

One-day national strike across public sector in France over pay and pensions; South African Clover dairy workers' strike against job and pay cuts enters tenth week and spreading; Lebanese teachers walk out against deteriorating conditions

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers contribute to this regular feature.

Europe

One-day national strike in France over pay and pensions

Thousands of workers across France stopped work and joined demonstrations on Thursday, in a one-day national strike called by the major unions and student organisations. Workers in many public services including transport, schools, and health and social care joined the strike, to demand improvements to pay and pensions.

France Bleu reported that over 150 students in Rennes gathered to protest in front of their school gates but were brutally attacked by the police. The police claimed that stones were thrown at them. One student explained they were small pebbles thrown at the cars. Police responded by firing tear gas canisters, one of which hit a student in the forehead. She was treated by the school nurse, and four other students were also injured.

Wave of strikes by French healthcare workers continues

Healthcare workers in France, who have suffered a threat to their lives as well as worsened working conditions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, continued to walk out on strikes and protests in recent weeks.

On Wednesday, workers at the Bonnefon clinic in the town of Alès began an indefinite strike in defence of their colleagues, one of whom was fired last week and three others disciplined, according to *France Bleu*. The Force Ouvrière (FO) and General Confederation of Labour (CGT) unions said the sacking was unjustified, and the local CGT official also reported being disciplined. The Bonnefon clinic is run by the Elsan private healthcare group, which had a turnover of 2.2 billion euros in 2020.

The CGT suspended an indefinite strike on Monday at another Elsan hospital, the Keraudren clinic in Brest, after the private hospital employers' association FHP agreed to negotiations, according to *Le Télégramme*. Midwives at the hospital began an indefinite strike on

January 3, although Elsan served requisition notices, requiring them to return to work or face a potential 10,000 euro fine and six-month jail sentence.

In Laval, the CGT called off an indefinite strike begun on Monday after one day, when the management of the private Polyclinique du Maine agreed to a pay rise of 1 percent for workers on the minimum wage, a rise of between 30 and 40 euros to monthly salaries for nurses and nursing assistants, and 500 euros in bonuses, according to *France Bleu*. Workers in the A&E department at the public Laval hospital have been on an indefinite strike since October to draw attention to understaffing in the unit.

Workers at the university hospital of Brest in the dermatology, ear, nose and throat and ophthalmology departments, as well as non-medical staff, joined a 24-hour strike on Wednesday, *Le Télégramme* reported. The strike was called by the Solidaires union to oppose the merging of the departments into a single unit.

Workers at French energy company EDF strike against subsidies to private competitors

On Wednesday, AFP reported that over 40 percent of workers at French energy company EDF, which employs over 63,000 people in the company itself and 165,000 in the EDF Group, stopped work to oppose a government request that the company sell cheap electricity to its competitors to bring down prices. EDF is over 80 percent owned by the state.

The unions said that selling discounted electricity to its competitors would damage the group.

The French government announced "Projet Hercule" in 2019. It plans to break up EDF and privatise its more profitable distribution and renewables divisions. There have been several strikes of thousands of EDF workers to oppose Hercule since it was announced.

Waste collection workers in Marseille, France continue strike over broken promise on Sunday bonuses

Waste collection workers in the French city of Marseille continued their indefinite strike this week. The strike began on January 18, after the city broke verbal commitments it made in December.

FO called off a nearly two-month long strike after the city agreed to reduce working hours by 15 percent. They had been increased to 35 hours in line with a new law, when previously waste workers had finished shifts when the job was completed. FO also accused the city of not complying with a verbal agreement to provide a 100-euro bonus for working on Sundays.

The Marseille city government claimed it would be illegal to pay the bonus and called for the FO general secretary to “return to reality” and tell his members to get back to work. The police served requisition notices on some strikers last weekend, threatening a potential 10,000 euro fine and six months jail if they did not return to work, but the city was ordered to pay 1,000 euros in damages to the workers and FO after a court ruled the requisition was not justified.

