

French healthcare workers continue stoppages against low pay, workload and staff shortages; Greek dockers strike in port of Piraeus over collective agreement; striking South African Clover food workers' indefinite strike continues despite violent attacks on pickets

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

French healthcare workers continue strikes against low pay and deteriorating services

Healthcare workers throughout France continued a widespread wave of strikes this week, opposing low salaries and staffing levels during the COVID-19 crisis.

An indefinite symbolic strike began at the Perpignan, France hospital on Monday, following the overflowing of the A&E at the weekend, when firefighters were called in to set up three emergency triage tents outside the hospital. The Force Ouvrière (FO) union told AFP the hospital lacks "at least 30 to 40 beds," and that on Sunday there were only three beds left available in the entire hospital.

Workers at the Clinique de la Baie private hospital in the town of Morlaix also began an indefinite strike on Monday, demanding improved staffing levels and workloads, as well as a pay rise. As an example of the persistently lower pay in the private sector, a representative of the Solidaires union told *Le Télégramme* that one nurse at the private clinic earned 8,000 euros less per year than her husband who worked as a public sector nurse. Some nurses have joined the strike symbolically, continuing to care for patients while wearing an armband or other symbol. Others stopped work completely.

The Clinique de la Baie is owned by Vivalto Santé, France's third-largest private healthcare group. The company reported in December that it had a turnover of over 1 billion euros when it was acquired by the private equity management group Vivalto Partners.

The indefinite strike which began two weeks ago at the private Bonnefon clinic in Alès is also continuing, with workers joining a demonstration in front of the hospital on Thursday evening, according to *Midi Libre*. The walkout began after a colleague was fired, and the local representative of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) who called

the sacking "unjustified" was disciplined along with other colleagues. At a protest on Sunday, the CGT demanded an increase in pay and the payment of the same bonus granted to many public sector workers in 2019's Ségur healthcare review, *Midi Libre* reported.

The Bonnefon clinic is run by the Elsan group, which reports being the largest private healthcare operator in France, with turnover of 2.2 billion euros in 2020.

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

This week, cleaning workers in the Spanish city of Córdoba continued their indefinite strike, called by the General Workers' Union (UGT) on December 22 during collective bargaining with employers in the sector.

The government of the region of Andalucía called for the employers and UGT to meet at the Extrajudicial System for the Resolution of Labour Conflicts in Andalucía (SERCLA), and imposed a 100 percent minimum service requirement, banning workers in many areas of hospital cleaning from joining the strike.

Following meetings at SERCLA, the UGT announced that the employers continued to refuse to raise pay to meet the public sector minimum wage without cutting bonuses. The union criticised the Andalucian Minister of Health and Families for imposing the strike ban, but also called on him to "mediate" in the conflict, according to *Europa Press*.

Care home workers hold one-day strike for working conditions in the Basque country, Spain

On Tuesday, workers in care homes throughout the Basque country, Spain, joined a 24-hour strike to demand improved working conditions

and staffing levels in the sector. Four unions called for the stoppage during renegotiations of the collective agreement for 5,000 workers, which they say are blocked by employers, according to *Europa Press*.

The Basque nationalist union Basque Workers' Solidarity (ELA) accused the regional government of imposing "abusive" minimum service requirements, banning many workers from joining the strike. The ELA announced two more one-day stoppages in the sector for February 16 and March 24 in the Basque province of Gipuzkoa, for which the provincial government said it would impose the "highest possible" minimum service requirements, *Europa Press* reported.

Collective bargaining strike at Finnish paper company extended to March

Workers at the Finnish paper and logging company UPM have been on strike since January 1, after the company announced it would not adhere to the collective agreement for the paper industry. The company intends to impose five different agreements on workers in different areas of its business.

The Paperworkers' Union originally called a five-week strike, but has extended the date repeatedly, and last week announced an extension to at least March 12.

In January, the Automobile and Transport Workers' Union (AKT), which represents many dock workers, called on its members not to handle any UPM cargo. Last week, the Industrial Union also announced a blockade of UPM, preventing its members from servicing and maintaining equipment at the company's paper mills, according to the Finnish Broadcasting Company.

