

UK strikes continue on railways and postal services as nurses begin walkouts over pay; one-day national strike against energy prices and pay rise cap in Belgium: protests in Syrian province Suweida over living conditions; many Kenyan health workers in Mombasa County defy court order to end strike; civil servants on five-day strike in Plateau State, Nigeria over unpaid wages and conditions

## Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

15 December 2022

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

### **UK rail workers begin programme of strikes and industrial action to last into New Year**

Around 40,000 UK rail workers held a 48-hour strike Tuesday, with another 48-hour walkout planned for Friday.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members have held strikes since June over pay, job losses and attacks on conditions. They work for Network Rail and 14 train operating companies (TOCs). In a recent ballot RMT members rejected below-inflation pay offers for this year and next. From December 18 until January 2 RMT members will ban overtime working, reducing the services the TOCs can run. There are 48-hour strikes scheduled for January 3 and 6.

### **24-hour pay strike by health workers in Northern Ireland**

Health workers in Northern Ireland staged a 24-hour strike Monday. Despite temperatures below zero, the workers held well-supported picket lines.

The Unison, GMB and Nipsa union members were protesting the imposition of a £1,400 pay rise for 2022/23. Nurses, ambulance staff, social workers and other health workers took part.

### **UK Crown Post Office workers strike over pay**

Around 1,400 UK Crown Post Office workers, along with administrative back-up staff, held a two-day strike on Monday.

This took to eight the number of strike days by the Communication Workers Union (CWU) members. Supply chain staff responsible for delivering cash to sub-post offices began a two-week overtime ban.

The Crown Post Office workers began their walkouts in May. In November, the workers renewed their strike mandate by a more than 90 percent majority. They oppose an inadequate revised pay offer of five percent for the year 2022-23, following a pay freeze for the year 2021-22.

### **Security staff at London luxury department store Harrods continue strike over pay**

Around 50 uniformed security and CCTV operators working at London luxury store Harrods are continuing their series of strikes.

The Unite union members rejected a seven percent pay rise, only half the current level of inflation of over 14 percent. They have held seven days of stoppages so far. They are scheduled to walk out Saturday and Sunday, and again December 23, 24 and 26, at the height of the Christmas busy period.

In 2021-22 Harrods reported profits of £51 million and doubled the pay of managing director Michael Ward to £2.3 million.

### **Staff at Manchester College in UK renew mandate to continue pay strikes**

Workers at Manchester College in England renewed their mandate to hold further stoppages over pay. The University and College Union (UCU) members voted by a 93 percent majority on a 60 percent turnout to

strike, both figures up on the previous vote in April.

The college lecturers have held eight days of walkouts since April against inadequate pay rises. For 2021-22 the college offered a one percent rise on top of a one-off payment equivalent to one percent. For 2022-23 the college offered a 2.7 percent rise for those earning more than £33,000 while those on less than £33,000 were offered a 4.5 percent rise plus a one-off payment equivalent to one percent.

The UCU is demanding a 10 percent pay rise. A UCU press release announcing the ballot result stated, "If we do not receive a fair offer, we will have no choice but to take escalating strike action in the New Year."

### **Midwives in Wales vote to strike over pay offer**

Midwives and maternity support workers in Wales voted by more than 90 percent in a ballot result announced Tuesday. The turnout was over 55 percent.

The Royal College of Midwives (RCM) members rejected the four percent pay offer from the Labour Party-controlled Welsh government. Midwives in England recently held a series of protests highlighting low pay and staff shortages putting pressure on the service. However, in a ballot of RCM members in England, the turnout was three percent short of the 50 percent legal threshold, invalidating strike action.

### **Physiotherapists in England and Wales vote to strike over pay**

Physiotherapists in England and Wales have voted to strike after rejecting a four percent pay offer.

Thousands of Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) members voted by over 80 percent to walk out. In both England and Wales, the turnout was over the legal threshold. The CSP has yet to make any announcement of industrial action. Physiotherapists say low pay is making recruitment and retention difficult.

### **Unite ends pay strike by UK rail workers employed by Network Rail**

Around 100 control room rail workers in the Unite union working for Network Rail will not be striking alongside their colleagues in the RMT union as they accepted a revised pay offer.

Rail workers in the RMT union began a 48-hour strike Tuesday, with a further strike due to start Friday and more action planned in January. The 20,000 RMT members at Network Rail rejected the revised offer by a 63.6 percent majority. The offer was for a five percent pay rise this year and four percent next year.

The control room staff are based in Brighton, Derby, Paddock Wood, Raynes Park, Romford, Selhurst Park and York. They control and manage the network's power supply.

### **National strikes and demonstrations in Italy against government budget**

Workers in Italy joined a series of rolling strikes this week against the far-right government's budget. The Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) and Italian Labour Union (UIL) called stoppages on different dates in regions throughout the country, demanding a decrease in taxes on workers' wages, improvements to job security and the right to early retirement, *ADN* reported.

### **One-day national strike to be held in Belgium against energy prices**

On Friday, workers throughout Belgium will join a one-day national strike and demonstration demanding energy price caps and the abolition of a law restricting wage rises. Belgian media report that major disruption is expected in public transport, schools, post, at Brussels Airport, in ports and metal companies.