According to *20 Minutes*, the city asked the police again on Wednesday to serve requisition notices.

Wildcat strike of Romanian bus drivers ends after union intervention, while the company threatens victimisations

On Tuesday, the Bucharest Transport Workers’ Union forced an end to a wildcat strike, which broke out five days earlier, telling its members to return to work while it continued negotiations with the board of directors.

The wildcat strike broke out over concerns about low pay, unsafe working and travel conditions, and the massive debt of the Bucharest Transport Company (STB).

The strike brought overground public transport to a halt, and *Radio România* reported that on Monday, 80 percent of vehicles were still not circulating. The unions failed to call for the metro workers to join the strike, despite both the STB and metro workers’ unions being part of the Public Transport Unions Federation.

Workers were left vulnerable by the strike ending, as STB announced it would attempt to recover its losses from the strike by pursuing individual strikers in court. Threatening to single out and victimise individual workers, it estimated that losses of 25 million lei (5 million euros) could be imposed on “a few dozen” pickets, according to *Spotmedia*.

Finnish paper workers joined by dock workers in indefinite strike over collective bargaining

Paper workers in Finland continue their indefinite strike against the forestry company UPM, which announced it would pull out of the collective bargaining agreement for the sector last year.

The Paperworkers’ Union announced an extension of the strike, begun on January 1, to February 19, and the Automobile and Transport Workers’ Union (AKT) announced last weekend it was calling on its members in ports not to handle any UPM shipments, according to the Finnish Broadcasting Company.

Pro trade union members are no longer on strike at UPM, as Pro did not extend the strike past its initial end date of January 22, but instead announced an overtime ban. The Finnish Broadcasting Company also reported last Friday that the Helsinki District Court had granted UPM’s request to force workers in heat production and water treatment at its plants to return to work, at the risk of a 2 million euro fine for the

Paperworkers’ Union. Previously, many cities which relied on biomass heating from UPM reduced heating to municipal buildings or bought more expensive natural gas.

Workers at bus manufacturer Solaris in Poland begin indefinite strike over pay

On Monday, workers at the Solaris bus manufacturing plants in Greater Poland began an indefinite strike to demand an increase of 800 zlotys to their monthly salaries.

Strajk.eu reported that Solaris, a subsidiary of the Spanish CAF Group, achieved record sales and revenues in 2021, but offered a pay rise of only 270 zlotys for assembly workers. The company threatens to make job cuts if the strike continues, despite being one of the most profitable bus producers in Europe, according to its president’s comments reported by *Strajk.eu*.

The strike was called by the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ) and Solidarity union among permanent workers, with around 2,700 eligible to join the strike. Workers on fixed-term temporary contracts were told by the unions that they should cross the picket line, as the company may not renew their contracts if they joined the strike.

A crowdfunding page set up by the OPZZ on Saturday to provide a strike fund for the Solaris workers raised 82,500 zlotys by Thursday afternoon.

Nurses’ union calls off protest strike at the last minute in Lublin, Poland

A two-hour warning strike by nurses and midwives at a hospital planned for Monday morning in the Polish city of Lublin was called off at the last minute by the National Trade Union of Nurses and Midwives (OZZPP) this week.

OZZPP granted the request of the hospital director to cancel the strike and announced it would “continue the mediation dialogue in good faith and in a spirit of respect for both parties,” according to *Dziennik Wschodni*. OZZPP initially called the strikes after mediation meetings in which it said the hospital failed to pay the 25 percent annual pay rises for 2019, 2020 and 2021, agreed in 2018, and also criticised staff shortages.

Workers in fish-canning sector in Spain strike over low pay

Thousands of workers who produce preserved canned fish in Spain held the first of three planned 24-hour strikes last Friday, demanding an increase in wages and job security.

