One-day national rail strike in France following conductors' wildcat walkout; primary care doctors and paediatricians continue indefinite strike in Madrid, Spain, alongside other health workers; UK faces a surge of strikes in the run-up to Christmas over pay, jobs and conditions; three-day nationwide strike in Iran to protest killing of Mahsa Amini; lawyers boycott mass show trial in Chad that jails 260; Tunisian bakers' indefinite strike over subsidies

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

8 December 2022

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

New national rail strike in France following conductors' wildcat walkout

Rail workers in France joined a one-day national strike Wednesday, following the end of a strike by conductors over equal pay.

The three-day conductors' strike over the weekend was organised by a group of conductors outside the unions, who set up a Facebook group with thousands of members and demanded the unions call a strike.

Wednesday's walkout was called by three unions during pay negotiations with state-owned rail company SNCF. *Le Figaro* reported that SNCF offered an average pay increase of 5.9 percent, below current inflation of 6.2 percent. A strike notice was also filed for switch operators, who could walk out as early as next week over understaffing and low pay.

Primary care doctors and paediatricians continue indefinite strike in Madrid, Spain, alongside other health workers

Around 5,000 primary care doctors and paediatricians in the Spanish capital Madrid continue their indefinite strike, begun November 21, demanding maximum ratios of patients to staff. According to *ABC*, medical workers voted last week by a "tremendous majority" to reject the Amyts union's suggestion that they reduce the strike to one day per week.

Other healthcare workers in the Community of Madrid, which includes the capital and its surrounding municipalities, will hold a three-day strike from December 11, *Europa Press* reported. Rural care workers and phone operators will join the walkout.

In Barcelona, care home workers also held strikes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday this week. *Europa Press* reported that 400 workers joined a strike rally Monday. The CGT and Co.bas unions called the three 24-hour stoppages to demand a pay increase, more stable employment and a 35-hour week. Many workers are only able to find 20-30 hours of work per week from the private companies operating most of Barcelona's care homes, leaving them with a very low income.

Long-running bus strike in Zaragoza, Spain, suspended as works council signs sellout deal

The indefinite partial strike of bus drivers in the Spanish city of Zaragoza, running for almost two years, was suspended by the works council last week after it signed an agreement with the operator.

Drivers employed by private operator Avanza began walkouts in February 2021. They escalated their action to a six-hour stoppage every weekday from November 2022.

The deal between Avanza and the unions accepts a major loss of real pay. According to *Europa Press*, the total pay rise between 2020 and 2023 is 12 percent, with an inflation review clause for further pay rises if prices rise further than 12 percent. However, the total pay rise was capped at 75 percent of inflation. Total inflation since 2020 is already 11.6 percent, so workers are likely to make huge losses in 2023. Drivers will vote next week on whether to accept the deal.

Educators throughout Europe fight against poor pay and conditions

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Teachers and other education workers throughout Europe continue to fight against attacks on their pay and working conditions.

In **Hungary**, hundreds of teachers began a strike Monday, after thousands of teachers, pupils and parents protested at the weekend against the dismissal of striking colleagues during a long-running pay dispute. According to *RTL*, 832 teachers declared they would begin a strike this week, defying government threats that their stoppages are illegal. Parents planned to pay victimised teachers out of their own pockets, then sue the government to recover the money.

Many teachers were fired for defying minimum service requirements, and students and parents repeatedly protested, with slogans including "Hands off our teachers," and "Shame on [prime minister] Orbán."

Teachers in **Portugal** will begin an indefinite national strike Friday, demanding a pay rise, recruitment of more teachers, and improvements to job security and career progression. The Union of All Teachers estimates that more than 4,500 teachers will walk out. Other school unions called for a demonstration in Lisbon March 4.

In **Serbia**, teachers held a protest November 30, and a warning strike on December 1, to denounce violence in schools, after students assaulted a teacher in Trstenik.

The president of the Forum of Belgrade High Schools told *Danas*, "The school must be a safe environment so that when a parent sends his child to school, he does not have to worry about whether he will end up on the operating table, but also a teacher, when he comes to school, so that his family does not have to fear for his safety."

Gas workers in Sakhalin, Russia, strike over unpaid wages

Hundreds of workers in the Kirinskoye Gas Field, near the island Sakhalin off Russia's east coast, began a strike at the end of November over unpaid wages. The gas field produces hundreds of millions of cubic metres of gas per year.

