

Baggage handlers hold three-day wildcat strike in Copenhagen Airport, Denmark over pay and conditions; thousands of teachers in Belgium walk out over pay and conditions; in South Africa, Clover food workers' strike over pay and job cuts continues, Sibanye-Stillwater gold miners vote to strike over pay

## 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

#### **Baggage handlers hold three-day wildcat strike in Copenhagen Airport, Denmark**

Last Saturday, around 400 baggage handlers working for SAS Ground Handling in Copenhagen Airport began a wildcat strike over pay cuts and an increase in working hours.

According to an industry analyst speaking to *Ritzau*, SAS claim changes in passenger habits due to the pandemic mean there must be more weekend work, which workers oppose. Copenhagen Airport is the major airport for most of Denmark and parts of southern Sweden.

SAS Ground Handling workers held a previous wildcat strike last July, after the company imposed cuts to wages and conditions. Then, as now, the United Federation of Danish Workers (3F) called for workers to return to negotiations.

3F publicly attacked Saturday's strike, with the chairman of the local branch telling the media he understood workers' anger but "it still does not justify striking in violation of the collective agreement." Calling for workers to trust the unions' corporatist negotiating process and protect SAS' profits, he said the large impact of the strike made it "a tactically bad time, right at the school winter holidays."

On Sunday, the Labour Court ruled the stoppage illegal and ordered the strikers to resume work, imposing a fine of 50 kroner per hour. When the strike continued Monday, the court increased the fine to 80 kroner per hour. The strike ended on Monday night, after 3F stewards warned workers about the company's threat to fire strikers if they do not resume work by Tuesday. *Politiken* reported that the local 3F chairman said he hopes strikes can be avoided in future, and that workers have "learned some expensive lessons."

#### **Thousands of Belgian teachers strike over pay, conditions and class sizes**

On February 10, thousands of teachers in the Brussels-Wallonia Federation in Belgium walked out and joined protests in a one-day strike over pay and conditions. *RTL* reported that between 5,000 and 7,000 teachers joined a rally in the capital Brussels in support of demands for improved salaries, extra support to encourage young graduates to enter teaching, and reduced class sizes.

The Minister-President of the Federation refused to consider increasing the education budget to meet the teachers' demands, instead suggesting a "real debate" took place on "simplification, rationalisation and abolition of certain public and semi-public structures,"—a euphemism for budget cuts and possible privatisations.

#### **Public transport workers in Paris, France strike against 0.4 percent pay offer**

On Friday, workers at RATP, the French state-owned company which operates the bus, tram and metro in the capital, will join a one-day strike to demand an improved pay offer.

The call to strike follows the company's proposal of a 0.4 percent increase for 2022, described as a "provocation" by five unions in a joint press release which points out RATP made around 200 million euros in profits in 2021. According to *20 Minutes*, the General Confederation of Labour demanded a 3 percent pay rise per year for the next three years, only slightly above official inflation of 2.9 percent for January.

#### **Greek miners walk out against privatisation and mass dismissals**

Last week, miners at the state-owned General Mining and Metallurgical

Company (LARCO) held a strike against the government's plans to sell off LARCO's assets and fire 1,200 workers.

According to *ef.syn* the strike had "universal participation," and most strikers also protested outside the Ministry of Finance. The government made threats that if the mass job cuts were not accepted, no investors would be found and the entire company would be shut down.

In January, the Court of Justice of the European Union fined the Greek state 5.5 million euros for paying 160 million euros between 2008 and 2011 in state aid to LARCO, Europe's primary producer of nickel. The court also ordered an additional fine of 4.4 million euros per year until the money is recovered, despite the company's 500 million euros in debts, *in.gr* reported. The LARCO workers' union announced a new strike and demonstration for February 26.

### **New strikes at Greek National Social Security Agency against "reform" bill**

The Panhellenic Federation of Social Security Associations (POSE) called a 24-hour strike on Wednesday, followed by another for Thursday, in the Greek National Social Security Agency (EFKA) following the introduction of a bill which would reorganise the service.

