

Striking school students in Italy join students' and educators' fight for COVID safety in US and France; protests in Lebanon as currency continues to fall; hundreds of striking South African Clover Foods dairy workers protest wage cuts, retrenchments and restructuring

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

School students in Italy in COVID safety strike demand return to remote learning, free tests and masks

On Monday, as schools reopened in Italy, school students across the nation began strikes against the danger of COVID-19 as daily infections reach record highs.

In Sardinia, students called for the reopening of schools to be postponed and remote learning to be used for at least two weeks. ANSA reported that thousands of students joined a walkout on Monday, and a survey of 20,000 students found that 93 percent wanted in-person learning postponed until the end of January. According to the news agency, some students continued to refuse to return to schools on Tuesday.

A student representative told ANSA, "We all agree that distance learning is harmful to the socialisation and coexistence of students, but the right to health and not to be infected is now more important," and that the government's campaign of optional testing was insufficient to make schools safe.

Students in Ancona and Campania also denounced the danger in schools, with local student councils calling a strike on Monday. Students called for free testing and FFP2 masks to be provided, as tests and respirator masks are currently only provided free to a class if there is a positive case detected.

The walkouts come amidst an international wave of opposition to the reopening of unsafe schools. Three-quarters of primary school teachers in France held a strike on Thursday to demand stricter safety protocols, and teachers in Chicago voted overwhelmingly to oppose the resumption of in-person teaching while Omicron runs rampant. After the Chicago Teachers Union ordered its members back into classes, students staged mass walkouts in New York, while teachers in California began wildcat sickout strikes.

Transport workers in Italy hold four-hour national strike for new collective agreement

Transport workers throughout Italy are taking part today, January 14, in four-hour stoppages called by the major transport unions to demand the negotiation of a new collective agreement. The previous agreement expired at the end of 2017.

The strikes are scheduled at different times throughout Italy, taking place in the morning in Rome, midday in Bologna and the evening in Florence.

According to ANSA, a retrospective agreement was signed last June for the period 2018–2020. The unions said the employers' associations had a "provocative and prejudicial" attitude towards negotiating a future national contract.

Bus drivers in Aix-en-Provence, France, stop work over COVID protocols

Bus drivers in the French city of Aix-en-Provence joined a walkout this Monday and Tuesday called by the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), which announced an imminent danger to their health from COVID-19.

According to *France Bleu*, the union said that buses were not disinfected, even when a driver tested positive.

The bus network, Aix-en-Bus, run by French multinational transport company Keolis, said on its social media pages that work resumed on Wednesday, although no details of new safety protocols were announced publicly. Despite the official end of the walkout, local traffic site *lepilote.com* reported major delays across the Aix-en-Bus network.

French midwives continue protest strikes over pay and understaffing

Midwives in France have continued strikes begun last year to demand

improved pay and staffing levels in their departments. At the private Océane hospital in the town of Vannes, midwives have been on strike since October against low pay and understaffing as part of national strikes in private hospitals.

According to one midwife interviewed by *Le Télégramme*, midwives at the Océane hospital earn 25 percent less than in public hospitals, and they spend inadequate time with their patients, spending over an hour on paperwork for each mother. The Océane hospital is run by the Elsan group, which runs 137 hospitals in France with a turnover of 2.2 billion euros in 2020.

Le Télégramme reports that the Vannes midwives were requisitioned, forced to return to work under threat of six months' imprisonment and a 10,000 euro fine. Elsan paid around 70 euros per midwife for bailiffs to serve requisition notices. Striking midwives at the Keraudren clinic in Brest, who were also requisitioned, filed an appeal on Tuesday after a court rejected their request to cancel the requisition notices.

French unions call off Toulouse waste collection strike over working hours for “not satisfactory” deal

The indefinite strike of waste collection workers in the French city of Toulouse was ended on Thursday by the unions, which accepted the abolition of previous working practices where workers could return home after their collection.

According to *France Bleu*, the city offered 11 additional days off and shorter hours in the summer to compensate for the extension of working time. The unions estimated that the changes would increase the amount of work by the equivalent of 67 days per year.