According to *Sakh.com*, 1,500 workers stopped work at Neftegazkomplektmontazh LLC, a contractor for Gazprom, after the payment due in October was over a month late, and the payment for November did not arrive.

The strike ended after a visit from the local prosecutor's office, at which a number of promises were made. However, many workers wrote to *Sakh.com* to say they had received a small advance on their wages, but they had no confidence problems would be fixed in the future. Other correspondents denounced the working conditions in the Kirinskoye field, with poor food and regular power outages. One reported many workers becoming ill from what they believed was a COVID outbreak.

Workers at IKEA in St. Petersburg, Russia, demand employment rights

Workers at the branch of Swedish furniture giant IKEA in St. Petersburg held a warning strike last week, demanding the right to keep their jobs.

In June the company announced its plan to "reduce the scale of its business in Russia," firing ten thousand workers with only severance of seven months' pay by "voluntary agreement."

According to *Novyye Izvestiya*, workers at the St. Petersburg branch stopped work for an hour and posted photos of themselves protesting on social media to demand that they either keep their jobs or be given better severance payments.

Bus drivers begin indefinite strike in Vilnius, Lithuania

Around 500 bus drivers in Vilnius, capital of Lithuania, began an indefinite strike Monday over the system of pay and bonuses. According to *LRT*, the union representing Vilnius public transport workers demanded a 10 percent wage increase, which management agreed to as this is well below current 23 percent inflation.

The main issue behind the strike, according to *LRT*, is the system of bonuses, which can be 250 euros per month. But deductions are applied for being late, passenger complaints and other "breaches of labour discipline." The union accused management of making arbitrary decisions over bonuses.

Workers at De Bijenkorf department stores in the Netherlands continue pay strikes

Workers at the Rotterdam branch of De Bijenkorf, a department store chain in the Netherlands owned by the Selfridges Group, walked out on a "surprise strike" Monday, coinciding with the Dutch holiday of Sinterklaas, the *Algemeen Dagblad* reported.

Workers are demanding at least a 10 percent pay rise, as inflation is currently 9.9 percent and has been much higher for the past few months.

De Bijenkorf workers throughout the Netherlands have held multiple strikes in recent months, including on "Black Friday," in the dispute between the company and the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions.

Teachers in secondary schools across Scotland hold two days of strikes over pay

Hundreds of Scottish school teachers in dozens of secondary schools walked out Wednesday and Thursday, protesting a below-inflation pay offer of up to 6.85 percent.

The strike involved the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association (SSTA) and the NASUWT union. Teachers in the much larger Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) held a one-day strike November 24, that closed almost all schools across Scotland.

Strike by workers at UK homelessness charity over pay

Around 600 workers at the UK homelessness charity, Shelter, walked out Monday.

The stoppage of Unite members is due to last until December 16. The workers rejected a three percent consolidated rise plus a £1,500 one-off payment.

Some Shelter workers fear losing their homes because pay is not keeping up with rising rents.

Workers are striking in Aberdeen, Birmingham, Blackburn, Bournemouth, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Norwich, Plymouth, Sheffield and at its headquarters in Old

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Street, London.

Coffin makers for major funeral care company in Scotland hold further strike over pay

Around 50 coffin makers at Co-operative Funeral Care's factory in Bogmoor Place, Glasgow in Scotland began a seven-day stoppage Monday.

The Unite union members held previous walkouts beginning at the end of October. They voted by a 96 percent majority for the stoppage, rejecting a pay offer less than half the current inflation rate. An improved pay offer from the Co-op last week was also rejected. The site supplies coffins to the Co-op funeral business throughout the UK.

UK rail strikes over pay, jobs and conditions to continue over Christmas

Strikes by large numbers of workers in various industrial sectors, including rail workers, are planned for the two weeks leading up to the Christmas holiday.

Around 40,000 rail workers have been in dispute with 14 train operating companies (TOCs) since June, over pay and the attack on jobs and conditions. The Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members recently renewed their strike mandate to continue their fight.

Planned 48-hour strikes are scheduled for December 13 and 16, and January 3 and 6. However, on Monday the RMT announced rail workers will also walk out from 6pm on Christmas Eve until 7am on December 27. While trains do not normally run December 25-26, the strike will affect train departures on Christmas Eve and impact planned engineering work over the Christmas break.

