

Healthcare workers across Europe strike over pay; further strikes in UK by Royal Mail and railway workers as nurses and ambulance workers announce walkouts; steel and car workers strike in Iran over pay; public sector pay strikes continue in South Africa

## 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.*

### Healthcare workers throughout Europe strike to defend pay, public services and staffing levels

Workers in hospitals and local clinics throughout Europe continue to oppose conditions in healthcare systems, which are deteriorating through underfunding and understaffing.

General practitioners in **France** began a two-day strike on Thursday, organised outside of the unions through the Facebook group “Doctors for Tomorrow,” which has nearly 15,000 members. Doctors from the group pointed out that new GPs often burn out quickly, overwhelmed by the amount of paperwork, and leave the speciality. They are demanding the flat payment they receive for a consultation be increased from 25 euros to 50.

The medical unions have suppressed the struggles of healthcare workers, especially since the start of the pandemic. In an attempt to stop medical workers from building a movement outside of their control, the unions also called their members to join the two-day stoppage.

Speaking with *France Bleu*, one striking GP said she worked 70 hours per week in order to have a good standard of living. Another said, “We work between 50 and 70 hours in a week,” and “there are around 15 hours per week of administration, we need to hire trained staff.” Doctors for Tomorrow has suggested calling an indefinite strike from December 26 if their demands are ignored.

French psychiatrists and psychiatric nurses also held a one-day strike on Tuesday, denouncing the “dilapidation” of the sector. According to *RTL*, the health unions are demanding an increase in pay of 25 percent in order to attract more people to the profession. They criticised the 800 new posts announced by president Emmanuel Macron as “less than one per centre ... and we haven’t seen a single one arrive!”

Workers in **Greek** public sector hospitals walked out Monday, Tuesday and Thursday this week against a new privatisation bill. According to *Kathimerini*, the bill tabled in the parliament would allow doctors in public hospitals to take private patients, and even treat them using the public hospitals’ facilities.

The Federation of Associations of Hospital Doctors of Greece, quoted by *ef.syn*, said “One word describes the bill. BLACKMAIL. Patients are being blackmailed into reaching even deeper into their pockets to pay for their health. Otherwise, they will be sentenced to many months, long waits for an examination, an operation, endangering their health and life. ... The doctors of the public health system are blackmailed, even if they ‘want’ to increase their income, to enter the market and use the public hospitals as a pool of clients.”

In **Spain**, doctors and paediatricians continue an indefinite strike begun in Madrid two weeks ago, demanding maximum ratios of patients to staff. The president of the Community of Madrid announced a number of measures including the hiring of 1,000 permanent workers and an end to temporary contracts, but according to *Europa Press* the unions called this “a hodgepodge” of promises already made and broken previously.

Doctors in the **Canary Islands** also begin an indefinite strike on Friday, accusing the government of “discriminatory treatment” and failing to fully implement a law against insecure contracts. The Union of Medical Employees of the Canary Islands (SEMCA) told *Europa Press* that 51 permanent contracts are still missing, and that the Canary Islands’ government had offered less favourable terms than the national government when converting temporary contracts to permanent ones.

Workers at four university hospitals in south-western **Germany** began a four-day strike on Monday, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported. The United Services Union (Verdi) called the walkout of around 2,000 workers during negotiations over pay, in which Verdi said it aimed to “permanently compensate for as much inflation as possible.”

The hospitals have offered a one-off payment of 4,200 euros, and an increase in basic wages of only six percent in a deal that will last until July 2024. This is an annual increase of less than four percent, well below 10 percent inflation. Verdi is calling for a 10.5 percent annual increase.

### UK nurses announce strike dates after historic vote over pay

Nurses in England, Wales and Northern Ireland will walk out in two 12-hour strikes on December 15 and 20.

The vote to strike by 300,000 Royal College of Nursing (RCN) members was the biggest in the union’s 106-year history. Under current

anti-strike legislation, ballots require a minimum 50 percent turnout to be valid. Of the 311 NHS trusts in England, around half reached the threshold, but all those in Northern Ireland and all but one in Wales passed it.

