

Spanish shop workers at Douglas strike against job losses, while bus drivers walk out in Zaragoza; unions capitulate to Finnish government's strike-breaking against pay stoppages by public sector workers; UK Chep pallet production workers in ballot to continue their struggle; South African Sibanye-Stillwater gold mine strike over pay enters week seven

## 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

### **Workers strike in Spanish Douglas shop branches against loss of 1,000 jobs**

On Wednesday, workers in Spanish branches of the perfume retailer Douglas joined the fourth 24-hour strike against a major restructuring.

According to *Europa Press*, the German multinational plans to cut 1,000 jobs, close 136 branches and impose new working conditions, including the removal of bonus payments for nights and weekends.

The strike was called by the Workers' Commissions and General Workers' Union. Unions have no opposition in principle to job losses, writing in a joint statement that they only want Douglas to "exempt more branches, exempt more workers from the restructuring, increase severance pay and minimise the modification of working conditions." Last year, Spain's unions agreed to 350 layoffs at clothing retailer H&M with similar demands for face-saving improvements, and isolated numerous strikes of workers in bank branches throughout Spain, ultimately agreeing to over 12,000 job cuts at four banks.

### **Bus drivers resume indefinite partial strike for a collective agreement in Zaragoza, Spain**

On Monday, bus drivers in the Spanish city of Zaragoza resumed the campaign of partial strikes; three one-hour stoppages each weekday, following a 75 percent vote by 563 workers to resume the strike. No agreement was reached at a mediation meeting between the works

committee and the operator, AvanzaBus.

Even these limited strikes were restricted by the government, which imposed the additional requirement that a certain level of service had to be provided, to be enforced by the works committee.

Zaragoza transport workers began holding partial strikes from September, after the collective agreement with the company expired, but the strikes were suspended by the works committee in February in exchange for the company withdrawing a lawsuit against the strike based on a technicality.

### **Dock workers at Piraeus, Greece continue strikes for collective agreement**

Dock workers at the port of Piraeus, in the Athens urban area, held a 24-hour strike on Tuesday, following a stoppage in one shift last week. This was part of a long-running campaign to demand a collective bargaining agreement is signed with the ENEDEP union.

The first strikes in November broke out after the death of a colleague, with ENEDEP issuing demands related to safety. In a new statement reported by *ef.syn*, the union is also calling for a pay increase, extra pay for nights, holidays and weekends, and permanent contracts for all workers.

Following the privatisation of the port of Piraeus in 2016 by the pseudo-left SYRIZA government, the port is now 67 percent owned by the Chinese shipping multinational COSCO, which has repeatedly refused to meet demands for a collective agreement. COSCO was granted a court order declaring the stoppages on Tuesday and last week "illegal."

### **Strike at Ryanair in Belgium over low and irregular pay**

Cabin crew from Belgium at the low-cost airline Ryanair begin a three-day strike this weekend, to demand better pay. Other pay issues include incorrect pay slips and pregnant workers unable to fly not receiving any pay for months, *Nieuwsblad* reported.

While Ryanair is expected to make 1 billion euros in profit this year, three-quarters of workers were paid the minimum wage in the sector.

The strike notice covers 650 workers at Brussels and Charleroi airports, and Ryanair was forced to cancel all flights between Friday and Sunday, reported *Nieuwsblad*.

Pilots in Ryanair's French operations also voted to strike to demand a pay rise, with 67 percent of pilots planning to join the strike, until the National Union of Airline Pilots (SNPL) called it off after the company agreed to negotiate with the union, *Sud Ouest* reported. The union previously agreed to cut pilots' pay by 20 percent at the start of the pandemic, with salaries only planned to return to normal by 2025, but after the company recovered much faster, pay did not return to its pre-pandemic level.

SNPL members also joined strikes at the low-cost airline Volotea, having stopped work last weekend and with new strikes planned for this weekend, according to *Le Figaro*, to reverse a similar pay cut agreed by the union.

### **Finnish municipal workers' walkout postponed by the government as nurses' unions suspend strike in face of threats**

Strikes by over 100,000 public sector workers in Finland were postponed or suspended entirely this week following strike-breaking measures from the government, accepted by the unions.

A week-long strike of 31,000 municipal workers in Helsinki, including teachers and workers in crèches and public transport, due to begin on Tuesday, was postponed by two weeks by the Minister for Employment of the Social Democrat-led government. The new date, May 3, coincides with another planned week-long strike by 81,000 municipal workers.