The RMT informed Network Rail members it will hold a referendum on the company's final offer, with a recommendation to reject. The ballot closes December 12.

The smaller TSSA union, representing rail workers in office and administrative roles, called off planned action in December while it ballots its membership on the latest offer from the TOCs and Network Rail.

Drivers' union ASLEF currently has no scheduled stoppages, but its executive meets this week.

Ambulance workers in England and Wales to join nurses in pay stoppages

Around 10,000 ambulance staff in England and Wales at nine trusts are to walk out on December 21, and again on December 28.

The Unison, Unite and the GMB members rejected a four percent pay offer. The erosion of pay over years has led to staff shortages and added pressure to their workloads. This is compounded by the inability of ambulance workers to offload patients and A&E units quickly because of staff shortages in hospitals.

The Royal College of Nursing members in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are to strike December 15 and 20. They want a pay rise of five percent above current inflation, currently 14.2 percent. Nurses have seen their pay eroded and some resort to food banks. Around 100,000 nurses will make history in their first national strike.

UK Royal Mail stoppages continue over pay, jobs and conditions

Around 115,000 UK workers at the Royal Mail plan further strikes for improved pay and against attacks on jobs and conditions.

The Communication Workers Union members already took 12 days of strikes. They are set to walk out on Friday and then on December 11, 14, 15, 23 and Christmas Eve.

Civil servants to walk out over pay and job security

Civil servants in England will walk out to protest a two percent pay offer. The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) members want a 10 percent pay rise, job security and no cuts to redundancy terms.

Around 200 workers at four Department of Work and Pensions offices in Liverpool and Doncaster will walk out December 19-31. Driving examiners will mount rolling strikes from December 13 to January 16. National Highways Officers in the southeast will strike December 22-25, with Highways Officers across the country walking out on January 3-4. Highways Officers help maintain traffic flows on motorways and liaise with police in emergencies.

Border Force staff responsible for checking passports at ports and airports will strike December 23-26 and 28-31. Major airports including Gatwick, Glasgow, Heathrow and Manchester will be affected.

London bus drivers at Abellio and Heathrow airport baggage handlers to join pay strikes

Other workers taking action in the run-up to the Christmas holidays include bus drivers in south and west London. Around 1,000 Unite members at Abellio will walk out on 48-hour strikes December 9 and 16, as the company has not entered pay negotiations or put a pay offer.

Baggage handlers at Heathrow airport employed by Menzies Aviation begin a 72-hour stoppage December 16. The Unite union members are protesting a below-inflation pay offer. The strike will hit Air Canada, Swiss Air, Qantas and Aer Lingus among other airlines.

Engineers at UK rail company to hold further strike over pay freeze

Around 350 UK engineers working for Great Western Rail (GWR) are to hold a strike December 15.

The Unite union members previously walked out in October over the company's refusal to offer a pay increase for the third year in a row.

The engineers are based at depots in Bristol, Exeter, Oxford, Penzance, Plymouth, Reading, Swansea, Swindon and London. GWR is part of the First Group. In 2021/22, First Group made pre-tax profits of over £650 million.

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Housing officers at Bristol, UK council to hold further strikes

Around 50 housing officers and their team leaders at Bristol council, England are to walk out December 14-16.

The Unite union members are protesting unbearable workloads and want additional resources. Working with vulnerable tenants, their workloads increased by 64 percent last year. They took four days of stoppages in October.

Scottish airport staff to strike over pay

Staff at the Highlands and Islands Airports (HIAL) group in Scotland will hold 24-hour strikes December 19 and 22.

The Unite union members whose roles include fire and rescue, administration and security are protesting the offer of a five percent pay increase. They voted by more than 70 percent to take action. HIAL runs 11 airports, including Dundee, Inverness, Stornoway and Wick.

Energy workers at UK firm to strike after rejecting "final" pay offer

Around 200 workers at Texas-based energy firm Baker Hughes are to strike at the company's Walker site in Newcastle, England over pay.

The GMB union members rejected a second and "final" pay offer from the company of 4.5 percent plus a one-off lump sum. The workers who produce pipelines for the oil and gas industry are to walk out December 12-15, and again January 12-18.

Parking wardens in Wiltshire, UK to strike over unsocial hours payments

Parking wardens employed by Wiltshire council, England will walk out on Saturday for a week, resulting in the council losing an estimated £200,000 in lost parking charges.