According to *ef.syn*, the POSE specifically denounced three provisions of the bill: the introduction of new general managers and directors hired straight from the private sector on large salaries; the handing-over of EFKA's real estate properties to a special purpose limited company, whose board of directors would be appointed directly by the government, with no guarantees that the technical services employees of EFKA would not lose their jobs in this transfer; and the abolition of union representatives on the Disciplinary Council.

Workers at EFKA previously walked out in two 24-hour strikes in December, after the government cancelled their leave to cover increased demand over Christmas. A court ruled that December's strikes were illegal, as the unions did not give the four days' notice required in the public sector, although the order cancelling leave was only given at three days' notice.

### **Energy workers in Hamburg, Germany join warning strike over pay**

On Tuesday, the IG Metall union called a one-day warning strike for 3,500 workers in energy companies based in the German city of Hamburg, as part of ongoing national wage negotiations for the sector.

According to the *Hamburger Abendblatt*, the unions in the energy sector are demanding a 6 percent pay increase and an 80 euro increase to the monthly salary of trainees, while the employers have so far offered an 800-euro COVID bonus and a pay rise of 3.5 percent spread over 28 months. The offer is the equivalent of 1.5 percent year-on-year, while inflation in Germany is currently 4.9 percent.

### **Spanish nurses protest "abandonment" of primary care**

Nurses throughout Spain joined protests outside hospitals on February 1 to denounce the deterioration of the sector and demand improvements to the quality of care.

*Infosalus*, the Nursing Union (ASNTSE) read to manifest the protest in Madrid, demanding "an increase in the workforce of nurses, midwives and physiotherapists that would allow us to deal effectively with waiting lists and reduce the long waiting times that patients suffer." *Europa Press* reported SATSE's calculations that 1,200 new staff need to be hired to deal with the overwork of existing workers.

### **New strikes called in fish-canning sector in Spain, employers threaten lockout**

Last week, unions in the Spanish fish-canning sector announced three new one-day strikes in a dispute with the employers' association Feicopesca over pay and job security. A demonstration will take place on Saturday in A Coruña, the capital of the autonomous region of Galicia where most of the sector is based, and 24-hour strikes are scheduled for March 14, 16 and 18, according to *Europa Press*.

The unions called previous walkouts on January 21 and February 3 and 4, following an offer from Feicopesca of an 11 percent pay rise over 4 years. If the current 6.1 percent rate of inflation held over that period, the offer would amount to a decrease in real wages of 12.4 percent.

Feicopesca responded to the announcement of new strikes by threatening a lockout in March, claiming it was necessary for safety purposes. This referred to an incident in which a company director claimed he was injured by picketing workers. *Europa Press* contacted the police about the alleged assault and was told no incidents were reported related to the strike.

### **UK High Court bans pickets at London's Great Ormond Street Hospital**

Security guards striking at London's Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) were forced to suspend picketing last week after a High Court injunction was served on their union. The guards at GOSH have held five days of strikes as part of a planned 44-day action demanding full sick pay, maternity pay, holiday pay and other benefits under which in-house National Health Service workers are employed.

The United Voices of the World (UVW) and its members were threatened with imprisonment, fines and/or the seizure of their assets if they continued to peacefully picket outside the hospital.

The High Court served its injunction on February 10, effective immediately. The UVW was given just seven minutes' notice of the orders. On February 16, the UVW tweeted, "Great Ormond St Hospital lawyers have argued for the judge to recuse themselves. We're now waiting for a re-listing, the injunction remains in place."

### **Pay strike by pallet production workers in Greater Manchester, England continues after workers rebalot**

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 1 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 reballoted to continue the strike, with a majority in favour of 94 percent. The employer offered new talks with Unite, which were due to begin Wednesday. A rally in support of the Chep strikers at Trafford Park was held to coincide with the talks.