A union spokesperson told Radio France the offer was “not satisfactory” but “the strike has lasted long enough,” referring to the “wearing-out of the strikers” after four weeks. He added that to deal with the backlog, workers must work overtime every day or at the weekends.

On Monday, two new depots joined the strike after the unions rejected an offer of an additional nine days off, while they were demanding 34 days. The mayor of Toulouse threatened to privatise the service if the strike continued, reported *Ouest France*, and despite the physical demands of waste collection, he insisted that he would not offer more additional rest than the 11 days granted to the police.

Strike against understaffing at Brest airport banned by French Civil Aviation Authority

This week a planned three-day strike at Brest airport in France was banned by the French Civil Aviation Authority, threatening workers with possible six months' imprisonment and a 10,000 euro fine if they did not show up to work.

The CGT union called the stoppage of air traffic controllers and maintenance engineers, to oppose understaffing at the airport. It coincided with the arrival of defence and foreign ministers from 27 EU states. *France Bleu* reported there are half as many engineers now as in 2019, and since bonus pay for weekends was removed six months ago there has been a shortage of staff prepared to work weekends. Damage caused by lightning one Friday evening in July had to wait until the following Monday for repairs.

Finnish Industrial Union calls off major strike, accepts two percent pay rise

Last week, the Industrial Union reached an agreement with the Technology Industries of Finland employers' association, calling off a strike of over 40,000 workers in the mining, metalworking and technology sectors.

According to the Finnish Broadcasting Company, agreements between the Industrial Union and Technology Industries of Finland often form the basis of agreements in other sectors in Finland.

The new deal provides a two percent pay increase for 2022, covering 90,000 workers. Although Finland's central bank claims average inflation in 2022 will be two percent, the current rate is 3.7 percent, while the projected figure for the eurozone is 3.2 percent.

Spanish unions call off Asturias metalworkers' strike, accepting below-inflation pay increase

The first three days of a strike by metalworkers in the Spanish province of Asturias, due to begin Tuesday, were called off by the General Workers' Union (UGT) and Workers' Commissions (CCOO) trade unions after reaching a preliminary agreement with the employers' association at the Asturian arbitration service.

The dispute was over pay bargaining in smaller companies and subcontractors in the metals sector, covering around 3,000 workers.

According to *La Nueva España*, the UGT and CCOO reported that most workers accepted the deal in the workplace votes held so far. The agreement provides a one percent pay increase for 2021, 2.5 percent in 2022 with a reduction in annual working time by eight hours, and three percent in both 2023 and 2024. Official inflation in Spain is currently 6.7 percent, making this deal a massive real-terms pay cut. *La Nueva España* also reports that collective bargaining for the 30,000 workers in the larger metal companies in Asturias has not concluded.

Cleaning workers continue indefinite strike over collective bargaining in Córdoba, Spain with additional stoppages

The CCOO union announced this week that its members in the cleaning sector in the city of Córdoba would hold three one-day stoppages and rallies in January, the first being on Thursday, following a demonstration called by the UGT last week.

UGT members in the capital of Andalusia, Spain's most populous province, have been on indefinite strike since December 22 over collective bargaining in which the CCOO says the current proposal would be “the only agreement in Andalusia that does not reach the minimum wage.”

The indefinite strike of UGT members was effectively banned by the local government, which imposed a 100 percent minimum service requirement, which the UGT said it would appeal in court.

Specialists at University Hospital in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, begin indefinite partial stoppage to demand head of service is dismissed

On Tuesday, ear, nose and throat specialists in the University Hospital Complex of Santiago de Compostela in Spain held a one-day stoppage, the first of an indefinite campaign of weekly 24-hour strikes.

The CCOO called the stoppages to demand the dismissal of the head of the service, whom it accused of “exercising leadership in an authoritarian manner” and treating staff with disrespect for years.

The minimum service requirement imposed by the local government for the five days’ stoppages in December remains in effect. The workers involved were threatened with legal action if the department’s emergency services do not provide 100 percent coverage, according to *El Español*.