According to *Europa Press*, most of the sector is concentrated in Galicia, where 12,000 are employed, mostly women. The unions said that 90 percent of workers joined the strike in Galicia. The employers’ association claimed the figure was as low as 32 percent, boasting about having offered a collective agreement which sets an 11 percent pay rise over 4 years—a real-terms pay cut, since year-on-year inflation is now at 6.5 percent.

Scaffolders at British Steel plant in Scunthorpe begin all-out strike over pay

Scaffolders employed by Actavo at the British Steel plant in Scunthorpe began all-out strike action on Wednesday.

The 62 Unite union members took 12 weeks of strikes at the end of last year and voted by an 83 percent majority to continue the stoppages in 2022. They 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.

Actavo (UK) is under contract to British Steel's Scunthorpe site to provide scaffolding and at-height services. The site, which employs 3,000, was taken over by Chinese steelmaker Jingye Group in March 2020 in a £50 million deal.

Protests took place on Monday at four Actavo sites across Ireland, England and Scotland in support of the strikers.

Strike by workers over pay at Somers Forge defence supplier in England

Workers at Somers Forge, Halesowen in England walked out on Monday. They previously held stoppages on December 17 and 21, as well as on January 12 and 21.

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.

Outsourced workers at London hospital to hold two-week walkout over pay and conditions

Outsourced staff working for Serco at St Barts hospital in London are to begin a two-week strike on Monday.

The Unite union members provide cleaning, portering, catering and reception services at the hospital. They are seeking pay parity with directly employed NHS staff at the hospital, who earn up to 15 percent more than outsourced staff.

They are also protesting excessive workloads and accuse management of bullying.

UK university workers to hold ten days of strike action in February

Members of the University and College Union (UCU) at 68 universities will take strike action this February.

Workers at 44 institutions will strike from February 14 to February 18 over the long-running USS pensions dispute; 68 institutions will take part in two days of strike action on February 21-22 over pensions, pay and conditions; 39 will hold three days of action from February 28 over just pay and conditions.

UCU members at 58 UK universities held a three-day stoppage beginning December 3 last year. 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.

Following a rebalot of institutions that did not meet the 50 percent participation requirement but recorded turnouts over 40 percent, a further 10 institutions will now take part in any action that goes ahead. The UCU is imploring the employer's body to enter negotiations over pensions to avoid a strike.

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, since worked to prevent a unified offensive against the employers.

UK train cleaners on Avanti West Coast trains strike over pay

UK train cleaners working for Atalian Servest Limited held a 48-hour strike beginning January 20.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) members are responsible for cleaning Avanti West Coast trains. They demand to be paid £9.90 an hour. Atalian offered a 2p an hour increase. Pickets took place along the route taken by West Coast trains including Carlisle, Liverpool, Manchester and Wembley in north London.

Further strike by leisure workers in Sandwell, UK in long-running dispute over "fire and rehire"

On Friday, UK leisure workers employed by Sandwell Leisure Trust at Portway Lifestyle Centre and Tipton Leisure Centre in the Midlands will hold a further strike protesting 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 and December.

They are also protesting the decision by the trust to include absences for COVID-19 episodes in sickness monitoring. They argue this puts pressure on workers to attend work when they should isolate.

Strikes planned by teachers at three schools in England over pensions and conditions

Teachers at three schools in England continue to oppose attacks on academisation, pensions and workloads.

Members of the National Education Union (NEU) at the St Matthews Church of England Primary school in Preston plan a three-day strike beginning February 1. They already held nine days of stoppages against plans for the school to become an academy. Academies were introduced by the Blair Labour government in 2,000. They are publicly funded but privately run, and teachers' pay and conditions can be ripped up.

Teachers at Abbots Hill School in Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire were set to strike Tuesday and Thursday this week, following two days of strikes last week. The NEU and NASUWT members oppose threats by the

school governors to use fire and rehire to attack their pensions.

NEU members at Gordano School in Portishead near Bristol voted to take six days of strikes over excessive workloads. The first strike is due February 3.