In the municipal dispute, unions are asking for a 3.6 percent pay rise each year for five years, while inflation rose from 4.4 percent in January to 5.8 percent by March. A "conciliation board" was appointed by the government, with the legal power to compel the unions and employers to attend mediation meetings and postpone strikes.

Between 25,000 and 40,000 nurses, according to the Finnish Broadcasting Company (*YLE*), also joined stoppages in the past few weeks for the same 3.6 percent pay increase. Describing the below-inflation demand as "unaffordable," despite the potential cost being a fraction of the recent 2 billion euro increase in the military budget, the government has moved even more openly to break the nurses' strike.

Nurses must already comply with strict "protective work" minimum staffing levels, but the Social Democrats' Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services threatened to bring forward a "Patient Safety Act," giving public health authorities the ability to order healthcare workers back to work.

Caving in before this threat, the Tehy and SuPer unions called off the strike planned for this Wednesday and issued a bankrupt call for a "mass resignation." The unions said they expected thousands of members would follow the suggestion to hand in their two weeks' notice, but labour market researcher Mika Helander told *YLE* that the government may still pass a law to force nurses who have resigned back to work, "a bit like conscription."

### **Three-week strike suspended at French TotalEnergies refinery over fixed-term contracts**

On April 15, refinery workers voted, in a meeting called by the General Confederation of Labour and Force Ouvrière unions, to accept the unions' recommendation to suspend the indefinite strike begun three weeks earlier at the TotalEnergies oil refinery in the French town of Donges.

According to their comments to *Ouest France*, after calling on local politicians to intervene, the unions proposed suspending the strike "in the face of the silence of the authorities, accomplices of the management of TotalEnergies which refuses all dialogue."

The strike began with the demand for 43 workers currently on fixed-term contracts to be permanently hired to ensure the site could operate safely. The unions told all strikers to return to work, ostensibly "to avoid the stagnation and disintegration of the collective, which is tired," but refuse to cover absent colleagues or swap shifts. *Ouest France* reported that 80 percent of the 300 workers who work directly on fuel production were called to join the strike, although more than 700 people work on the site in total.

TotalEnergies is a French multinational oil and chemical producer, which declared 14.3 billion euros in profit in 2021.

### **Below-inflation pay agreements signed by Dutch trade unions in metalworking and youth care sectors**

Following a long campaign of industrial action, generally one-day and regionally isolated stoppages, the Dutch trade unions agreed a deal with employers' organisations on Tuesday which would lead to real-terms pay cuts in the metalworking sector for the next few years.

Federation of Dutch Trade Unions members will vote in May on the new agreement, which increases pay by an average of 3.2 percent per year over its 30-month duration, along with a lump sum for the period when the deal was being negotiated. This deal, well below current annual inflation of 9.7 percent, covers the 320,000 workers employed by smaller metal companies.

Last July the unions signed a collective agreement with larger companies, covering a total of 260,000 workers, which provided a mere 2.3 percent pay rise for 2021 and three percent in 2022.

The main unions in the Netherlands also signed a new collective agreement in the youth care sector last week, which increases pay by an average of just 2.6 percent per year for three years and includes a lump sum. Thousands of care workers joined a one-day strike and protest last month, calling for improvements to workload, increased pay and hiring in the sector, as well as opposing the government's plan to cut half a billion euros in funding.

### **Chep pallet production workers' pay strike in Greater Manchester, England ballot to continue strike**

Chep pallet manufacturing workers in Greater Manchester, England, on strike since December 17, are voting in a ballot to continue their struggle.

Last week, workers rejected the latest in a string of inadequate pay offers well below inflation. They are balloting from April 21 to May 5 to continue their action, as the current strike mandate runs out May 19.

The 70 workers walked out on December 17, after employers offered

first a one percent wage rise, later revised to two percent. Over the previous two years, workers received just one and two percent for each year. After five months on strike, this is the longest current dispute in the UK, and the longest in the Unite union's history.

The union have been pushing for a five percent rise this year and five percent next year—a substantial pay cut with inflation at 9 percent and rising, and mortgage payments set to increase with interest rate rises.

Chep, part of the Brambles supply chain company headquartered in Australia, recorded profits of £150 million last year.

Appealing to Brambles, Unite general secretary Sharon Graham, said, "I'm calling for Chep's UK parent company to intervene and sort out this mess."