Warning strike over pay dispute at Amazon in Leipzig, Germany

Around 400 members of the United Services Union (Verdi) at the Amazon warehouse in Leipzig, Germany began a 24-hour strike during the late shift on Sunday, in a long-running dispute over collective bargaining.

Verdi is calling for Amazon to pay in line with the collective bargaining agreement for the retail and mail-order sector, and according to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* has called repeated one-day stoppages for this demand since 2013.

In last year’s bargaining for the retail and mail-order sector, Verdi agreed to a below-inflation pay rise of only three percent for 2021, and 1.7 percent for 2022.

UK London underground rail staff vote overwhelmingly to defend jobs, pensions and conditions, while strikes continue against night rosters on Central and Victoria lines

Staff working for London Underground Limited (LUL) voted by a 94 percent majority for stoppages in opposition to job cuts and attacks on pensions and conditions.

LUL is facing a financial crisis. Its parent body Transport for London (TfL) saw a 95 percent fall in revenue since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The TfL board and London Labour party Mayor Sadiq Khan proposed £1.3 billion in cuts in response. Such cuts would mean the London transport network entering “managed decline.”

A Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) workers union press release announcing the vote said, “(t)he ballot has now closed, and the union is considering the result and what action to put on.”

Separately, RMT members on the Central and Victoria lines continued their Friday and Saturday evening strikes in opposition to the imposition of rosters to cover all-night services. Prior to the onset of the pandemic all-night services were staffed by a dedicated team working only night-time shifts. Their weekend strikes will continue until June.

Additionally, London Underground drivers on the Metropolitan line based at the Neasden depot voted overwhelmingly to oppose “outrageous” rosters being imposed. Two 24-hour strikes are scheduled for January 21 and February 11.

Month-long strike continues over pay by pallet production workers in Greater Manchester, England

The end of this week marks one month of strike action by around 70 workers at Chep in Trafford Park, Greater Manchester. The workers began their indefinite strike on December 17, after rejecting a pay offer of one percent.

The Unite union members, who make pallets for companies such as Heinz and Heineken, engaged in four previous strike days and an overtime ban. Workers delivering Calor gas needed for the site’s forklift trucks refused to cross the picket line.

Workers at other Chep sites, who are paid £1,000 more than those at Trafford Park, voted 75 percent to strike against a two percent offer. Chep recorded profits of £150 million last year.

UK: Refuse workers in Eastbourne strike, other refuse workers in Sussex to ballot over pay and conditions

Twenty Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) refuse collection drivers working for South East Environmental Services Ltd (SEES) in Eastbourne, England walked out on Monday.

The GMB members, who previously walked out on New Year’s Eve and January 7, are protesting low pay and “barbaric” conditions, with only two toilets for 100 employees and inadequate washing facilities. The drivers voted unanimously to walk out. The drivers are paid at near-minimum-wage levels. They are due to begin a six-day strike on Friday.

Loaders voted in a separate ballot to ballot for strike action over the same issue.

The stoppages are affecting around 50,000 households in the Eastbourne area. SEES is wholly owned by Eastbourne Council.

In separate disputes, refuse collectors in Adur and Worthing, also in Sussex, are taking part in a consultative ballot over demands for improved pay and conditions. The ballots held by the GMB close on January 19.

Walkouts by refuse collection drivers in Coventry, England over pay and conditions continue

Around 70 UK refuse collection drivers at Labour-run Coventry City Council began a four-day stoppage on Tuesday over pay and work arrangements over Christmas.

It follows a two-day stoppage last week, and a four-day one in the run-up to Christmas Eve.

The Unite members voted by a 98.5 percent majority to strike. 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 was 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.

Further strikes planned by gritting lorry drivers in Welsh local authority after employer reneges on agreement

Around 70 gritter lorry drivers working for Carmarthenshire County Council in Wales held a two-day stoppage last week.

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 union and council two years ago. Further strikes are planned for January 17-21 and 24-28. On Tuesday, the GMB union posted a press release stating talks between the council and strikers' representatives are due to take place on January 17.