Bus drivers at Stagecoach in southwest England in strike ballot over pay

A ballot of bus drivers working for Stagecoach in southwest England began on Tuesday. It closes on February 10.

The Unite union members work out of Stagecoach depots in Bristol, Cheltenham, Gloucester, Stroud, Coalway and Ross-on-Wye. They are protesting low wages, many of them earning less than £11 an hour. Unite has announced no pay claim figure.

UK financial regulatory workers ballot over attacks on pay, jobs and conditions

Staff working for the UK Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) are taking part in a consultative ballot over proposals by the FCA to cut jobs, pay and impose an appraisal system.

FCA staff are responsible for monitoring and regulating companies providing financial services in the UK. The ballot of Unite union members closes on January 31.

Refuse collectors in southwest England ballot for strike over pay

Refuse collectors working for Hills Waste Solutions in Trowbridge, Salisbury and Calne, England are balloting over pay.

The 64 GMB union members are angry over the company imposing a two percent pay rise, well below the current inflation rate of over 7 percent so a cut in real terms. Hills Waste Solutions is responsible for refuse collection for around 250,000 homes across Wiltshire. The ballot closes on February 4.

Refuse collectors in Sussex, England to ballot for strike over pay

UK refuse collectors in Adur and Worthing in Sussex, England will ballot for walkouts for improved pay.

The GMB union members voted by a 92.5 percent majority in a consultative ballot to ballot for industrial action. A GMB press release stated it would go ahead with a ballot but appealed to Adur and Worthing council to negotiate.

UK post office workers to ballot in opposition to pay freeze

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) industrial executive said on

Monday it would ballot post office workers against a pay freeze imposed by the employer, the Post Office Ltd. A CWU press release said union assistant secretary, Andy Furey, would meet CWU post office representatives this week.

UK government workers to take part in consultative ballots over pay

The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) is to hold a series of consultative ballots of its members in various government departments. The ballots will run from February 14 to March 21.

A common claim was put in by the PCS for 2022 for each sector of workers. Its demands include a 10 percent cost of living rise, a London weighting of at least £5,000, a minimum wage of £15 an hour and 35 days leave a year.

The departments to ballot include: the Attorney General's Office, which provides legal advice to the UK government; civilian staff working for the Department of Defence; the Department of Health and Social Care; the Home Office; the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; the Cabinet Office; the Department of Culture, Media and Sport; HM Land Registry; the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; the Department of Education; and the Department for Transport.

Welsh government and assembly staff to ballot over pay and conditions

The PCS union is holding a consultative ballot of its members working for the Welsh Assembly (the Senedd Commission) and Welsh government departments.

Its demands include a cost-of-living allowance, though it gives no figure, for staff to be able to progress up the career scale and for staff temporarily promoted for long periods of time to be consolidated. The ballot will take place from February 14 to March 21.

Scottish government department staff to ballot over pay and pensions

The PCS is holding a consultative ballot of its members working for Scottish government departments. It will take place from February 14 to March 21. Their demands include a pay rise at least in line with current levels of inflation and a shorter working week.

UK air traffic workers to ballot over redeployment and redundancy agreement

Air traffic control workers employed by NATS in the UK are balloting over a new redeployment and redundancy agreement reached between NATS and the PCS union. PCS is recommending its members accept the new agreement.

The workers voted by more than 80 percent in a consultative ballot to be prepared to strike if a satisfactory agreement could not be reached. Under the new agreement, the previous agreement will apply until the end of

December 2022. It will be renegotiated in January 2023.

The agreement includes voluntary redundancy terms being capped at 18 months' pay. For compulsory redundancy it would be 22 months.

Aircraft manufacturing workers at Airbus in UK ballot over pay

Around 3,000 UK workers at Airbus at its factories in Broughton in North Wales and Filton in Gloucestershire are balloting over pay. The ballot closes February 15.

The Unite union members oppose a pay freeze in 2020 followed by a low offer for 2021. A Unite press release announcing the ballot called for "a fair pay increase."