The RCN want a pay rise of inflation plus five percent. The Tory government offered a £1,400 rise, around four percent for most nurses. Inflation is currently over 14 percent. On average, most nurses have lost around £6,000 in real terms over the last 12 years.

The week of the nurses' strike will also see strikes by railway workers and Royal Mail workers.

### **Vote by UK health workers including ambulance staff to strike**

As well as the 100,000 RCN members set to strike on December 15 and 20, other health workers have voted in favour of striking. On Tuesday, Unison, the union representing many UK health workers, announced the results of its recent ballot of NHS workers.

Of those voting, around 81,000 (90 percent) were in favour of striking. Under anti-strike legislation, however, only eight trusts in England and none in Wales met the 50 percent threshold of members voting required for the ballot to be recognised. The ballot result is a vote of no confidence in Unison, with many workers correctly viewing it as an organisation that will not lead a successful struggle.

Ambulance workers including emergency call handlers, ambulance technicians and paramedics at ambulance services in the North East, North West, London, South West and Yorkshire were among those where the threshold was achieved. They will be taking part in stoppages in December, the first national ambulance strike for 30 years.

On Wednesday, the GMB union announced the result of its ballot of NHS members over pay. While it received overwhelming majorities for strike action in many cases, the threshold of those taking part in the ballot was below 50 percent. The GMB has not announced any stoppages at this stage, saying its National Committee would meet in the next few days to discuss its response.

### **One-day national stoppage in Italy**

On Friday, workers in many industries in Italy will join the one-day strike called by "grassroots" trade unions. The Italian media reported that many workers were expected to join in public services such as transport, as well as the private sector. A demonstration is planned in Rome on Saturday.

Under the slogan "weapons down, wages up," the unions involved are demanding a 12-euro minimum wage, stable contracts, measures against workplace deaths, price controls, investment in public services and an end to the shipment of weapons to Ukraine.

The unions have won support among many workers for denouncing the open collaboration of the main union confederations with employers, but their political orientation is based on putting pressure on the capitalist state to deliver reforms.

### **Metal workers hold five-day strike over pay in Bizkaia, Spain**

Metal workers in the Spanish province of Bizkaia began a five-day strike on Monday, demanding a pay rise which keeps pace with inflation.

The Biscayne Federation of Metal Companies (FVEM) offered an increase of only 14.7 percent over four years and promised to increase pay in 2026 in line with inflation for the previous four years if inflation is higher than the pay rises. But the current inflation rate of 6.8 percent would amount to price rises of 30.1 percent over four years, leaving workers struggling to pay bills for years and likely falling into debt, even if the 2026 promise is honoured.

The collective agreement will cover 52,000 workers in Bizkaia. Unions reported that 85 percent of workers joined the strike, while the FVEM claimed, on the basis of a survey of a small number of companies, that less than 20 percent joined.

### **Tens of thousands of workers at Spanish footwear companies strike over pay**

Around 28,500 workers joined a strike called this Thursday at footwear companies in Spain, according to comments by the unions published in *Europa Press*. The Workers' Commissions and General Workers' Union are negotiating a collective agreement with the employers which will cover 30,000 workers.

*Información* reported that the employers' association has offered a pay increase of only eight percent with inflation adjustments of up to 2.5 percent for each of the four years the agreement lasts. This amounts to a maximum increase of pay of only 15 percent over four years, while current inflation would see prices rise by 30.1 percent over the same period.

### **Strikes by construction engineers at UK refinery continue over pay, with further stoppages planned**

Construction engineer workers employed at the Fawley petrol refining facility near Southampton, England began their latest strike on Monday. It runs until Saturday.

The 130 Unite union members and some GMB members were also on strike November 21-26. They are employed by contractors Altrad, Bilfinger and Enverveo to provide maintenance at the Exxon Mobil refinery site. They demand the restoration of a £2.37 hourly bonus payment, withdrawn with union agreement during the pandemic. Further strikes are planned, with a 48-hour strike beginning December 8, a week-long stoppage beginning December 12 and a 72-hour strike to begin December 19.