Just Eat delivery drivers' strike continues in Sheffield and Blackpool, England

UK Just Eat delivery drivers in Sheffield and Blackpool began a week-long strike on Monday, with pickets planned at McDonalds restaurants each day.

The Independent Workers Union of Great Britain members are employed by Stuart Delivery, subcontracted to deliver fast food for chains such as McDonalds. The initial strike of Stuart Delivery drivers was in Sheffield on December 6. Further strikes followed both in Sheffield and other places such as Chesterfield and Huddersfield.

They are protesting a cut in the base rate for deliveries from £4.50 per delivery to £3.40 per delivery. The strikers are demanding £6 per delivery.

Stuart's profits rose 30 percent in 2020 and its highest earning director was awarded a 1,000 percent pay rise to £2 million.

Strike by printers in Dalkeith, Scotland over pay

Around 110 printers working for FLB printing firm in Dalkeith, Scotland began a 24-hour pay strike Wednesday.

The Unite union members voted by a more than 95 percent majority on a near 85 percent turnout to strike. They are due to hold 24-hour walkouts each Wednesday until the end of March. They are seeking a six percent pay rise. The company, which owns the Filofax and Letts brands, offered a 2.75 percent pay rise over two years which was rejected by the workers. The RPI measure of UK inflation was 7.1 percent in November last year.

The company recorded a turnover of more than £20 million the last two years and awards one of its company directors an annual salary of £200,000.

Protest in support of UK bus driver in Manchester facing dismissal

On Tuesday, supporters of bus driver Tracey Scholes held a protest outside her bus depot in Cheetham Hill, Manchester where she was due to attend an appeal hearing. Scholes was the first female driver at the depot, where she has worked for 34 years.

The 57-year-old faces dismissal as her employer Go North West buses has introduced a new fleet of buses that Scholes, because of her short stature, is unable to drive. The height restriction was imposed after the company altered the position of the wing mirrors. Go North West offered

her a post driving school buses but it would mean losing five hours work a week, resulting in a £230 shortfall a month in wages. The widow and mother of three could not manage the financial loss.

The protest was organised by the Unite union, which was responsible for the sellout of a determined strike by Go North West drivers last year at the depot, against fire and rehire threats. Unite pushed through a deal incorporating most of the company's demands.

Workers in Belfast, Northern Ireland, occupy hostel to prevent closure

Workers at the Regina Coeli House in West Belfast, Northern Ireland occupied it after the authorities announced its closure.

The hostel provides women-only accommodation for 21 women at risk of homelessness, mental health breakdown or domestic abuse. The facility has been run down during the pandemic, having currently only six residents.

The Unite union members are calling for the Stormont government to intervene to save the hostel. They were given notice of redundancy with effect from February 27.

Airline support staff at London Heathrow airport in pay ballot

Around 400 workers employed by aviation services company Menzies at London's Heathrow airport are balloting for possible strike action over pay.

The Unite union members provide ground handling services and refuelling of planes at London's major airport. Menzies refused to negotiate a pay rise for 2020 or 2021, resulting in a two-year pay freeze. The ballot is due to close January 27. Any industrial action would be likely to take place from mid-February.

Santander bank workers in UK balloting over union recommended below inflation pay offer

UK Santander staff are being advised by the Communication Workers Union to accept a "final" below-inflation pay offer being made by the company.

The offer is for £1,000 across the board which for most staff would be consolidated. Some workers will not automatically receive a one-off £250 unconsolidated lump sum. According to the union the £250 payment applies "to everyone apart from those with a 2021 performance rating of 'Not Achieved'. Even they have the potential of a pro-rated increase being retrospectively applied in September 2022 pay if they successfully complete a documented coaching plan by August 1. Similarly, anyone who successfully appeals a 'Not Achieved' rating will retrospectively be awarded the £250 'cash' payment."

With RPI inflation at 7.1 percent the CWU said that there would be "a 2% increase to S1/G1 and S2/G2 pay range midpoints." If the deal is accepted, entry level employees will be paid just £10.41 an hour.

Speaking about the sellout deal, the CWU national officer for Santander, Sally Bridge, said, "We've managed to conclude, in constructive and businesslike talks with management, a 'final' offer from the Bank which

provides a level of certainty for members in world where very little is 'certain' just at present."