The union and UPM began meetings this week to negotiate an agreement to end the strike, after weeks of the company rejecting the Paperworkers' Union's advances. The Finnish Broadcasting Company reported that the CEO of UPM had tweeted that he was happy with their "shared commitment to building five business-specific agreements," to which the Paperworkers' Union president replied, "Good if you think the same way as [UPM] employees," adding a "thumbs up" emoji.

Workers join new 24-hour strike at Piraeus dock in Greece, despite police repression

On Monday, dock workers in the port of Piraeus in Greece held another 24-hour strike to demand the operator of two piers sign a collective agreement with the ENEDEP union.

Workers have been on strike for a total of nine days since November to force the Chinese multinational COSCO, which operates piers II and III in Piraeus, to recognise ENEDEP in place of another union that is currently recognised, and to sign an agreement implementing improvements to working conditions. The first strikes in November broke out after the death of a colleague, with ENEDEP issuing demands related to safety.

The companies which operate Piraeus port obtained a court order declaring Monday's strike illegal, and riot police were deployed at the docks to intimidate strikers. Despite the legal repression and police intimidation, *efsyn* reported that COSCO workers joined the strike en masse, and were visited by a delegation of miners who are on strike against job cuts at LARCO.

Primary teachers join one-hour warning strike over COVID-19 in Cyprus

On Monday, teachers in primary, nursery and special schools in Cyprus joined a one-hour warning strike from 7.30 to 8.25 a.m., the *Cyprus Mail* reported.

The Pan-Cyprus Organisation of Greek Teachers (POED), which has 5,000 members among the 6,150 teachers in the primary, nursery and special schools, called the strike to demand the installation of mechanical ventilation and other COVID measures, which POED says are nonexistent in nursery schools.

POED announced that following the one-hour stoppage, its board of directors would "meet in 15 days to review and evaluate the whole situation" before deciding on more strikes. The strike followed a 96.5 percent vote by POED members on January 15 to authorise the union to take "any measures deemed necessary" to guarantee health and safety in schools.

Belgian trade union defies members' 70 percent rejection of contract and shuts down strike at TotalEnergies

The General Labour Federation of Belgium (ABVV) withdrew a strike notice for 155 workers at two TotalEnergies chemical plants in Antwerp this week, accepting a contract which 70 percent of workers voted against.

According to the ABVV, the contract was "slightly improved" compared to the 3 percent pay rise rejected by a 98 percent vote in January, *Het Laatste Nieuws* reported.

The statutes of the ABVV, Belgium's self-proclaimed "socialist" trade union confederation, require workers vote by two-thirds to reject an offer from the employers. Even after TotalEnergies' offer was rejected by a supermajority of workers this week, the ABVV declared the margin "too close" and began consulting with the company to write its rejected terms into the collective labour agreement.

Paramedics begin work-to-rule in Ishimbay, Russia

Paramedics at the Ishimbay Central District Hospital in the Russian republic of Bashkiria began an indefinite work-to-rule campaign last Friday, February 4, to demand an increase in staffing levels and overtime payments.

Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP) reported that the Action medical trade union had announced in January that ambulance teams in Ishimbay would comply with labour regulations to the letter.

The former head of the ambulance department, now working as a paramedic, told KP there was a "catastrophic shortage of employees," to the point that students from nearby cities were brought in to make up the numbers.

Ambulance teams initially announced they would adhere strictly to the rule that an ambulance should not go out when understaffed, which would have all but paralysed the service. Due to surging rates of COVID-19, they agreed to deploy understaffed teams again, instead refusing other internal deployments and not working on rest days.

UK university academic staff to strike on Monday over attacks to pensions

Tens of thousands of academic staff at around 44 UK universities will begin a five-day strike on Monday. Academics have been involved in a long-running dispute over pensions and what the UCU describes as the “Four Fights”(pay, workload, inequality and insecure contracts).

The UCU members will strike next in the dispute over the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS), and hold a two-day strike February 21–22. The USS wants to change the terms of the pension scheme, which would mean a 35 percent cut in the average pension.

Dates for strikes over the four fights are a two-day stoppage beginning February 21, and a three-day walkout beginning February 28.

Universities taking part next week include Belfast, Birmingham, Bradford, Bristol, Cambridge, City University of London, Glasgow, Goldsmiths, Kent, Liverpool, London School of Economics (LSE) and Sheffield.

Over a million students attend the 68 universities that are set to be struck during February.

