

Public sector workers in Portugal hold one-day national pay strike; UK strike wave continues over pay, jobs and conditions; South Africa's public sector holds one-day pay strike, but unions oppose unity with striking taxi drivers in Western Cape

## Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

24 November 2022

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

Europe

### Public sector workers in Portugal hold one-day national pay strike

Workers in the public sector joined a national strike in Portugal last Friday, stopping work in local services including waste collection, hospitals and schools.

The Common Front of Public Administration Unions, representing around 365,000 public-sector workers, is demanding a 10 percent pay increase, according to *Reuters*.

Public sector workers have suffered a major drop in real wages. Inflation in Portugal was 10.1 percent for October, but *Reuters* reported that the pay rise for 2022 was only 0.9 percent. The government offered a 3.6 percent pay rise for the coming year.

Participation in the strike was widespread. The unions estimated around 80 percent of workers walked out.

### Workers at BP refinery in Rotterdam, the Netherlands begin strike over pay

Oil refinery workers at BP's plant in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, began a strike this week, escalating a work-to-rule campaign over pay begun November 14.

The refinery was shut down by a technical fault last week, after which the Christian National Trade Union Federation (CNV) instructed its members at BP to help with repairing the fault but not with restarting production.

Due to the stoppage, BP had to suspend plans to restart the refinery, which processes 400,000 barrels of crude oil per day, according to *Bloomberg*. This is around a third of the Netherlands' processing capacity and around three percent of total European production.

*Yahoo Finance* reported that BP offered a five percent wage increase

and a 4,000-euro one-off payment, while inflation is currently 14.3 percent. The CNV's own demands are for a 9.5 percent wage increase, a major real terms pay cut for its members. At the end of September, BP reported a profit of 8.2 billion US dollars for the prior three months alone, on top of the 8.5 billion from the previous quarter, according to *CNBC*.

### Teachers at Budapest school begin rolling walkouts following national strike in Hungary

Teachers at the Eötvös József high school in Budapest began a rolling strike on Monday, denouncing the conditions of work and education in Hungarian schools.

In a Facebook post announcing the action, they wrote, "The gaping void that has arisen on the surface of education can no longer be filled with any excuses, explanations, or slogans... We do not claim that we have nothing to lose, and of course our stand and protest can have drastic consequences, but it is our moral duty to do everything we can. We are not left alone, parents and students line up around us. There is no other way, we must resist together!"

The post was signed by 36 teachers. They said they were inspired by teachers at two schools who stopped work all last week in defiance of the government's draconian minimum service requirements and would hold stoppages until the end of December.

On November 18, students joined striking teachers in rallies across the country. Teachers faced numerous attacks for joining the strikes over pay called by the Democratic Trade Union of Teachers and Teachers' Union. Five teachers were fired.

### Thousands of metal workers in Lleida, Spain, strike for pay increases

Metal workers in the Spanish province of Lleida held a two-day strike from Tuesday this week, opposing a pay offer from the Femel employers' association that would lead to an enormous drop in their purchasing power.

According to *Crónica Global*, Femel offered pay rises of percent each year for the next four years, barely a third of current inflation, which is 7.3 percent.

The offer also comes with a clause that would increase pay if prices rose by more than pay by the end of the agreement, but the overall pay rise is capped at three-quarters of the inflation rate. Also, there is no back pay, so workers would spend four years unable to pay rising prices.

The Workers' Commissions and General Workers' Union demanded a pay increase of 4.6 percent for this year. The unions called around 13,000 metal workers to strike in the province. Recent deals agreed in the neighbouring provinces of Barcelona and Tarragona were both below the current rate of inflation.

### **Major strikes by medical workers over pay and staff shortages continue in Spain**

Healthcare workers in Spain continue strikes over stagnating pay and understaffing. Around 5,000 doctors and paediatricians in the capital Madrid are on an indefinite strike begun two weeks ago, demanding maximum ratios of patients to staff. The Amyts union demanded GPs see a maximum of 31 patients each day and paediatricians see a maximum of 21.

The government offered to set maximums of 34 and 24 patients respectively. According to *Europa Press*, Amyts says it would consider this proposal, but the government has not explained what would happen after a doctor reaches their maximum number of patients, raising the prospect that the agreement may not be enforceable.

In the Basque Country, workers in residential care homes began a five-day strike on Monday over working conditions and low pay. *Europa Press* reported the Basque Workers' Solidarity union called the stoppage over "serious shortcomings" in the care and working conditions and to denounce the 40 percent pay gap between workers in private care homes and the public sector.

