

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

National strike in Belgian public sector against wage restraint

Public sector workers in Belgium joined a one-day national strike on Monday, and a demonstration of 80,000 workers took place in Brussels. Workers in public transport, schools, hospitals and other public services walked out to demand an increase in real pay, and modification of the country's "wage norms" law.

The General Labour Federation of Belgium (FGTB), Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (CSC) and General Confederation of Liberal Trade Unions of Belgium (CGSLB) called for the law to be "modified". It is intended to guarantee a race to the bottom by forbidding Belgian workers from receiving a pay rise above what is received in neighbouring France, Germany and the Netherlands. This rate was set at the particularly low rate of 0.4 percent in 2021.

Supposedly to protect workers' wages from inflation, pay is automatically increased by a national "index" on top of the wage norm. Prime Minister Alexander De Croo attacked Monday's strike, claiming that Belgian workers are "better protected in terms of purchasing power than in any other eurozone country". The increase in the index always lags behind inflation as it is made at the start of the year. In January it was set at 3.6 percent for 2022.

The *Brussels Times* reported that the employers' association Voka asked for the index to be set at 3 percent and made a one-off payment rather than pay rise.

Cabin crew at Ryanair, EasyJet and national carriers across Europe plan strikes over pay and workload

Workers in the airline industry, who suffered union-backed layoffs and cuts to pay and working conditions during the pandemic, are fighting back across Europe.

Cabin crew at Ryanair in Spain, Belgium, Italy, France and Portugal walk out this week, demanding improvements in pay and working conditions. Spanish crew begin a three-day strike on Friday, called by the Syndical Workers' Union (USO) and the Independent Airline Cabin Crew Union (SITCPLA), with another three days planned next week. Workers in Belgium and Portugal will strike the same dates this week, while French workers will join the strike for two days on Saturday and Sunday. Italian workers walk out Saturday. According to *Europa Press*, 2,700 Ryanair workers are involved in the strikes.

Ryanair refuses to recognise many of the unions, with its CEO last week calling the USO and SITCPLA "Mickey Mouse unions" and lauding a deal with the Workers' Commissions (CCOO). In comments in the *Irish Times*, Ryanair praised the setup in Ireland and the UK, where "We deal

with Fórsa in Ireland and Unite in the UK. We deal with one union and it's simple."

The smaller unions have no perspective for reversing the cuts imposed on airline workers or fighting the divide-and-conquer approach of the airlines. Speaking to *Europa Press* about the plan for nine days of strikes at EasyJet in July, a USO official noted the enormous pay gap between EasyJet workers in Spain compared with France and Germany. But, "Reaching the level of our colleagues in France would mean an increase of 80 percent, which we understand is impossible given the current economic situation," and called for 40 percent. This lowered demand will be betrayed at the first opportunity.

Workers at Brussels Airline, the Belgian subsidiary of Lufthansa, also begin a three-day strike on Thursday, and around 1,000 pilots at the Scandinavian airline SAS will strike on June 29 against plans for a 30 percent pay cut.

Greek healthcare workers national strike over staff shortages

Healthcare workers in Greece joined a 24-hour national strike on Wednesday, called by the Federation of Public Hospital Employees (POEDIN) and other unions to denounce low staffing levels, the use of agency staff and lack of funding.

Alfavita quotes POEDIN's statement that "this summer there are 10,000 fewer staff compared to last year [due to retirements, illness, job suspensions]" and "the staff was left exhausted with regular cuts to leave".

Metal workers' strike in Cantabria, Spain ends after unions push through below-inflation pay deal

On Tuesday, 65 percent of workers at a meeting voted to accept an agreement between the unions and Pymetal employers' association, ending the 20-day pay strike of metal workers in the Spanish autonomous community of Cantabria.

The deal, which applies to 20,000 workers, agrees a 3.5 percent pay rise and payment of €250 for 2021, a 4.5 percent rise for 2022 with a provision for increasing pay by 65 percent of the inflation rate, and in each of 2023 and 2024 a pay rise of 3 percent with a clause for increasing pay by 85 percent of inflation.

The strike came under sustained attack from the Cantabrian government, a coalition between the Regionalist Party of Cantabria (PRC) and the ruling PSOE. Around 150 workers were banned from striking by the imposition of a 100 percent minimum service requirement in 12 companies.

The unions did not call their members to defy the measures, despite hundreds of workers joining a protest to demand they are lifted.

Other metal workers in Spain continue strikes for pay rises and the renewal of collective agreements, with eight unions in the Basque Country planning a one-day stoppage Thursday and two days next week.

