover is intensifying its push to close four factories with the loss of 1,000 jobs to save R300 million, introduce 12-hour days worked over four days in every six without overtime pay and increase workloads by reducing staff numbers.

The General Industries Workers Union of South Africa (GIWUSA) and the Food and Allied Workers Union members have been on strike since November 2021.

Almost 760 workers already faced retrenchment unless they accepted a 20 percent pay cut. The company has closed one factory in Western Cape. Three more in North West province, Free State and Gauteng could close in the first quarter of 2022.

The unions called for government intervention, including nationalisation of the company, which was acquired in 2019 by Milco SA, a consortium including Israel's Central Bottling Company. GIWUSA president Mametlwe Sebei told *Food for Mzansi* that government intervention was the "only way" to save jobs.

On December 29, the unions met with the office of Ebrahim Patel, Minister of Economic Development. They called for the Competition Tribunal to declare Milco and Clover in breach of the conditions authorising their merger, which precluded retrenchment or downgrading conditions. To gain approval for the acquisition, Milco pledged to create 500 jobs. Clover has now shed about 2,000.

The government approved the takeover as part of African National Congress President Cyril Ramaphosa's bid to attract investment.

The government said it could not intervene in Clover's business. The two unions called a mass meeting of their members for January 8, but are doing nothing beyond urging customers to boycott Clover goods.

Racecourse workers in South Africa strike for pay rise

Workers at Kenilworth Racing in Western Cape, South Africa went on strike on January 3, in an ongoing dispute about wages. After one day's picketing the company offered a settlement that was accepted by the GIWUSA union.

The workers last received a wage adjustment in 2018. In 2020, the company told them no adjustment was possible because of the impact of COVID. Other issues include job security and reduced hours.

Formal wage negotiations opened six months ago. Kenilworth offered a staggered adjustment for varying wage grades that was rejected. GIWUSA spokesperson Abeedah Adams told *SAHorseracing.Com* that workers with an average service of four years were paid the minimum wage.

Adams reported being told recently by Kenilworth's Chief Operations Officer that the company has been loss-making for 20 years, and assured the company that the increase tabled by GIWUSA "won't even cost them

R200,000 per month.”

The strike notice was issued on December 31, and workers walked out on January 3, resulting in major gambling outlets being closed to business ahead of a forthcoming big racing event. At 10.30am, the company reopened negotiations, offering a five percent settlement backdated to August 2021, and an agreement to open negotiations for the August 2022 wage adjustment in May.

GIWUSA accepted the deal, with Adams saying she hoped it signalled a “more progressive” period in relations with the company. She said the union was “grateful” the strike had only lasted one day but it could have been avoided altogether.

Lagos nurses start three-day warning strike as Nigerian parliament prepares to outlaw health sector strikes

Nigerian nurses and midwives in Lagos will begin three days of strike action on January 10.

The stoppage is due to an acute shortage of nurses and midwives in the state-owned health sector, non-payment of retention allowances, lack of promotions for graduates and nurses, poor welfare and working conditions, and the need for hazard allowances and life insurance schemes for nurses and other health workers.

These issues motivated a planned indefinite strike in September 2021 that was called off at the last minute by the National Association of Nigeria Nurses and Midwives. The union used a change in the government position on uniform allowances to justify a climbdown on other issues.

Nigeria's House of Representatives will give a second reading to a bill outlawing strikes by government-employed health workers.

Workers at polytechnic in Ondo State, Nigeria walk out over unpaid salary arrears

Nigerian workers at Rufus Giwa Polytechnic, Owo in Ondo State walked out on indefinite strike on January 5. They resumed and indefinite strike that was suspended by their trade union on November 8, 2021. The workers are owed 13 months' salary arrears.

The strike was called by the Senior Staff Association of Nigeria Polytechnics and the Non-Academic Staff Union. The polytechnic management responded by declaring that all union activity is banned.

Defying this order, workers carrying placards with slogans like “Pay our 13-months' salary” blocked the entrance to the main building, saying they would continue striking until their grievances are resolved.

Kenyan truck drivers strike over charges for mandatory COVID testing

Kenyan truck drivers going across the border with Uganda at Malaba walked out on January 3, to protest being charged US\$30 to get tested for COVID every 14 days. Testing certificates from Kenya are not accepted, and drivers said Ugandan authorities were making money out of them.



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