### **Local authority workers strike in defence of job security in Flanders, Belgium**

Workers in local authorities throughout Flanders, the Flemish-speaking region of Belgium, held a one-day strike on Tuesday, stopping work in bin collection, childcare, libraries and other public services.

Workers are opposed to the Flemish government's plans to make it easier to fire workers on permanent contracts, which would leave them with the same lack of job security as those on temporary contracts.

### **Workers strike over pay and understaffing at religious hospitals in Vienna, Austria**

Workers at six hospitals in Vienna, Austria run by religious orders held a three-hour warning strike on Wednesday, demanding a decent pay rise to keep up with 11 percent inflation. The Vida union reported that almost 100 percent of members voted in favour of the strike.

According to the *Kleine Zeitung*, the hospitals made an offer of a one-off payment of "up to 1,000 euros," but Vida said the offer was a lot less

60,000 workers, and a nurse would barely get 50 euros. Vida is demanding a monthly salary increase of 500 euros, or an increase to at least 2,000 euros per month for the 10,000 workers employed in the hospitals.

### **Teachers continue walkouts over class sizes in Berlin, Germany**

Teachers in the German capital Berlin will walk out again on an all-day strike over class sizes on Friday. This is almost a month after the last warning strike called by the Education and Science Union (GEW), in which 3,500 educators stopped work.

According to the *Berliner Morgenpost*, the GEW is calling for the city government to sign a collective agreement with binding maximum ratios between students and teachers. Teachers have held five warning strikes since 2021 in this long-running dispute.

### **Workers at Greek Council for Refugees strike over denial of employment rights**

Workers at the Greek Council for Refugees, a charity providing legal and social advice to refugees in Greece, held a two-day strike from Monday against the charity's circumvention of labour law.

According to the Employees' Union of the Greek Council for Refugees, in a statement reposted by *ef.syn*, the charity fires workers before they accumulate one year's continuous employment, then hires them again for 45 days, to prevent them becoming entitled to employment rights, "creating two-tier employees."

The union said this issue affects workers in the integration programme, teachers, housing managers, administrative staff and interpreters and called on the charity to hire its employees on permanent contracts.

### **Prison educators in Geneva, Switzerland, strike against imposition of 11-hour days**

Educators at the children's detention centre La Clairière, in Geneva, Switzerland held a strike on November 18, after a previous one-day walkout on November 2 against the imposition of new working patterns.

The centre has suffered from understaffing since the start of the pandemic. The management and cantonal government announced a "solution" of introducing 11-hour shifts with a 30-minute break, up to three days per week.

The local councillor for security, from the Geneva Citizens Movement, a party based on agitation against French workers in Switzerland, claimed maintaining eight-hour shifts would be "putting the wishes of employees before the interests of the young people entrusted to them," the *Tribune de Genève* reported.

The Public Services Union pointed out that the centre tested 10-hour shifts with a one-hour break. Educators reported that by the end of such a long shift they no longer had the patience to deal with the complex needs of children in custody.

## **UK academics strike over pay and pensions, joined by ancillary staff striking over pay**

Academic staff at around 150 higher education (HE) facilities in the UK are striking Thursday and Friday, and again on November 30.

The University and College Union (UCU) members are involved in separate disputes over pay and pensions. Nearly all the 150 institutions are involved in the pay dispute, and a majority are also walking out over the attack on pensions.

Among the universities taking part are Aberdeen, Bath, Birmingham, Cambridge, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Oxford, Sheffield and various University of London colleges.

The UCU members will also be carrying out action short of a strike (ASOS) until further notice. The ASOS will include working to contract, not covering for absent colleagues and not rescheduling lectures or classes cancelled as a result of the strikes. Some universities have threatened to dock up to 100 percent of pay for ASOS.

University ancillary staff including administrators, catering, cleaners, library and security staff also began days of stoppages from Monday of this week.

Unison union members at 19 HE institutions including University of Bath, Leeds University and Manchester Metropolitan are taking up to seven days of action, depending on the institution. Most of the HE institutions taking part will be striking on days coinciding with striking UCU members.

This is a second wave of stoppages following those in September and October, when staff rejected a three percent pay offer from the Universities and Colleges Employers Association in May. Many university ancillary staff are low paid and are hit hard by the rising cost of living.