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

UK university administrative staff to strike alongside academic staff over pay and pensions

Administrative staff at UK higher education institutions voted to join their academic colleagues in strikes over pay and pensions.

Unison union members at nine institutions produced ballot results exceeding the 50 percent minimum figure allowing a strike to proceed. The institutions include Brighton University, Edinburgh Napier, Leeds University and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. Some will be taking part in the strikes on the pay and pension issue, some on just the pay issue, and one on pensions alone.

The dates for the industrial action are February 21–22, and February 28 to March 2.

London Underground rail workers to strike over threat to jobs, conditions and pensions

Rail workers on the London Underground (LU) system, which employs 10,000, voted by a 94 percent majority to strike over the threat to jobs, conditions and pensions.

Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members will hold 24-hour strikes on March 1 and 3.

LU faces cuts of over £500 million and is looking at 600 jobs losses as part of efforts to meet a financial shortfall. It was hit by a big reduction in passenger numbers during the pandemic, which meant a reduction in revenues.

Unlike other underground rail systems in Spain, France and New York, which receive around two-thirds of their funding from government, LU relies on ticket revenues for two-thirds of its funding.

University staff at Goldsmiths University, London, strike over job cuts

Academic staff at Goldsmiths University in London struck on Monday and Tuesday, over the university’s plans to cut 46 posts in response to financial strictures.

The University and College Union (UCU) members are involved in a long-running dispute at the university over the job cuts and took previous action. The UCU imposed a global boycott on Goldsmiths, which includes asking academics to refuse to speak at conferences and events at the university, and relocating events planned to take place at Goldsmiths to other venues.

The workers will also walk out February 16–18, and February 26 to March 4, as part of an upcoming national strike for increased pay and defence of pensions.

Teachers at UK chain of independent schools strike over attack on pensions

Teachers working for the Girls Day School Trust (GDST), the largest network of independent (i.e., private) girls’ schools in the UK, walked out on Thursday. The GDST runs 23 independent schools across England and Wales.

The National Education Union (NEU) members are protesting plans by the trust to withdraw from the Teachers’ Pensions Scheme. This would cut the annual amount of pension payments they receive on retirement by a massive 20 percent on average. Teachers have been threatened with “fire and rehire” if they do not accept an inferior pension scheme.

The strike ballot returned 95 percent in favour of action, on an 85 percent turnout. The strike is the first in the GDST’s 149-year history. A two-day strike is scheduled to begin February 23, and a three-day one on March 1.

NASUWT members at GDST’s Norwich High School for Girls began the first of six strike days on Thursday over the same issue.

Pay strike by pallet production workers in Greater Manchester, England continues

The strike by around 70 workers at Chep in Trafford Park, Greater Manchester, continues. They began their indefinite strike on December 17, after rejecting a pay offer of one percent.

The Unite union members, who make pallets for companies like Heinz and Heineken, are paid less than workers at other Chep sites, who earn £1,000 more than those at Trafford Park. They voted 75 percent to strike against a two percent offer. Chep recorded profits of £150 million last year.

The Chep workers were rebalotted to continue the strike, with the result expected this week. The employer has offered new talks with Unite, which are due February 16.

Date set for walkout by Churchill Group rail cleaners in UK

The RMT union announced that UK rail cleaners employed by Churchill Group will hold a 24-hour strike on February 23. They are calling for improved pay and conditions.

The hundreds of cleaners employed by Churchill clean trains and stations on behalf of Govia Thameslink Railway, HS1, Southeastern Railway and Eurostar in the southeast of England. They are demanding £15 an hour, along with sick pay and travel benefits currently denied to outsourced workers.

Around 1,000 outsourced cleaners were balloted by the RMT, returning a clear call for action—two of the ballots registering a 100 percent strike vote. The cleaners are paid just £8.91 per hour, far less than in-house cleaners who perform the same role. Churchill refused to lift wages, despite profits of £11.1 million last year and dividends of £12 million to its parent company and £3.8 million to company directors.

The RMT opposes joint action between outsourced cleaners and in-house workers, and participates in the Rail Industry Recovery Group, which plans £2 billion cuts a year at the expense of jobs and conditions.

UK Atos workers vote for pay stoppage

UK workers employed by Atos conducting disability benefits assessments voted by a near 90 percent majority on an over 62 percent turnout to strike, after refusing to accept an inferior pay offer.