Manchester Trades Union Council and the People's Assembly are providing a cover for Unite which, as at Chep, is negotiating below-inflation wage deals up and down the country, and keeping disputes isolated. They organised a Chep solidarity march and rally of around 200 on April 13 in support of the strike. At the rally, speakers including president of the BFAWU bakers union Ian Hodson and Unite regional secretary Ian McCluskey said nothing about extending the strike and spreading it to other Chep factories.

### **Confectionery workers in York, England hold fourth strike over pay and conditions**

Dozens of workers at Fox's sweet factory in York, England held a day's strike on April 14. It was the fourth day of strike action in the dispute.

The GMB members are protesting a below-inflation pay offer. Also, the lowest paid workers were excluded from a one-off payment, others stand to lose two days leave, and the company gave notice to end collective bargaining at the site.

The workers twice rejected the pay offer from Fox, who have refused to improve it despite making an improved offer at its Pontefract site. Workers are told they must sign up to a new contract which will cut holiday leave and pay, or risk being fired and re-hired on new terms. Fearing they may lose their jobs, some workers have signed up to the new contract.

Fox makes well-known brands including Glacier Mints, Mint Humbugs and Poppets. The parent company is Irish-based multinational Valeo Foods, which has Yorkshire headquarters in Pontefract and another factory in Cleckheaton.

### **UK drivers employed by scab-organising Coventry Labour council continue pay strike**

The all-out strike by 70 UK refuse collection lorry drivers against Labour Party-run Coventry City Council begun January 31 is continuing.

The Unite union members recently voted by a 94 percent margin to continue their stoppage, which will coincide with the May local elections. They reballoted as the mandate for the current action ran out March 24.

The Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) drivers' pay starts at just £22,183 a year. It takes 11 years' service to reach the top of the pay scale. There is a UK-wide shortage of HGV drivers, and some councils increased pay or made retention payments to keep refuse collection drivers.

The council suspended shop steward, Peter Randle, on what Unite said were bogus charges. The union lodged a claim with an employment

tribunal accusing the council of victimisation.

Coventry council hired a replacement scab workforce via its wholly owned arms-length company, Tom White Waste. It has sites guarded by privately hired security staff across the city where waste can be dropped off.

### **Support staff at Dundee University, Scotland stage further stoppage over attacks on pensions**

Support staff at Scotland's Dundee University began a one-week stoppage on Monday. It is the third round of action in the current dispute over the university's proposal to change pension arrangements for around 900 administration support staff. The changes would mean workers on grades one to six having to work longer, pay more and receive less pension.

The strike by around 300 Unison union members will be followed by selective action over the next three weeks.

### **Refuse workers in Cardiff, Wales set to walk out over bullying claims**

Refuse workers employed by Cardiff Council Waste Services department in Wales are due to begin a six-week strike Friday. They voted by a 98 percent majority for the stoppage.

The Unite union members accuse management of bullying tactics and non-adherence with health and safety regulations.

### **Rail cleaners set to strike against Churchill Group**

Following strikes by rail cleaners employed by the Churchill Group in February and March, they are due to walk out for 11 days between April 27 and May 7. They are calling for improved pay and working conditions.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members work for Churchill cleaning 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 £8.91 per hour, far less than in-house cleaners who perform the same role. Churchill refused to raise 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 rail workers to ballot over job cuts and pay**

Around 40,000 UK rail workers employed by Network Rail (responsible for rail infrastructure) and 15 Train Operating Companies (TOCs) are to

ballot for industrial action.

The RMT members face the threat of 2,500 job cuts on Network Rail, many in critical safety roles. Those working for TOCs also face job cuts, pay freezes and attacks on terms and conditions. The ballot opens April 26 and closes May 24. Industrial action could begin in June said the RMT.

### **UK workers at Hackney council set to strike over pay offer**

Around 200 workers employed by Hackney Council in London plan to strike April 25-27 and May 3-5.

The Unite union members work in refuse collection, building services and transport for special needs and disabled. They oppose the nationally set Local Government Association pay rise offer of 1.5 percent, and up to 2.75 percent for those on the lowest pay grades. The offer is a cut in real terms on top of 11 years of pay freezes, which leaves council workers around 22 percent worse off in spending power.

### **UK Post Office staff to hold 24-hour stoppage over pay freeze**

On May 3, staff at all 114 UK Crown Post Offices (main offices) will hold a 24-hour strike. Call and administrative staff plus staff responsible for cash deliveries and collections from the 11,500 sub-post offices will also walk out.