## **Vinyl floor manufacturing workers in Greater Manchester, England continue all-out strike over pay as talks fail**

The indefinite stoppage begun October 31 by around 200 UK workers employed by vinyl flooring manufacturer Polyflor in Greater Manchester continues as the latest talks failed.

Talks brokered by government mediation service Acas at the company's insistence were set up, but they broke up last Friday after failing to reach an agreement.

The GMB union's demand, first put forward in July, is for a 10 percent rise. The company's latest offer was a 10 percent rise, but only starting in December and running until December 2023, with no backdated pay rise. With RPI inflation now over 14 percent, workers are being asked to take a pay cut in real terms. The Polyflor workers rejected the offer, and the strike continues.

Polyflor's parent company, James Halstead PLC, recently announced a near 10 percent rise in profits, and dividends paid out to shareholders will match last year's record high.

The GMB union members were to begin a series of two-hour strikes against low pay on September 7. However, they were informed by email not to turn up for their shift and were locked out for a week. While unions cancelled strikes after the queen's death, the lockout was not lifted.

On September 20, the company ended the lockout and employees returned to work. They then held a two-hour strike on September 21 and protested outside the factory. The company brought in agency staff to try and break the strike.

## **Strikers at UK logistic firm hold demonstration as stoppage continues**

Around 350 logistics workers at Arrow XL based in Liverpool, England are continuing their programme of strikes for better pay.

The Unite union members have held stoppages each Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday since October 24. They are seeking improved pay. Working as drivers, warehouse and customer care staff, many are on the minimum wage of £9.50 an hour, while XL's highest paid director earned nearly £540,000 last year.

Striking XL workers, including those at XL's depots in Enfield, Wigan and Worcester, held a demonstration on Tuesday outside the headquarters of XL's parent company, Logistics Group Holdings UK Ltd in Liverpool.

XL workers make two-person deliveries for major companies such as Amazon, LG Electronics and Richer Sounds.

## **Further strikes announced of UK rail workers in dispute over pay, conditions and threat of job losses**

On Tuesday, the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union representing around 40,000 UK rail workers announced a series of further strikes in the long-running dispute over jobs, pay and conditions.

Rail workers employed by the 14 train operating companies (TOCs) and by Network Rail will hold 48-hour strikes on December 13, December 16, January 3 and January 6. In addition, there will be an overtime ban operating between December 18 and January 2. The combination of strikes and overtime ban will impact heavily on the Christmas holiday travel period.

The strike date announcement follows a re-ballot of the 40,000 RMT members. The original ballot was held in May, leading to one day stoppages in June and continuing over the summer, but, under Tory anti-trade union laws, re-ballots are required if a dispute lasts more than six months.

The majority in favour was 91.7 percent, higher than the original ballot. The RMT suspended planned stoppages earlier this autumn ahead of two weeks of talks, which ended last Friday. Neither the Rail Delivery Group, representing the TOCs, nor Network Rail made any new proposals the RMT could put to its membership.

## **Cash delivery staff at UK firm to strike over pay**

Around 1,200 staff working for the G4S Cash Solutions firm headquartered in London are set to strike.

The GMB members voted by a 97 percent to walk out. They are seeking an improved pay offer. Initially the company tried to impose a pay freeze and then made an inadequate offer of four percent plus a lump sum dependent on contracted hours.

The stoppage, due to begin December 4, could lead to shortages of cash in the run-up to Christmas. G4S delivers cash to banks including Barclays and HSBC and supermarkets, including Asda and Tesco.

## **Stagecoach bus drivers in Sunderland, UK reject new pay offer and plan to resume strikes**

Around 250 drivers, engineers and cleaners at the Stagecoach bus company in Sunderland, England rejected a new pay offer and are set to renew strike action begun last month.

The GMB members want a 10 percent pay rise and walked out. The GMB suspended stoppages to put an inadequate new offer to the workers. This was rejected by a two-thirds majority and walkouts will recommence.

#### **Drivers for London's Metroline bus company announce strike dates**

Around 2,000 bus drivers employed by Metroline in the UK capital will hold seven days of strikes in December over low pay.

The Unite union members will walk out on December 1-3, 8-9 and 15-16. Some of the drivers employed by the Singapore-based company are paid as little as £13.13 an hour. They rejected the latest company offer of 10 percent and nine percent on back pay.

Metroline covers north and west London. The Metroline strike will coincide with strikes by bus drivers working for Abellio, which operates in south and west London, on December 1-3. They are in dispute over pay.

#### **London Underground rail staff to strike over unfilled posts**

London Underground staff at several prominent stations are to strike Friday.