### **Train conductors at TransPennine Express in England strike over pay**

Train conductors at TransPennine Express (TPE), which runs services in the north of England, held the first of four 24-hour strikes on Sunday. Further strikes are scheduled for the next three Sundays.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members are calling for an end to the pay gap between them and other TPE workers. The dispute also concerns a new agreement covering rest days and Sunday working. In addition, the new agreement covers the use of new technology payment. The TPE conductors are calling for a 2p payment per transaction for checking tickets via new technology, in line with conductors working for Northern Trains who get this payment.

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

### **Further strikes by train staff at UK Cross Country rail company over attacks on job role**

Train managers and senior conductors working for UK rail franchise company Cross Country will hold 24-hour strikes on February 19 and March 5. They are in a long-running dispute over attacks on their job role. They previously walked out over the Christmas/New Year period.

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

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

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

### **Strike by teachers at UK chain of independent schools over attack on pensions wins good response**

Around 1,500 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 February 10. 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 were threatened with "fire and rehire" if they do not accept an inferior pension scheme.

The trust's schools in Brighton, Cardiff, London, Newcastle, Northampton, Norwich, Oxford, Portsmouth, Sheffield and Shrewsbury were among those taking part. The strike was covered by numerous posts on Twitter, including a video message of support from veteran actress Miriam Margolyes, who attended Oxford High School GDST. An online rally in support of the teachers was also held.

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, followed by a three-day stoppage from March 1.

NASUWT members at GDST's Norwich High School for Girls began the first of six strike days on February 10 over the same issue.

### **Bus drivers at Stagecoach West in England vote to strike over pay**

Around 300 bus drivers, many on less than £11 an hour, at Stagecoach West in England voted overwhelmingly to walk out over low pay.

The Unite union members are based at depots in Bristol, Cheltenham, Colway, Gloucester, Ross-on-Wye and Stroud. Drivers at the Swindon depot are currently balloting, with the ballot closing on February 21.

Unite announced no strike dates but instead gave the company "a final opportunity to make a pay offer which meets workers' expectations."

Unite agreed below-inflation sell-out deals in bus companies across the UK, keeping all disputes separate within the same company or between companies. The union recently ended a strike at First Bus in Oldham, agreeing to a below-inflation pay deal with inferior conditions. While drivers at First West Yorkshire in Bradford recently voted by 77 percent to walk out, the union announced no strike dates.

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

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 on February 24.

The strike by Unison union members will be the sixth in their long-running dispute. The last was on January 28.

In March 2021, the trust fired and rehired the 280 Unison union members, removing them from national pay and conditions.

### **Refuse workers in Wiltshire, UK to strike over pay**

Around 70 UK refuse operatives, loaders and drivers working for Hills Waste Solutions providing refuse collection on behalf of Wiltshire County Council are to strike February 28.

The GMB members are responsible for bin collection at around a quarter of a million homes in Calne, Salisbury and Trowbridge. They are opposed to a two percent pay offer, which is a real-terms pay cut. They voted by a 98 percent majority on an 85 percent turnout to walk out.

## **UK IT services staff to strike over pay offer**

Staff working for French-owned Atos IT Services, which provides services for the National Savings and Investment, Personal Independence Payments (PiP), BBC and Tax Free Child Care contracts in the UK, are to strike on February 28.

The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) members rejected a 1.5 percent pay offer from Atos. They are demanding a five percent pay rise, or a £1,300 increase, whichever is largest, plus a one-off £600 payment in recognition for working throughout the pandemic.

The one-day strike will be followed by an overtime ban plus selective strikes.

## **UK: Fujitsu Information and Communication Technology workers vote to strike**

Fujitsu workers in the UK voted by over 77 percent on an 80 percent turnout to strike over a 1.5 percent pay rise offer this year. Their pay was frozen last year.

The PCS members are seeking a four percent rise or £1,500, whichever is greatest. A PCS press release announcing the vote did not give any dates for walkouts. The union instead wrote to Fujitsu appealing for negotiations to reopen.