The GMB members are protesting plans to cut the unsocial hours premium, which could mean them losing up to £2,000 a year. A planned strike in July was called off after the workers understood the plans to cut the unsocial hours payment would only apply to new recruits, and that the premium for existing workers would apply for their ongoing contract of employment. The council is now saying the protection was for only four years and will end in 2027.

Ballot of UK firefighters begins over pay

A ballot of around 33,000 UK firefighters and control room staff began Monday.

Fire Brigades Union (FBU) members voted by a 79 percent majority to reject a five percent pay offer and proceed to a strike ballot that closes January 30.

Firefighters held a rally and lobby of parliament in London Tuesday to mark the beginning of the ballot.

Three-day nationwide strike in Iran to protest killing of Mahsa Amini

Iranian protesters against the killing of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in September called for a three-day nationwide strike, which began Monday. They called on shops and businesses to close.

Reports say commercial areas in several cities including Isfahan, Mashhad, Shiraz and Tehran closed in response to the strike call. A third of shops in Tehran's Grand Bazaar heeded the call.

Industrial workers on strike included several thousand steel workers at the Isfahan Steel Company, Sanandaj Petrochemical workers, Sepahan Cement workers. In Mashhad, bus drivers were on strike. Workers at the Daroogar pharmaceutical plant also held protests over four months' non-payment of wages.

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.

Strike by Lebanese telecom workers over promotion procedures

Telecom workers at the Lebanese telecom firms Touch and Alfa declared an open-ended strike Monday.

They are demanding promotions and pay rises on a fair, transparent basis, as agreed in previous labour contracts. The caretaker minister for telecommunications, who had previously threatened to take legal action against the strikers, now said he is awaiting the results of negotiations between the companies and the workers.

Lawyers boycott mass show trial in Chad that jails 260

Lawyers in Chad refused to take part in a mass trial of 401 people at the Koro Toro prison on charges of unauthorised gathering and disturbing public order. The four-day trial ended December 2.

Those tried were arrested during anti-government protests October 20, when the ruling military junta promised to cede power. Around 50 people died, according to official figures, when police opened fire with live ammunition on demonstrators in the capital N'Djamena and other cities. Opposition groups say the death toll was much greater, accusing the military of a mass killing of unarmed civilians.

Many lawyers stopped work during the trial, after the Chad Bar Association denounced the proceedings as a "parody of justice" with defendants "kidnapped" and "deported" to Koro Toro prison. Sentences of two to three years in prison were handed down to 260 defendants, which will be appealed.

Tunisian bakers' indefinite strike over subsidies

Around 3,100 bakeries in Tunisia stopped work indefinitely December 7, to demand the government pays overdue subsidies. The strike involved

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90 percent of the state-subsidised bakeries.

A similar protest by national bakery owners' union members took place two months ago. Subsidies amounting to 260 million dinars have not been paid for 14 months. *APN* reported one baker saying, "We can no longer continue to work; we are unable to pay our workers and all our costs."

On December 5, wholesale distributors of medicines protested the ending of their exemption from government-required discounts, in place since 2006.

Public sector pay dispute continues in South Africa

The public sector workers' dispute in South Africa involving 800,000 over a 10 percent pay demand and work conditions remains unresolved. However, the union deadline of December 2 for a government response has now been and gone without further action being called.

Public sector workers 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 want more staff, proper functioning equipment, adequate medication and food supplies.

After a meeting of its executive committee December 1, the COSATU union federation said in a statement, "We reiterate our call on the government to sit down with unions… and engage in good faith to find an amicable solution to avoid labour instability in the public service."

The Public Servants Association's Reuben Maleka said, "Public servants' anger has reached an uncontrollable level and they are prepared for indefinite strike action. Workers are prepared to fight fire with fire and bring the country to a standstill."

Nigerian lecturers protest non-payment of salaries during eight-month stoppage

University lecturers at the Alex-Ekwueme Federal University at Ikwo and Ebonyi State University Abakaliki protested November 30 over the Nigerian Federal Government's withholding salary payments when they were on strike.

Nigeria's university lecturers walked out from February 14 until September 21, when the National Industrial Court issued a ruling demanding an end to the strike, with which the Academic Staff Union of Universities complied. The strike was to demand better salaries and funding, and for an end to problems with payroll software that caused years of late salary payments.

Under Nigerian law, payment is due to strikers unless the stoppage is deemed illegal or without foundation.

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