Refuse collectors in Barrow, UK in pay ballot

Around 20 UK refuse collectors working for FCC Environment in Barrow are balloting for industrial action over a pay claim.

The ballot closes on February 7. The GMB is calling for a below-inflation three percent pay rise. The workers cover 33,000 households in Barrow.

Scheduled strike at nine outlets by luxury retail car chain technicians in England called off by Unite union as employer makes new offer

The Unite union called off a four-day strike by around 180 UK technicians working for luxury car chain Mercedes-Benz Retail Group (MBRG) due to begin Tuesday.

The technicians, based at nine retail outlets including Croydon, Heathrow and Watford, voted by majorities of between 80 and 100 percent to walk out. They were protesting against MBRG, who initially refused them a pay rise this year, following no rise last year, but then made a 1.5 percent offer which was rejected.

MBRG subsequently made an offer which was accepted by the technicians. It comprised a £500 lump sum for 2021 equivalent to a 1.5 percent pay rise. For 2022 the deal is made up of a three percent rise plus a restructuring of the pay scheme, by which 10 percent is moved from the bonus scheme into consolidated pay going forward. This allowed Unite to claim the technicians achieved a 13 percent rise this year.

Unions suspend strike by gritting lorry drivers in Welsh local authority

The strike of around 70 gritter lorry drivers working for Carmarthenshire County Council in Wales, which started on January 18, was suspended on January 19. The workers previously held a 48-hour stoppage

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. Following talks between the unions and management the council proposed a new

agreement which is currently being considered by the workers.

Hospital workers in south London to hold protest after employer stops COVID-19 payments

Workers employed by contractor G4S to provide cleaning and portering services at Croydon University Hospital NHS Trust in south London plan a protest after the employer stopped paying COVID sick pay. Instead, workers off sick with COVID will have to rely on statutory sick pay. The protest will take place on Monday January 31 at 12 noon outside the hospital.

Middle East

Lebanese teachers walk out against deteriorating conditions

Teachers in Lebanon began an open-ended strike on January 10. It has led to the closure of most of Lebanon's public schools as the teachers demand higher wages and stipends just to exist day to day.

Under the impact of the severe economic and political crisis gripping Lebanon, the currency lost 90 percent of its value, producing wartime-like conditions for the population. A shortage of teachers is also impacting education, as the Education ministry has no money to fill vacant posts. Another aspect of the crisis is the increasing demand for public school places as growing numbers of Lebanese families can no longer afford private education for their children.

Protests continue across Iran over low pensions and pay

On Sunday, Steel Fund pensioners gathered in several cities including Isfahan and Tehran protesting the failure of pensions to keep up with the cost of living. The same day social security pensioners protested in Rasht Mashad and Tabriz over the same issue.

On Monday, retired teachers held rallies in Tehran, Rasht and several other cities calling for pensions to rise above the poverty line and free health care. Monday also saw Iranian Telecom pensioners protesting in Tehran against delayed payments and for improved living standards.

Iranian teachers plan strikes over pay and conditions

Iranian teachers are to strike on Saturday and Sunday, followed by nationwide rallies across the country on Monday. They are protesting poverty wages and inadequate education budgets among other issues.

A second phase of walkouts is planned between February 12 and 17, ending with nationwide rallies on February 17.

Africa

South African Clover dairy workers strike against job and pay cuts enters tenth week and spreading

The 5,000 striking Clover Foods workers in South Africa, now in the tenth week of their strike over pay cuts and retrenchments, were joined Thursday by other workers in a nationwide day of protests at shops and embassies.

The General Industries Workers Union of South Africa (Giwusa) and the Food and Allied Workers Union members were joined in demonstrations by National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa and the South African Federation of Trade Unions members. Many workers are affected by the jobs destroyed along the supply chain, and by the economic impact of Clover factory closures on small towns. They called for a boycott of Clover products and government intervention, including nationalisation of the company.