The Communications Workers Union (CWU) members voted by a 97.3 percent majority to take the action against a Post Office-imposed pay freeze. The CWU announced other strike dates will follow.

### **UK pharmacy workers vote to strike over inadequate pay offer**

Around 1,000 workers at pharmaceutical company GSK's UK sites voted by an 86 percent majority to strike. It is the first such strike vote at GSK.

The Unite union members rejected a pay increase of 2.75 percent as well as a 4 percent offer with strings attached, a cut in real terms. A Unite press release of April 20 announcing the result stated, "GSK now has a short 48 hour-window of opportunity to make a much-improved offer or strike action will be announced."

GSK makes products such as Sensodyne and Panadol and many prescription medications. It recorded £34 billion in profits last year.

### **Refuse workers in Northampton, UK vote for stoppages after rejecting pay offer**

Around 70 UK refuse collection workers employed by Veolia to provide services to around 95,000 houses on behalf of Northampton council voted to walk out after rejecting a 2.5 percent offer from the company.

The GMB members may strike as early as April 27. The GMB says it will discuss with members prior to announcing strike dates.

Northampton council has upped its funding to Veolia by 5.5 percent, yet the company offered only a 2.5 percent rise to its workers.

### **Threat to six feature writers' jobs at Scottish newspaper revoked after indicative vote by newspaper workers**

A plan to sack six feature writers by the Newsquest Media Group in Scotland has been revoked. The group is responsible for production of *The Herald*, *Glasgow Times* and *The National*.

National Union of Journalist (NUJ) members at the media group voted in an indicative vote that they were prepared to strike against the job cuts. The writers will be slotted into vacant jobs within the group. In response the NUJ called off plans for a strike ballot.

### **Workers at UK housing association ballot for strike over pay**

Staff working for the Thirteen Housing Group in the Yorkshire/North East area are balloting for strike action over pay. The ballot closes on May 5.

The Unite union members in a consultative ballot overwhelmingly rejected a three percent pay offer. The housing association is also seeking changes in pension arrangements. With the low pay offer and pension changes workers would be around £1,000 a year worse off in real terms.

### **Domestic staff at London hospital to ballot over job restructuring**

Domestic staff working for outsourcing companies Sodexo and Mitie at Queen Mary's Hospital Roehampton in the UK capital voted in an indicative ballot to ballot for industrial action.

The GMB members are protesting low pay and plans by their employers to change their contracts requiring them to undertake a wider range of roles.

Should they vote in favour of industrial action, it is expected to take place in June.

### **UK teachers' union conferences discuss pay but offer no fightback**

The two main UK teaching unions held their annual conferences over the Easter holiday period. National Education Union (NEU) conference delegates voted to hold an indicative industrial action vote of its membership in the UK over pay.

The NASUWT's motion at its annual conference called for the union executive to "mobilise members for national industrial action, up to and including strike action, in the event that any government or administration fails to deliver a programme of restorative pay awards for teachers."

The NEU held its conference in Bournemouth and NASUWT met in Birmingham.

Boris Johnson's Conservative government said it will raise teachers' starting pay by 16 percent over the next two years, to reach a minimum starting figure of £30,000. However, more experienced teachers will see their pay rise by only five percent, which according to the Institute of Fiscal Studies leaves most teachers five percent worse off in real terms.

force, is calling for a 10 percent rise.

### **UK aircraft control staff vote to accept union-brokered below-inflation pay deal**

UK air traffic control staff employed by NATS Holdings voted by a near 88 percent majority to accept a three percent pay offer made by the employer. The below inflation offer follows a two years' pay freeze.

The Public and Commercial Services union members accepted the offer recommended by the union. The offer includes a one-off £3,000 lump sum as a sweetener.

### **Unite union calls off planned strike of baggage handlers at Luton airport, England over sick pay and wage arrears**

Unite called off a planned strike by around 100 workers employed by GH London Ground Handling Services at Luton airport. They were due to walk out April 14-19, after voting by a 96 percent majority to protest the employer's failure to bring in promised sick pay improvements and pay wage arrears regularly.

The strike was called off after the company agreed to pay 13 weeks of sick pay at full or half pay depending on length of service to all workers with more than a year's services. The company also agreed £100 compensation for the arrears of wages.

### **GMB union cancels planned strike of council workers in Glasgow, Scotland**

The GMB union called off a two-day strike by thousands of staff working for Glasgow city council, Scotland due on Wednesday and Thursday. The planned action was over the council's broken promises over equal pay.