Ballot of UK university staff over pensions and pay

A ballot of university staff at 42 UK colleges and universities carried out by the University and College Union (UCU) closes Friday.

UCU members at 58 UK universities held a three-day stoppage beginning December 3 over a year-long pensions dispute, which the UCU refers to as the "Four Fights": pay, workloads, casualisation and equality. Most universities did not take part in the action as they failed to meet the 50 percent turnout requirement set by the anti-strike laws, a rule brought in with no resistance from the trade unions.

With further strikes planned for this year, the UCU decided to reballoon those institutions that failed to achieve the 50 percent threshold, but which did reach 40 percent.

In 2018, mass opposition of UCU members to an attempt to sell out a national strike over pensions and conditions involving 50,000 workers forced General Secretary Sally Hunt to resign. Her replacement, pseudo-left-backed Jo Grady, has since worked to prevent a unified offensive against the employers.

Teachers at UK independent school chain in strike ballot over pension attack

Teachers working for the Girls Day School Trust (GDST) are to ballot for industrial action over threats to pensions.

The National Education Union (NEU) members oppose plans by the GDST to withdraw from the Teachers' Pension Scheme and replace it with an inferior scheme, which would leave teachers at least 20 percent worse off. The GDST is threatening to impose fire and rehire measures to impose the cuts. Around 70 percent of GDST teachers are members of the NEU.

The GDST runs 23 independent schools across England and Wales. In an indicative ballot announced in December, 93 percent of NEU members voted in favour of holding a ballot for strike action. That ballot opened on January 10. Any industrial action would be the first in the GDST's 149-year history.

Middle East

Further protests in Lebanon as its currency continues to fall

On Tuesday, the Lebanese pound continued to sink, reaching 33,200 to the dollar. In response, protests took place across the country.

In Tripoli, protesters blocked the al-Nour Square, while in Beirut and Sidon they blocked major highways. Lebanon is facing a continuing financial collapse, which the World Bank likens to wartime conditions. The protestors demanded the right to fuel and the essentials of life and railed against corruption. Due to the collapsing currency, the monthly minimum wage amounts to only \$22.

Lebanese teachers strike over pay and conditions

On Monday, Lebanese teachers went on indefinite strike, leading to the closure of most schools across Beirut. Schools in the north and south of the country were also affected. The teachers' three demands are for adequate health care cover, a pay rise and transport allowance.

Protests in Egyptian capital by broadcasting employees over wage arrears

Hundreds of workers at Egypt's state-run broadcaster Maspero protested outside Maspero's headquarters in Cairo on Sunday.

The Maspero workers were protesting wage arrears and non-payment of annual bonuses and pay rises going back to 2014. They called for the head of the National Media Authority, Hussein Zein, to stand down. They accuse Zein of presiding over attacks on their conditions including pensions and not paying annual bonuses to families of deceased former employees.

Similar protests took place the previous week, which lasted three days.

Protests by Iranian judiciary workers outside parliament over pay

Hundreds of Iranian judiciary workers held protests outside the parliament building in Tehran on Saturday and Sunday.

They were protesting the government's failure to honour promises to raise salaries. They called the parliamentary speaker a liar. Similar protests also took place in several cities across the country. In the run-up to the election, the newly elected Iranian president, Ebrahim Raisi, proposed pay increases for judiciary workers. Before the election Raisi was head of the judicial service. The Iranian prosecutor general threatened to launch legal proceedings against the protestors.

Protests by Iraqi election commission employees demanding permanent contracts

Protests were held in Baghdad on Monday by temporary employees of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), to demand permanent contracts.

The IHEC has temporary and permanent employees. Those on temporary contracts are only employed in election periods and there is no guarantee of being awarded a contract even if they had previously worked for the IHEC.

Israeli forces arrest West Bank striking students

Monday saw a raid by Israeli forces on the campus of Birzeit University in the occupied West Bank, arresting five striking Palestinian students.

The students were involved in a strike against raised tuition fees and had been holding a protest. Two of the students were released later that night.