Further support for the strikers came when workers at Ladismith Cheese, Western Cape refused to produce cheese and powdered milk for Clover, saying that if the company forced them, they would go on a secondary strike.

Clover strikers remain determined in the face of hostility from the company. On January 19, private security guards used rubber bullets and teargas against pickets at Clover's Clayville plant as other workers attempted to distribute 300 food parcels. Giwusa said the company "staged" the shooting to undermine any intervention from the government and to give support to their application for a Labour Court interdict of the strike.

Clover workers face pay cuts of 20 percent. The company already closed one factory in Western Cape. Three more could close in the first quarter of 2022. 1,600 workers were retrenched during 2021 and the company proposes a further 821 job losses by the end of February.

South African ANC staff continue strike amidst eviction threats after three months without pay

Administrative staff of South Africa's ruling African National Congress (ANC), on strike since January 17 after three months of unpaid salaries, say many of them face eviction and are forced to use loan sharks. They have also been without unemployment insurance and hospital fund payments, and without salary increments for the last four years.

Staff met with the ANC's treasurer-general January 18 but were not offered any remedy. President Cyril Ramaphosa blames the ANC's financial problems on the newly introduced Political Party Funding Act, designed to increase regulation of political funding. The ruling party's national working committee discussed a possible amendment to the act to allow political parties to receive up to R100 million from a single donor in contrast to the current R15 million limit.

Health workers in further demonstration over the thousands of job cuts in Eastern Cape, South Africa

About 100 health workers demonstrated on Sunday at a sports stadium in Gqeberha, Eastern Cape, South Africa calling for the renewal of their contracts. Last week, 70 community health workers demonstrated outside Eastern Cape's provincial legislature.

The workers, many affiliated to the South African Federation of Trade Unions, regularly have their contracts renewed, but the provincial health department now says posts will end in March, with no money available for the next two years of the current budget. The contracts of 2,749 workers are affected, including doctors, nurses and ambulance staff.

Permanent workers say their morale is affected by the staff shortages, and fear the further overwork once contracts end.

Teachers threaten strike over stationery shortages in South Africa's Eastern Cape schools

Teachers in Eastern Cape province, South Africa are threatening to strike because of a shortage of Learner Teacher Support Material. Over 3,000 of 5,000 schools in the province are without the necessary stationery.

The South African Democratic Teachers Union and National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa members blame the incompetence of the provincial Education Department, and say they cannot teach if students are without exercise books.

Workers in Enugu State and Kogi State, Nigeria renew strike for minimum wage

Nigerian workers renewed their struggle for the minimum wage by striking on January 19.

The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Trade Union Congress, Nigeria Union of Teachers and the Nigeria Union of Local Government Employees in Enugu State are restricting action to a three-day warning strike. The struggle was undermined and sabotaged by the unions over many years.

A similar action is due to begin in Kogi State, although the unions ensured they do not take place at the same time.

The chairman of the Kogi NLC branch admitted the state government set up a minimum wage committee in February 2020 that was supposed to hand in a report within four weeks but has still not done so two years later. He apologised for the union's "delay" in taking action.

Nigerian oil workers protest over poor conditions and lack of safety

Nigerian oil workers in Warri, the Niger Delta staged a protest on January 20 against poor conditions of work and the lack of safety provisions.

Placards carried by the workers included, "No food, no crew change, no COVID-19 test, poor welfare of workers, poor salary payment..." One of the workers told the media that the "peaceful protest came up during today's crew change."

Teachers walk out at school in Liberia over pay

Liberian teachers at the Booker Washington Institute (BWI) Kakata, Margibi County walked out on January 25. Since a salary harmonisation exercise three years ago, the government has failed to implement a salary increment.

The strike came as students were due to start their mid-term exams. The teachers sent a letter to the president of the Workers Union of the school

on January 19, explaining their grievances. Despite the school being one of best facilities of its type in Liberia, teachers' monthly salaries are substantially below LRD\$300.



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