A Unite press release reported that on November 25, Hampshire police posted 60 officers at the picket line to prevent strikers from picketing and speaking to drivers entering the site. The same press release reported the use of agency staff on higher pay than the strikers to undermine the action.

Around 100 contract workers at the refinery carried out strikes earlier in the year over an inferior pay offer. The Unite union oversaw a return to work with a deal that fell short of the strikers' demands.

### **Strike over pay offer by chemical workers in Consett, UK**

Around 100 chemical workers at Thomas Swan in Consett, England walked out for 24 hours on Wednesday over pay.

The GMB members voted by more than 92 percent to reject a revised 5.1 percent pay offer capped at £1,500. Additional 24-hour strikes were announced for December 7, 14 and 21 and January 4.

Thomas Swan is an independent chemical company founded in 1926, exporting to 80 countries around the world. It produced hand sanitiser products during the lockdown stage of the pandemic. Following the decision to strike, the company cancelled all pre-booked leave over Christmas.

### **Collective bargaining strikes at wind turbine manufacturer Vestas in Germany continue**

Service technicians at the wind turbine manufacturer Vestas in Germany began a five-day strike on Monday, in a collective bargaining dispute now in its fourth week. The IG Metall union has called Vestas to begin direct negotiations with the union, according to the *Hamburger Abendblatt*, but the company says it prefers to negotiate with the works council.

Around 300 workers have joined the many strikes called since the start of November, out of 570 technicians employed at Vestas. Danish-based Vestas is the largest manufacturer of wind turbines in the world, employing around 30,000 workers worldwide.

### **Port workers strike to demand Portuguese government honours promise of early retirement**

Dock workers at ports across Portugal began a 48-hour strike on Tuesday, leaving the port in Lisbon “at a standstill.” The Union of Captains, Pilot Officers, Commissioners and Engineers of the Merchant Navy (OficiaisMar) said participation in the strike was almost unanimous, except where the government had imposed minimum service requirements.

According to *Lusa*, port workers are calling on the government to honour an agreement reached in 2019 that due to the “especially painful and exhausting nature” of their work they would be allowed to retire from the age of 60. OficiaisMar says that at a meeting on September 21, “it was clearly stated that the Government would not implement this agreement.”

### **Dutch trade union announces “secret strike” at postal company PostNL**

On Tuesday, the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV) announced that workers at PostNL, the formerly state-owned postal company, had carried out a “secret strike” in compliance with a draconian minimum service requirement imposed by the courts.

Last week a court in The Hague ruled that strikes could go ahead in a collective bargaining dispute covering 19,000 PostNL workers, but only if “essential” post still reaches its destination.

The FNV refused to challenge this effective strike ban, and admitting it conspired to ensure workers had no opportunity to fight it. *Nieuwsblad* quoted FNV director Mariska Exalto that only 33 workers were called to strike, and it was not publicly announced because “If there

is a strike and other employees get wind of it, they may want to join and then we have to disappoint them.”

### **UK teachers on the Isle of Man strike over pay and workload**

Teachers on the Isle of Man, a British Crown Dependency situated between England and Ireland, began a two-day strike Wednesday.

The NASUWT union members demand an improved pay offer, having rejected the Isle of Man government’s offer from the Department of Education, Sport and Culture, which for most teachers would represent a below-inflation rise of eight percent. According to the NASUWT, the real-terms value of teachers’ pay has fallen by 30 percent since 2010. They are also protesting excessive workloads.

Further strikes are planned for January 11-12 and February 15-16.

### **More strikes planned by Scottish teachers over pay**

Following the one-day strike by tens of thousands of teachers in Scotland on November 24, further stoppages are planned.

The walkout last week was the first national Scottish strike for nearly 40 years. The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) members rejected a five percent pay offer and voted by a 96 percent majority to walk out, demanding a 10 percent rise.