The RMT members at Victoria, Euston, King's Cross, St Pancras, Heathrow terminals and other stations are walking out to protest the non-filling of around 600 posts. The strike comes on top of an overtime ban begun Sunday.

#### **UK court workers set to strike over new computer court system**

Court associates and legal advisers working for the HM Courts and Tribunals Service across the England are to walk out on various dates between December 2 and 5.

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members oppose the introduction of a new computer court system, the Common Platform. Workers are concerned the new system increases their workload.

#### **Unite union calls off planned strike by food manufacturing workers in Spalding, UK as company makes new pay offer**

Unite called off a strike of around 700 UK workers employed by food manufacturer Bakkavor at Spalding, Lincolnshire, due to run from this Friday until January 2. The workers are considering a revised pay offer.

The workers originally voted to strike between November 1-9, after rejecting a 6.5 percent pay offer, but the strike was suspended after Bakkavor made an improved offer. However, the workers rejected the new offer.

Many of the Unite union members are currently paid only one penny an

hour more than the national minimum wage of £9.50 an hour. The company made £100 million in profits.

The factory makes food for supermarket giants such as M&S, Morrisons, Sainsbury's and Tesco. Bakkavor is currently considering closing one of its factories in Lincolnshire producing salads and one in Leicester producing desserts, leading to the loss of around 900 jobs.

Middle East

#### **Protest in Zarzis, Tunisia over drowned migrants**

Hundreds of protestors took part in a demonstration in Zarzis, Tunisia on Wednesday. They were demanding to know what happened to missing migrants lost in September trying to cross the Mediterranean when their boat capsized. The protestors included friends and relatives of the missing.

The boat was carrying 18 would-be migrants, many from the Zarzis area. To date 14 bodies have been recovered but only six have been identified. The protestors are angry at the negligence of the authorities in failing to find and identify most of the victims.

The protestors also called on the Tunisian General Labour Union in Zarzis to mount a general strike Thursday and Friday in support of the demonstrators.

Africa

#### **South Africa's public sector holds one-day pay strike, but unions oppose unity with striking taxi drivers in Western Cape**

Public sector workers walked out for a day of strikes and marches across eight provinces in South Africa on Tuesday. Workers in hospitals, schools and prisons opposed a three percent offer, and then the government's "final" pay offer of 7.5 percent. Hospital workers also demand more staff, proper functioning equipment, adequate medication and food supplies.

SABC NEWS reported that in Soweto, Chris Hani Road was blocked off to traffic, and strikers barricaded nearby Baragwanath Hospital's entrance with burning tyres.

Workers continued their protests at lunchtimes in defiance of an interim interdict obtained against striking workers by Gauteng Department of Health at the Johannesburg Labour Court.

Public service unions affiliated with Cosatu, the SA Federation of Trade Unions (Saftu), and the Federation of Unions of SA (Fedusa)—around 800,000 members—cancelled the strike in Western Cape, where taxi drivers are holding a stoppage.

The taxi drivers walked out Monday to protest Western Cape's decision to cancel its Blue Dot project to improve services and road safety. News24 reported buses being set alight.

Cosatu, Saftu and Fedusa issued a divisive statement condemning the "violent status of the Santaco [SA National Taxi Council] action," and declaring postponement of the public sector strike in Western Cape because "the safety of our members will not be guaranteed."

#### **South African Sunbake workers in Polokwane begin indefinite stoppage over pay and conditions**

Workers at RCL Foods' Sunbake operations in Polokwane, South

Africa began indefinite strike action on Monday over pay.

The General Industries Workers' Union of SA (Giwusa) members demand a R600 wage increase, overtime instead of commission for sales and medical insurance with contributions 50 percent paid by the employer.

According to Giwusa, the average wage is R4,700 before deductions, so workers, who support families up to 10, "cannot afford to regularly buy the bread they bake," while a "basic food basket costs R4,800."

A strike at RCL's Pieman's operations in August ended when the SA Industrial Commercial and Allied Workers' Union accepted a two-year deal of 12 and seven percent each year. Workers walked out demanding 36 percent over three years.

### **Hospital workers picket at Inkosi Albert Luthuli Hospital in Durban, South Africa**

Hospital workers picketed outside South Africa's Inkosi Albert Luthuli Hospital in Durban on November 18.

The National Education, Health, and Allied Workers Union members are threatening to strike over pay progression, not being paid on time, vacancies not internally advertised when existing employees could fill positions and management bullying.



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