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members are seeking a five percent increase, with a minimum £1,300 rise for the lowest paid, plus a one-off £600 payment.

Atos initially offered a one percent rise, which workers rejected. Atos then came back with an improved offer of a two percent rise for workers on or below £30,000, or 1.5 percent across the board rise. This was rejected in negotiations.

The PCS has not announced any strike dates, but instead wrote to Atos inviting them to reopen pay negotiations.

Train conductors in northern England to strike over new agreement

Train conductors working for TransPennine Express (TPE), which runs services in the north of England, will hold four 24-hour strikes over the next four Sundays, beginning February 13.

The RMT union members are in dispute over a new agreement covering rest days and Sunday working. In addition, the new agreement covers the use of new technology payment.

The train conductors voted by an 85 percent majority to strike.

Strike of First Manchester bus drivers in England called off after Unite union negotiates sell-out deal

This week the Unite union called off strikes set for this month by 300 UK bus drivers at First Manchester, England after agreeing a sell-out deal.

The drivers, based in Oldham, paid just £12.40 an hour, walked out in rolling strike action in January for a pay increase. Drivers were also angered at new rosters imposed during the pandemic which wrecked family life and ended set shift patterns for workers with seniority.

After being told by Unite that the deal was the best achievable, workers

voted by 72 percent to reluctantly accept the offer.

Drivers at the depot told the WSWS earlier this week that the new offer was merely “recycled,” and did not address their concerns. One worker told the WSWS, “We’re so used to having money taken off us, if we get anything it looks good.”

Unite claimed the deal includes an 8.9 percent increase in basic pay over 18 months, and the same percentage increase for other payments plus a one-off lump sum £750 payment—not the increase backdated to August which workers wanted. Drivers said the rosters have not been fully restored.

Unite has agreed below inflation sell-out deals in bus companies across the UK, keeping all disputes separate within the same company or between companies. The strike was ended in Oldham was sealed just as First West Yorkshire bus drivers in Bradford voted by 77 percent to walk out.

Strike vote by First Bus bus drivers in Bradford, England over pay offer

Bus drivers in Bradford, England voted by a 77 percent majority in favour of a strike out over a well below-inflation pay offer from employer, First Bus.

The Unite union members rejected a pay offer comprising 1.9 percent from October 2021, followed by 1.8 percent from October 2022.

While describing the pay offer on February 4 as “truly pathetic,” Unite has not announced any strike dates. Instead, it has said talks with the company will take place on February 16.

Airport ground handling staff at Gatwick airport, London to ballot over pay

Around 500 workers employed by Logistics firm DHL at Gatwick airport in the UK capital are to ballot over pay.

The Unite union members were offered a pay increase of between 7.54 and 8.32 percent but rejected it. They were subject to a pay freeze in 2020 and 2021 and are seeking to recover an estimated nine percent loss in pay in real terms for this period as well as an increase going forward. DHL threatened to revoke the offer if it was not accepted.

The workers are balloting on whether to accept the offer or to ballot for industrial action.

Car parts manufacturer workers on Merseyside, UK to ballot over pay

Around 160 workers at International Automotive Components in Halewood, England are balloting for industrial action after rejecting a pay offer.

The Unite union members were offered a two-year pay rise, comprising of two percent in the first and three in the second year. The offer is well below inflation at 7.5 percent. Workers have also suffered cuts in pay because of short-time working.

International Automotive Components supplies dashboards for Jaguar Land Rover (JLR), and any strike action could have knock-on effects for

production at JLR. The ballot closes on February 24.

Refuse collectors in Solihull, England ballot over pay

Around 100 refuse collectors in Solihull in the Midlands, England are balloting over pay.

The GMB members work for contractor Amey to provide refuse collection and recycling services for Solihull Metropolitan Council. Amey is refusing to negotiate pay with the GMB. The ballot closes on March 4.

Revenue staff and London Metropolitan Police civilian staff to be included in consultative ballot over pay

The PCS union is to include Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs staff and London Metropolitan Police civilian staff in its consultative ballots over pay. They will run from February 14 to March 21.

A common claim has been 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.