EIS members in two Scottish local authorities will walk out again each day for 16 consecutive days between January 16 and February 6. There will also be a Scotland-wide strike in primary and special schools on January 10, and in secondary schools on January 11.

Teachers belonging to the NASUWT union plan a stoppage on December 7-8, while members of the Scottish Secondary Teachers’ Association are to begin industrial action short of a strike on December 9 over pay.

### **Strike dates announced for UK civil servants over pay**

On Tuesday, the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union representing 100,000 civil servants announced strike dates.

The PCS members voted to walk out over a two percent pay offer. The union wants a 10 percent rise, improved pensions, job security and no dilution of redundancy terms. The PCS press release announced a rolling programme of strikes in just two of the 124 government departments that voted to walk out.

Civil servants in the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA), including driving test examiners and call centre staff, as well as those in the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) will be the first to take action, with a rolling programme of stoppages at different DVSA and RPA offices across the country from December 13.

In a video broadcast last week, PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka said other departments would be called out in the New Year, if coordinated action with other unions could be organised.

### **Eurostar train security staff to strike over pay**

Around 100 UK security staff employed by facilities management company, Mitie, are to strike over a below-inflation pay offer.

The RMT members provide onboard security on Eurostar trains, which run from London to Europe via the Channel Tunnel. The guards, some paid as little as £10.66 an hour, voted by an 81 percent majority for the stoppages. The strike dates are December 16, 18, and 22-23.

The first strike date coincides with a walkout by RMT members working for Network Rail and 14 Train Operating Companies. Mitie made £50 million in profits from March until September this year.

### **Train conductors in France strike to demand equal pay with drivers**

Conductors at French state-owned rail company SNCF begin a three-day strike on Friday morning, cancelling 60 percent of train journeys, *Le Figaro* reported.

A representative from the Sud union told *Ouest France* that conductors work the same schedules as drivers, but lose more pay if they have to take leave or are sick. He said the strike was first organised by a group of conductors outside the unions, who set up a Facebook group with thousands of members and asked the unions to call a strike. Further stoppages are planned for the weekends around Christmas and New Year's Day.

### **Refuse collection workers in Wirral, UK to strike over pay**

Around 200 refuse workers employed by outsourcing company Biffa on behalf of Wirral Council in England are to strike for higher pay.

The Unite union members work as HGV drivers, refuse collectors and street cleaners. They want a 15 percent pay rise to match inflation, which is eroding their real wages. Currently drivers are paid £11.95 an hour, refuse collectors £11.50 an hour and street cleaners £10.76 an hour. They are due to walk out from December 5 until December 10, with further stoppages if there is no resolution.

### **Strikes in Iran against low pay**

On Saturday, around 4,000 workers at the Steel Company in Isfahan walked out. They previously walked out November 15-16, calling for a 100 percent pay increase.

In meetings including workers' delegates and a Ministry of Labour representative, the ministry promised to implement their demands by Saturday but failed to do so, leading to the further walkout. The steel workers say they are paid less than those at other steel plants, with wages not covering basic essentials.

Also on Saturday, car workers at the Iran Automobile Company walked out over delays in the payment of wages dating back nine months. On November 24, car workers at the Cruise car parts factory held a further strike calling for a wage increase.

### **Strikes by Iranian truckers in support of demonstrations against the killing of Mahsa Amini**

Iranian truck drivers began a strike on Saturday, which continued Monday, to support demonstrations against the killing of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini.

Mahsa Amini was arrested by the morality police for wearing the hijab "improperly." She suffered injuries in police custody resulting in her admission to hospital, where she fell into a coma and died three days later.

Trucks were reported parked up in the city of Isfahan in central Iran. According to social media, truck drivers in the cities of Qazvin, Kermanshah, Marand and Bandar Abbas joined the strikes. Strikes were also reported at the Pars home appliance factory in Qazvin and Safe Khodro car plant in the city of Karaj.