Strike over staff shortages at university hospitals in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany

Last week, a labour court in Germany rejected an application for an injunction by Bonn University Hospital against the United Services Union

(Verdi) to halt the indefinite stoppage affecting non-emergency treatment at six university hospitals throughout the state of North Rhine-Westphalia.

Workers are fighting for improved staffing levels and against high workloads, with a staff shortage of 20,000 in the state according to Verdi.

Verdi announced it wanted to conclude a “relief collective agreement” this week, along the lines of that concluded in Berlin. The Berlin agreement only hired a tiny fraction of staff needed over three years.

Wildcat strike over pay and conditions at semiconductor factory in France ends after union-brokered deal

An indefinite strike at the Soitec semiconductor factory in the town of Bernin, near Grenoble in France, has ended after workers voted by 52 percent to accept a deal negotiated by the General Confederation of Labour (CGT).

The strike began as a wildcat by the night shift of the site’s 1,500 workers June 10, to demand improvements in working conditions and pay after the company’s turnover increased by 48 percent and net profit tripled in a year.

The CGT and Force Ouvrière (FO) unions intervened to gain control of a movement which brought production “virtually to a standstill”. The CGT-backed deal reportedly increases the profit-sharing bonus by 20 percent, but contains no improvements to working conditions.

Strike ends at Borjomi mineral water bottling plants in Georgia with pay cuts and sackings

On Monday, a strike of around 400 workers at two Borjomi mineral water bottling plants in the Georgian town of the same name was ended by the local union.

The walkout began after 50 workers were fired in May for refusing to sign a new contract containing a 50 percent pay cut. The deal signed reinstates only 48 of the 50 sacked workers, with the chairman and deputy chairman of the union not given back their jobs. The contract at half-pay remains in force until next year.

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 continues.

Coventry council hired a replacement scab workforce via its wholly owned arms-length company, Tom White Waste.

The Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) drivers’ pay starts at £22,183 a year. It takes 11 years’ service to reach the top of the pay scale. The council suspended shop steward Peter Randle on what Unite said were bogus charges.

Further strike by cleaners working for UK train cleaning company over pay and conditions

UK rail cleaners employed by the Churchill Group held their latest stoppage, begun June 16 until Monday. The workers, who walked out in February, March and April as well as earlier this month are calling for improved pay and working conditions.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members 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.

The 1,000 outsourced cleaners were balloted by the RMT. Two of the ballots registered a 100 percent strike vote. The cleaners are paid £8.91 per hour, far less than in-house cleaners performing 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.

Outsourced cleaners at London, UK hospital begin week-long strike over pay and conditions

Cleaners and hostesses employed by outsourcing company Mitie at St

Georges Hospital in Tooting London began a week-long strike Monday.

The GMB members taking the action over low pay and working conditions already held three days of stoppages.

Ancillary staff at Leeds, UK university hold week-long strike over pay

Around 500 ancillary staff at Leeds University, England began a five-day walkout Monday.

The Unison union members working as cleaners, security staff, administrators and librarians are protesting the imposition of a 1.5 percent pay offer, with low-paid staff taking home less than £18,000 a year. The workers are seeking a £1,250 across-the-board rise.

UK barristers vote to walk out over low pay and cuts to legal aid

The Criminal Bar Association (CBA) representing around 2,500 prosecuting and defending criminal lawyers announced 14 days of action between June 27 and July 22.

The barristers are protesting low pay and the ongoing crisis of legal aid funding. In April, they refused to stand in for colleagues in overrunning cases by appearing in court or doing preparatory work—a process known as “returns.”

According to the CBA, around a fifth of junior criminal barristers left the profession since 2016. The CBA accuses the government of not implementing a recommended 15 percent rise in legal aid funding, which the CBA says is “the bare minimum” to stop the system falling apart. Its members saw a 28 percent decrease in earnings since 2006.

Stagecoach bus workers in Liverpool, UK to walk out over pay claim

Around 370 bus drivers and engineers working for Stagecoach at the Gilmoor depot in Liverpool are demanding a pay rise taking their hourly rate to £12.69.

The Unite union members are to strike on June 30 and again on July 4. According to the *Liverpool Echo* June 22, Stagecoach offered a 9.5 percent increase with an additional inflationary rise in 2023. In the second half of 2021, Stagecoach more than doubled its profits to nearly £33 million.

Care workers in Bristol, UK facing “fire and rehire” to walk out

Over 100 workers at Bristol-based care company St Monica Trust will strike over proposed cuts pay and sick pay.

The Unison union members who work as care workers, registered nurses and residential home staff are to walk out June 29, with further action on July 2, 5, 10, and 11. Under the Trust’s proposals senior care workers will see weekend pay rates cut by 21 percent. Other staff will see a 10 percent cut, with workers losing around £400 a month. The trust threatened to use fire and rehire tactics to enforce the changes.