## **Workers at Airbus plane manufacturer vote to strike over pay in UK**

UK workers employed by Airbus at its sites in Filton, Gloucestershire and Broughton, North Wales voted to strike over a pay offer of around 2.5 percent for 2021.

The 3,000 Unite union members voted by a 94 percent majority on an 84 percent turnout to strike. The low pay offer for 2021 followed a pay freeze the previous year. Airbus is a European multinational aerospace corporation headquartered in the Netherlands.

A Unite press release announcing the ballot result stated any strike action could begin in March but appealed to Airbus to make an acceptable offer.

## **Workers at London hospital in consultative ballot after employer stops COVID-19 payments**

Workers employed by contractor G4S to provide cleaning and portering services at Croydon University Hospital NHS Trust in the UK capital are taking part in a consultative ballot, closing February 21.

The GMB union members oppose G4S's decision to stop paying COVID sick pay. Instead, workers off sick with COVID will have to rely on statutory sick pay.

A ballot on industrial action will follow if the workers vote in favour in the consultative ballot. A protest at the ending of COVID sick pay took place at the hospital on January 31.

## **EE telecom call centre staff in UK in consultative ballot over working hours**

UK workers at EE call centres are taking part in a consultative ballot over plans to scrap paid breaks in return for a cut in contractual working hours.

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) members are being asked to lose their two and a half hour paid breaks in return for cutting the contractual working week from 40 hours to 37.5 hours. This would bring EE workers in line with BT call centre workers. EE is owned by BT. The changes would apply to advisors and team leaders in post before July 2020.

According to the CWU, the changes would increase the hourly rate on which overtime is based. The ballot closes February 21.

## **Nurses in Northern Ireland reject three percent pay offer**

Nurses working for Health and Social Care (part of the NHS) in Northern Ireland voted by a near 93 percent majority to reject a three percent pay offer, on a near 52 percent turnout.

The ballot of Royal College of Nurses (RCN) members closed on February 10. An RCN press release noted that the vote "gives us a clear mandate to act on your behalf." However, the only proposal in their statement was to send letters to politicians pointing out the ballot result.

The WSWS noted previously how the Tory government was able to impose a three percent pay rise for health staff in England and Wales, a de facto pay cut. This was due to the betrayal of the health unions, which suppressed mass opposition in the million-strong NHS workforce.

## **Unite union calls off strike by UK B&Q DIY warehouse workers**

The 450 workers at the B&Q distribution centre in Worksop, East Midlands, accepted a revised pay offer from subcontractor, Wincanton.

The pay deal is for an hourly increase of 6.75 percent, below the current RPI inflation rate of 7.5 percent. The Unite union has falsely packaged this as a 10.75 per cent pay award by adding together a £250 Covid bonus and the fact that it has been backdated to last July.'

The B&Q workers fought a determined fight since November last year, escalated to an all-out strike on Christmas Eve.

## **Scheduled strike by airline support staff at London Heathrow airport called off by Unite as it accepts new offer**

A 72-hour stoppage due to begin February 11, by around 400 workers employed by Menzies Aviation at London's Heathrow airport, was called off by the Unite union as the company made a pay offer.

The workers are employed to provide ground handling services, while a separate group refuels British Airway planes. The ground handling group provide services for a range of airlines including Lufthansa and Air Canada. The walkouts were called in response to Menzies Aviation's refusal to enter pay negotiations.

At the height of the pandemic, the company fired over 800 of its

employees and re-employed them on inferior terms. According to Unite, many suffered big cuts in pay, with some losing £9,000 a year.

Under the terms of the deal ground handling staff will get a seven percent pay rise backdated to January 1, with a further increase in May. Joint Venture refuelling workers will get a six percent pay rise backdated to January 1, plus a £3,000 lump sum, while BA refuelling workers will get a £3,000 lump sum and a commitment that the 2022 pay review will take place around the October anniversary date.

### **Protest by outsourced hospital workers at London hospital over working conditions**

Workers employed by outsourcing company Mitie to provide cleaning and portering services at St Georges Hospital in Tooting in UK capital are holding a protest Friday.