### **Police violence against workers on strike at Makro in Germiston, South Africa**

Police fired rubber bullets and injured 20 during a protest by workers on strike at retail giant Makro in Germiston, South Africa.

The South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (Saccawu) members walked out for two days on Black Friday for a pay increase of 12 percent, a sales commission increase of 20 percent, a R100 uniform increase and a thirteenth cheque at the end of the year.

*IOL* reported that owner Massmart's senior vice president, Brian Leroni, said, "Saccawu union officials at Makro have indicated privately that they know the company can't afford a 12 percent increase. This is perhaps best supported by the fact that Saccawu recently settled for a 4.5 percent increase at our Builders and Game stores."

### **Public sector pay strikes continue in South Africa**

The public sector workers' dispute in South Africa over a 10 percent pay demand and work conditions is continuing.

Public sector workers previously walked out for a day of strikes and marches across eight provinces in South Africa on November 22. Workers in hospitals, schools and prisons oppose a 7.5 percent government "final" pay offer. Hospital workers also demand more staff, proper functioning equipment, adequate medication and food supplies.

SA Federation of Trade Unions, the Federation of Unions SA, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union met November 29 to discuss further action.

### **South African postal workers' further strike over pay and jobs losses**

Workers at ailing South African Post Office (SAPO) began a two-day strike and held marches on November 24 over pay.

The Communication Workers Union members demand a 15 percent salary increase, a R900 housing allowance, a R2500 housing subsidy and that their working hours remain the same. Workers are also facing a 40 percent cut in the workforce, meaning 6,000 job losses. Unemployment stood at 44.1 percent as of June, according to *Moneyweb*.

Marches were held around the country, including the National Treasury, the Department of Communications in Pretoria and Parliament in Cape Town.

A union memorandum handed to the government said, “We call for Postbank to be reincorporated into SAPO. We also demand a bailout for SAPO considering the plight of workers.” Another demand is that the state-owned post office becomes the sole deliverer of parcels weighing 1kg or less.

According to *GroundUp*, SAPO has not paid employees’ medical aid contributions to Medipos medical aid provider or pensions.

### **Sudanese teachers hold nationwide strike to demand pay rise**

Sudanese teachers held a one-day national strike on November 28 to demand higher salaries and payment of benefits and allowances. Their eight demands include the rescinding of recent changes worsening teachers’ conditions.

The teachers formed strike committees in the different provinces to prepare for the strike and demonstrations and to build momentum.

In mid-October, the Sudanese Teachers’ Committee demonstrated outside the headquarters of the Council of Ministers in Khartoum to deliver a petition detailing their demands.

Teachers took nationwide strike action on March 10 against low wages, followed by further walkouts March 14-15. They were demanding a substantial raise in the minimum monthly salary to 24,000 pounds to offset the effect of rapid inflation.

### **Kenyan farmers and sugar mill workers protest unpaid wages**

Employees of Mumias Sugar Company and the sugar cane farmers who supply it came together in protest outside the sugar mill premises on November 24.

They demanded the owners pay their unpaid salary arrears, not paid since the former owners declared bankruptcy in 2018. The new owners, Uganda-based Sarrai Group, promised to pay the debts of the former owners when they took over the mill.

One farmer explained, “Mumias collapsed when I had just supplied sugar cane worth Sh340,000 in June 2018. When Sarrai Group and KCB came in, they sat down with us farmers and promised to pay our dues but that has never happened. I now don’t have money to maintain my 20-acre piece of land... I have suffered to [such] an extent I cannot pay school fees for my children.”

Patrick Mutimba, Chairperson of Mumias Sugar employees caucus, said Sarrai Group illegally locked them out of the premises despite owing them millions in salary arrears, citing labour laws forbidding removal from your place of work until all your dues have been paid. “We have not been paid since 2019. Our children have dropped out of school, and they are now chasing us away from the servants’ quarters [their homes] and we do not have money to pay rent elsewhere.”

The farmers also accuse local politicians of collusion with Sarrai Group.



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