It was the second such raid within a month.
Africa

Hundreds of striking South African Clover Foods dairy workers protest wage cuts, retrenchments and restructuring

Clover Foods workers in South Africa protested Monday outside the offices of the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration in Johannesburg and Cape Town, supported by hundreds of workers affiliated to the South African Federation of Trade Unions.

Around 5,000 General Industries Workers Union of South Africa and the Food and Allied Workers Union members have been on strike for eight weeks against attacks on jobs and conditions. They were also demanding their thirteenth cheque, or annual bonus, which will now be paid Friday.

Clover intends 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 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. About 1,600 Clover workers were retrenched during 2021. The company proposes a further 800 job losses by February.

The workers also marched to the offices of the Ministry of Trade and Industry Thursday, calling for government intervention, including nationalisation of Clover, which was acquired in 2019 by Milco SA, a consortium including Israel's Central Bottling Company.

South African miners at Sibanye-Stillwater nearer to strike action in continuing wage dispute

South African miners at Sibanye-Stillwater multinational, owners of three gold mines employing 31,000, are in deadlock over ongoing wage negotiations.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), Solidarity, and UASA union members want pay rises comparable with those negotiated with other major South African gold mining operations.

Workers are demanding a R1,000 a month rise. Sibanye-Stillwater have offered increases for most workers of R480 a month in year one, R570 in year two, and R600 in year three, with artisans and officials offered 4.1 percent in year one and 4.7 percent in years two and three.

In 2019, AMCU sold out a five-month stoppage at Sibanye-Stillwater Gold. It accepted a wage agreement, already signed off by the NUM and Solidarity, which it had previously called a "slave labour deal."

Thousands of Kenyan health workers strike over pay

Over 4,000 Kenyan health and municipal workers, including nurses, doctors and clinical officers, have stopped work over salaries not paid for the last two months.

The Kenya Union of Clinical Officers, Kenya County Government Workers Union and Kenya Medical Practitioners and Dentist Union members say they will strike until wages and National Insurance Fund

Payments are paid in full.

Tricycle operators wildcat strike in Kano State, Nigeria

Tricycle operators in Kano State, Nigeria started a week's strike on January 10, in an action disowned by their union.

Tricycles are how most commuters get around the city. The state government decided upon changes that made their lives more difficult, prompting the walkout.

The Secretary of the Kano State Transport Associations Forum (KSTAF) disowned the strike by its own members, saying it "didn't instruct its members to go for the strike. Some of our members resolved to take the decision, not under our umbrella." The union had been in talks with the state government when the strike broke out.

Nurses' stoppage in Lagos, Nigeria over bad conditions ended by union

Nurses in Lagos who walked out on January 10 were told by their union to return to work the following day.

The Lagos state chapter of the National Association of Nigeria Nurses and Midwives (NANNM) was involved in "a marathon meeting" with the state governor, but details of the agreement reached were not reported. The NANNM said "we are suspending the strike to give room for the implementation of our demands. All nurses in the state are expected back at their duty post by 8:00 on Tuesday."

Ghanaian university lecturers strike over pay

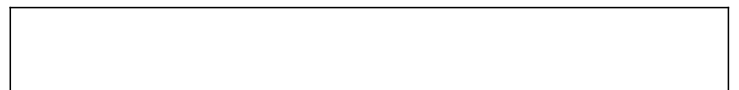
University teachers in Ghana began a nationwide strike Monday over poor pay and conditions.

The University Teachers Association of Ghana (UTAG) members say a failure by the government in 2013 to implement a pay award until a survey of the labour market was completed has since meant the erosion of salaries.

In August, UTAG, the Ghana Association of University Administrators, Senior Staff Association of Universities of Ghana and the Teachers and Educational Workers' Union signed a memorandum of understanding with the government, bringing a previous strike to an end. The government, however reneged on its promises.

Tunisian oil tanker drivers begin three-day strike over conditions

Oil tanker drivers in Tunisia began a three-day strike on January 6. The drivers decided to strike after the General Union of Hydrocarbons Transport Workers refused to negotiate any improvement in their conditions.





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