In 2018, several thousand Glasgow city council workers, predominantly women, walked out, demanding to be paid in line with male workers carrying out equivalent roles. The council agreed to recompense the workers, but there have been major delays in ending the dispute. The settlement figure was around £500 million.

Scottish National Party-controlled Glasgow council agreed that equal pay will begin in October. The strike mandate is still valid, and the union says it will be used if the council fails to keep to the agreement.

### **UK telecom staff to ballot over pay offer**

UK telecom workers employed by BT are to ballot over a pay offer. The CWU members work as engineers, in retail, call centres and BT's subsidiaries Openreach, Plusnet and EE

The CWU rejected BT's offer of a £1,500 pay rise for all staff grades. BT claims it represents an eight percent increase for lower-paid staff. However, it only represents three percent for higher-paid staff, including frontline workers, and so with current inflation is a cut in real terms.

The CWU, which represents around 40,000 of BT's 100,000 work

### **Protest at Goldsmiths University, London, over redundancies**

Staff at Goldsmiths University in the UK capital held a protest last week after the university announced plans to make 16 posts in the English, Creative Writing and History departments redundant.

Members of the University and College Union and Unison are threatened with losing their jobs as the university seeks to make savings of £9 million by 2023.

Middle East

### **General strike in Palestinian West Bank in response to killings by Israeli defence forces**

A general strike took place on April 14 in the Palestinian West Bank in response to four shootings by the Israeli army. Public and private businesses in Ramallah closed in support of the strike.

In April, one Palestinian was shot in Ramallah and one in Bethlehem. This was followed by the death of two Palestinians in a raid by the Israeli army in the town of Kfar Dan near Jenin city.

### **Egyptian textile workers suspend strike after management offers negotiations**

Egyptian textile workers employed by the Nile Linen Group in the Alexandria Free Investment Zone suspended their strike on Sunday. They walked out on April 13 after the company proposed cutting their Eid bonuses by 50 percent.

The workers agreed to suspend the strike after management agreed to negotiate and not punish any worker who had walked out.

### **Strike of Saudi fishermen against government surcharge**

Saudi fishermen in the Qatif fish market held a stoppage in opposition to the Saudi government's imposition of a surcharge. The strikers called on the government to drop the charge which the fishermen say will have to be passed on to their customers.

Qatif, along with other eastern provinces, has a sizeable Shia minority population. Such areas have experienced severe government crackdowns.

Africa

### **South African Sibanye-Stillwater gold mine strike over pay enters seventh week**

The strike by over 30,000 miners at Sibanye-Stillwater gold mines in South Africa is now entering its seventh week. The miners want a R1,000

a month rise, but the employers refuse to move beyond their offer of R700.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) have threatened to escalate the strike to involve 35,000 miners at Sibanye-Stillwater's platinum operations. The company says it has not received notification of a secondary strike, but threatens it will take legal action when official notice is given.

In 2019, AMCU ended a five-month stoppage at Sibanye-Stillwater, accepting a deal they had previously called "slave labour" when it was first agreed by the NUM and Solidarity unions.

### **Sudan teachers' strike continues into second week**

Sudanese teachers are continuing their strike to be paid according to a new salary structure, with adjustments backdated to 2020-21.

The Sudanese Teachers' Committee said they will boycott basic and secondary certificate exams if their demands are not met. They are also critical of the whole educational process in the country, saying it is not conducive to students' learning.

### **Local government workers in Ondo, Nigeria picket bank for withholding salaries**

Workers in Ondo, Nigeria mounted a picket on April 14 at the main Akure branch of Alagbaka bank, after the bank withheld the salaries of Anambra local government workers.

The protesters arrived at the bank carrying placards with their slogans. They demanded the bank release the money immediately.

The Amalgamated Union of Public Corporations, Civil Service Technical and Recreational Services Employees members were acting in solidarity with their counterparts in Anambra state.

### **Health workers on strike at Migori Referral Hospital in Kenya**

Casual workers at the Migori Referral Hospital, Migori County in Kenya walked out on April 14 to demand nine months' worth of unpaid wages.

The 70 workers attended a press conference led by their chairperson Delamare Deya. Deya demanded employers pay the workers immediately. "Each time we complain about the unpaid salaries we are threatened with sacking," he said.

One of the workers explained they could not afford to pay for basic needs or provide for their families. Another said she could not afford to pay medical fees.



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