Other departments balloting includes the Department of Health and Social Care, the Home Office and the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Unite union suspends strike of XPO logistics workers in England as company makes new pay offer

The strike by around 400 UK drivers and warehouse workers employed by logistics firm XPO due to begin on Monday was suspended by the Unite union. The workers voted to walk out over low pay, but following talks on February 4 brokered by the Arbitration, Conciliation and Advisory Service (ACAS), XPO made a new pay offer.

Unite suspended the planned stoppage and is balloting its members on the new offer. The union is not recommending the new offer, and a scheduled week-long strike due to begin Monday February 21 will go ahead if the offer is rejected.

The XPO depots involved in the dispute include Gloucester, Hounslow, Luton, Motherwell, Sheffield and Wakefield. XPO is under contract to deliver motor vehicles for Mercedes and VW, among others, as well as delivering supplies for Velux Windows and Tata Steel.

Middle East

Shooting by Israeli army sparks West Bank general strike

Nablus in the West Bank was hit by a general strike on Wednesday, which led to all shops and businesses closing.

It was in response to the shooting dead of three Palestinians by the Israeli army on Tuesday.

Africa

Striking South African Clover food workers' indefinite strike continues despite violent attacks on pickets

Around 5,000 workers at the Clover food and beverage group in South Africa are continuing their two-month-long stoppage, despite violent attacks that saw three workers hospitalised on Monday.

Three taxis drove out of the Clayville plant in Gauteng into a picket of 25-30, injuring one, and two workers were kidnapped and taken inside the factory where they were beaten for hours. Four arrests were made.

The General Industrial Workers Union of South Africa, the Food and Allied Workers Union and the South African Federation of Trades Unions members oppose Clover's attacks on pay and conditions. Clover wants to close several factories and save R300 million by retrenching 1,400 workers and introducing 12-hour days, worked over four days in every six, without overtime pay. They also propose a 20 percent reduction in wages, supposedly to stop further redundancies.

Last week, after talks with the unions, the company agreed to reinstate 763 workers retrenched in November.

Hospital security and cleaning staff in Gauteng province, South Africa protest outsourcing and threaten to strike

More than 100 South African security guards and cleaners marched on February 2 to the provincial Department of Health in Marshalltown, Gauteng, and handed over a memorandum to protest the outsourcing of workers. They are threatening to walk out if their demands are not met within a week.

The South African Cleaners, Security and Allied Workers' Union and National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers members demand the health department directly employ security guards and cleaners in Gauteng hospitals. They also want the reinstatement of workers dismissed by those private security companies that have lost contracts and been replaced.

In a separate protest in Gauteng, paramedics marched 5 km to raise public awareness of persistent criminally motivated attacks against emergency medical services workers.

South African ANC workers refuse return to work until all staff receive full back pay and benefits

Administrative staff of South Africa's ruling African National Congress (ANC) are continuing their stoppage for back pay, even though the ANC claimed February 3 that they have now paid all salaries in full.

The ANC statement came after the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union applied for a court order to force the ANC to pay their members. However, workers say not all staff in the provinces were paid, and there has still been no mention of unpaid unemployment insurance, hospital fund payments and four years' salary increments.

Staff protest over unpaid wages at Liliesleaf Farm Museum, Rivonia, South Africa

Twenty workers from South Africa's historic Liliesleaf Farm Museum in Rivonia marched to the museum's foundation offices February 2, to demand salaries unpaid since October 2021. Liliesleaf Farm is a national heritage site, which functioned as the hideout for the military wing of the African National Congress during apartheid.

The museum closed indefinitely in August, but staff were employed intermittently for functions. They say salaries have not been paid on a regular basis since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, and many cannot afford their rent or school fees.

Planned teachers' pay strike in Enugu state, Nigeria declared illegal

Primary school teachers in Enugu state, Nigeria, who declared they would strike if their pay was not brought up to the N30,000 minimum wage, were told that as they are essential workers their planned strike is illegal.

The court claims delays in pay by the state government will not be accepted. In practice this does not apply to delays in paying the minimum wage, which has been denied to millions of Nigerian workers for many years. Another court hearing is scheduled for February 22.

This decision by the National Industrial Court, Enugu Division, is informed by the state's need to keep children in holding pens while their parents are exploited for profit, rather than concern for children's education.

The Nigeria Union of Teachers sided with the state against the teachers, while making a few token complaints about it being "disdainful" and "unfortunate."



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