The GMB members are protesting Mitie's renegeing on an agreement over bank holiday lieu days and occupational sick pay. In addition, they are angry over the firm's failure to deliver a £40 Christmas voucher in line with directly NHS employed staff at the hospital.

## **Middle East**

### **Protest by Iranian steel workers over pay and living conditions**

Workers from the Iran National Steel Industrial Group held a march in front of the Khuzestan governor's office in Ahvaz on Sunday.

They were demanding higher pay and improved living conditions. They also protested having to work with poor equipment and lack of spare parts.

### **Fishermen in Gaza threaten to stop fishing in protest at harassment by Hamas authorities**

Gazan fishermen organised by the Union of Agricultural Work Committees in the Gaza strip are threatening to stop going out to sea to fish. They accuse the Hamas-run naval police of harassing the fishermen at sea and stopping them earning a living.

### **Minimum wage protest outside Israeli parliament meeting**

Protests took place outside the Israeli parliament building on Sunday, organised by the Minimum 40 protest movement. They are calling for a minimum wage of NIS 40 per hour.

The protest took place while the Israeli parliament was discussing Finance Minister, Avigdor Liberman's plan to increase the minimum wage from NIS 29.12 per hour to NIS 33 per hour by December 2025.

## **Africa**

### **South African Clover food workers' strike over pay and job cuts continues while unions and management negotiate**

Approximately 5,000 workers at the Clover food and beverage group in South Africa are entering the twelfth week of their strike in opposition to the employer's attacks on pay and conditions.

The company agreed to reinstate 763 workers retrenched in November, but the General Industrial Workers Union of South Africa and the Food and Allied Workers Union refused to accept the proposed terms. Clover management offered to reinstate the 763 with full pay for a further eight months, whereas the unions demand that workers should return on full pay for the two-year term covered by the negotiations.

The unions have not revealed details of any pay offer.

Clover wants to close several of its factories, make up to 1,400 workers redundant and introduce 12-hour days, worked over four days in every six, without overtime pay. They also propose a 20 percent reduction in wages.

### **Thousands of South African gold miners reject latest pay offer and vote to strike**

At a meeting held Sunday, South African miners at Sibanye-Stillwater multinational, owners of three gold mines employing 31,000, decided to strike after seven months of 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.

The unions demanded a R1,500 a month rise in September, but dropped this to R1,000 despite being granted a certificate giving them the legal right to strike. Sibanye-Stillwater offered increases for most workers of R800 a month for the next three years. Artisans and officials were offered a five percent rise. The Solidarity union recommended their members accept, but most workers voted to go ahead with the strike.

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

### **Nigerian lecturers walk out on one-month strike**

Nigerian university lecturers began a one-month strike on February 14. Academic Staff Union of Universities members are demanding the renegotiation of a 2009 agreement, solving of the long-running crisis caused by the imposition of the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System, which caused salary delays and non-payment issues, and the release of a N15 billion revitalisation fund.

The strike is a continuation of a nine-month strike in 2020 over the same issues. It was ended with the signing of a Memorandum of Action, which was never acted upon by the government. The leadership of the National Association of Nigerian Students denounced "the impunity, recklessness, and irresponsibility" of both sides.

College lecturers are also ready to strike over similar issues.

### **Strike by university lecturers in Ghana enters fifth week**

The strike by university lecturers in Ghana entered its fifth week, as the lecturers demand improvements in pay and conditions. The University Teachers Association of Ghana members' pay has been eroded by inflation to 52 percent of what it was in 2013.

### **Zimbabwe government suspends striking teachers**

Striking teachers in Zimbabwe are defying government threats of disciplinary hearings and refuse to go back to work. The government suspended them for three months.

Teachers walked out when schools opened on February 7, to demand a salary increase of US\$540. Previously, teachers were staying at home despite the unions not calling a strike.

The government's latest pay offer—described as a 20 percent increase for government employees—was rejected by all the unions. The Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe said teachers were treated like slaves.



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