Flooring manufacturer workers in Craigavon, Northern Ireland, to strike

Around 100 workers at commercial flooring manufacturer, Interface Europe in Craigavon, Northern Ireland are to begin a continuous strike June 26.

The Unite union members rejected a 5.25 percent pay offer and are calling for an 11 percent rise. They voted by an 88 percent majority to walk out.

Threatened strike of refuse collectors in Chesterfield, UK called off as GMB union pushes through below inflation deal

On Tuesday, the GMB union said it had called off proposed strike action by UK refuse collectors employed by waste management company, Veolia Environmental contracted to Chesterfield council. They voted by 100 percent to reject a below inflation 4.48 percent pay offer, but the company came back with a 7.5 percent pay offer which was unanimously accepted. It will mean a £2 an hour increase, backdated to April 1.

Middle East

Israeli pilots' pay dispute continues

The pay dispute of Israeli airline El Al pilots involves failing to turn up for allotted flights, often citing sickness. They oppose the airline's refusal to reverse cuts imposed during the pandemic. El Al asked for the Labour Court in Tel Aviv to file an injunction against the action, but the court refused.

Ongoing strikes by Israeli teachers

Teachers have been taking rolling strikes action across Israel demanding increased pay and improved working conditions.

The Israel Teachers' Union (ITU) held a two-and-a-half-hour strike in south Israel June 15, while on Monday they held a nation-wide partial strike beginning work at 10 a.m. rather than 8 a.m.

Strike by Israeli bus drivers

Thousands of bus drivers across Israel walked out June 17. They were protesting over 300 attacks by passengers this year and low pay, forcing many drivers to work overtime to make ends meet.

A shortage of around 5,000 drivers puts increasing pressure on drivers. Drivers in Ashdod held a protest near the central bus station and burnt tyres.

Africa

South African contract miners at North West platinum mine on indefinite strike

South African miners at Impala Platinum in the North West province walked out on indefinite strike on Monday over pay parity.

On Tuesday, hundreds of workers demonstrated near shaft eight of the mine in Freedom Park.

The National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA) members are employed by three contractors at Impala. They are paid a fraction of the pay of permanent employees who do the same job. A rock drill operator earns a minimum R17,000 month plus benefits, while a contract worker earns R5,000 top, without benefits.

The strike involves 3,000 out of Impala's workforce of 45,000. Impala Platinum does not recognise NUMSA and has gone to court to get the strike banned.

Strike by South African ambulance drivers in Eastern Cape

Ambulance drivers in Eastern Cape, South Africa have been on strike for two months.

The 200 National Health and Allied Workers Union members complain ambulances lack basic equipment, like blood pressure machines, means to check diabetes or functioning radios.

In May, workers ignored a court order to end the unprotected strike. The health department is using private ambulances for life-threatening calls.

South African nurses mass picket in Eastern Cape over allowances

On June 15, hundreds of nurses from hospitals and clinics in the rural areas in the Eastern Cape picketed the provincial Department of Health in East London.

The 5,000 NEHAWU members are demanding a rural pay allowance, which enrolled nurses and their assistants received until 2007. In 2019, the department agreed to reinstate the payment, but few nurses received it.

Domestic workers march in Pretoria, South Africa over work conditions

Over a hundred domestic workers marched through the streets of Pretoria June 16 over pay and conditions.

Carrying mops and irons, they marched to the Department of Labour.

They are demanding improved work and living conditions if they live in and to be registered for the Unemployment Insurance Fund and Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases.

They complain of being physically abused by employers and racism.

Uganda school teachers walk out

Most Ugandan teachers walked out on strike June 15 after the government proposed to increase only the salaries of science teachers, handing other teachers a substantial pay cut.

Most Ugandan schools are closed, and those open have only the head teacher and support staff in attendance.

Nurses in Zimbabwe strike as salaries destroyed by 100 percent inflation

Nurses in Zimbabwe began an indefinite strike on June 21, in response to low salaries and lack of medicines.

NewZimbabwe.com quoted a nurse saying, "Everyone thinks we are heartless after being offered a 100 percent salary increment which however makes no difference. We love our job; our mission is to save lives but how do we deliver when we do not even have paracetamol?"

"Even if we were to stay, what would we use to treat the patients? We do not have any medicines here and patients are told to buy their own medication... We want a situation whereby patients stop buying medication for themselves because this is a state institution."

Most of the nurses at Harare Central and Parirenyatwa hospitals walked out by the end of the day, leaving only a minimal service.

Nurses in Parirenyatwa marched to the Health Services Board (HSB) with junior doctors who are also on strike. 4,000 nurses have left government employment in the last three years.



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