In Belgium, pay rises are restricted by law, to ensure Belgian companies remain "competitive" relative to neighbouring countries. Workers' pay is supposedly protected by "indexation," an automatic pay increase in line with inflation each year. However, energy price rises are not included in the calculation of the index. As indexation is only calculated once per year for many workers, many are now struggling to pay hugely increased prices on wages that have not increased since January.

Employers are demanding that no pay increase above the index be allowed in the next two years. Many companies have gone further, proposing the government should allow them to "skip" the next inflation-linked increase or replace it with a one-off payment.

### **Widespread strikes by Spanish healthcare workers**

Health and social care workers in Spain continue widespread fights for safe staffing levels, secure contracts and against attacks on services and pay.

In the capital Madrid, around 5,000 primary care doctors and paediatricians continue an indefinite strike begun November 21, demanding maximum ratios of patients to staff. On Wednesday, thousands joined a strike rally in the city centre, *Europa Press* reported.

The Community of Madrid, which governs the capital and its surrounding municipalities, proposed limiting patient numbers to 34 per doctor per day, and 24 children per paediatrician, with doctors offered "voluntary" overtime shifts to cover the remaining patients. However, the strike committee said the proposal was not clear about what would happen when there were more patients than the ratios allow. They suspect the Community may use the excess of patients in the public healthcare system to introduce privatisation.

Workers in out-of-hospital emergency centres in the Community of Madrid also held a three-day strike from Sunday, December 11, calling for an increase in healthcare spending to 25 percent of the budget. It is currently only 11 percent.

They also demand an increase in staffing levels, and the reopening of 24-hour care centres at their pre-pandemic staffing levels. The Madrid Public Health Defence Committee also called a protest for this Saturday, telling *Europa Press*, "We say no to the closure of Primary Care centres and the persistent attack on this jewel of Madrid public health."

On Tuesday, workers in care homes in the province of Bizkaia also began a three-day strike, called by the LAB union. According to *Europa Press*, the LAB is calling for workers in privately run care homes to receive the same pay as their colleagues in the public sector. Another

union, ELA, has called a separate week-long strike from this Saturday in Bizkaia care homes, calling for better staffing levels and for “public management of residential centres.”

### **Signal workers begin strike at French national rail company**

Signal operators at French state-owned rail company SNCF began a strike Thursday evening, due to last until next Monday morning, demanding improvements to their working conditions, and changes to pensions and pay.

SNCF workers have held numerous strikes in the past weeks, including a one-day national strike last week, and a three-day conductors’ strike demanded by thousands of members of a Facebook group outside the unions.

### **Rail workers in southwest Germany strike for equal contracts**

Rail workers at state-owned Southwest German Regional Transport (SWEG) and its subsidiary Bahn Stuttgart (SBS) walked out for several hours on Tuesday, the latest of several short stoppages called by the German Train Drivers’ Union (GDL).

GDL suspended an indefinite strike in November declaring it wanted to give the company “breathing space... to admit the instability of their position.”

GDL members are demanding the collective agreement for SWEG workers also cover workers at Abellio subsidiary SBS, which was recently acquired by SWEG after it ran into financial difficulties. SWEG refuses to agree to this demand because it intends to privatise SBS.

### **Teachers hold one-day strike over class sizes in Berlin, Germany**

Around 2,500 teachers in Berlin joined a one-day strike on Thursday, the latest in a long-running campaign for smaller class sizes. The Education and Science Union (GEW) has called numerous warning strikes for this demand, while the Berlin Senate claims it is unable to put a maximum class size in the collective agreement.

The GEW told the *Berliner Morgenpost*, “In their election programmes, almost all parties are committed to the goal of smaller classes... But nothing has happened since the last election. On the contrary: The working conditions in the schools are getting worse, as the extremely high sickness rate proves.”

Despite the hostility of all parties in the Senate to the teachers’ demands, the GEW has continued to limit its campaign to short and isolated one-day stoppages.

### **Teachers in Greece hold new strike over pay, working conditions and categorisation**

Teachers held a one-day national strike in Greece on Thursday, demanding a pay increase, permanent contracts once teachers are

qualified, and the repeal of recently introduced assessments, which teachers say will lead to the division of schools into several tiers.

There have been several stoppages since the measure was introduced, and a number of teachers’ unions declared boycotts of assessments.

### **Workers hold two-day strike at Portuguese airline TAP**

Workers at Portuguese airline TAP began a two-day strike on December 8, cancelling around 860 flights. The National Union of Civil Aviation Flight Personnel (SNPVAC) said that TAP unilaterally cancelled agreements, which had cost the crew around 12 million euros.

The SNPVAC has said further strikes will take place in January unless the airline negotiates over pay and working conditions in the new collective agreement. TAP is 72.5 percent owned by the Portuguese state, and, according to Reuters, since receiving a 3.2 billion euro bailout it has cut 2,900 jobs and cut pay by 25 percent.

### **Metal workers walk out in Turkey, defying government’s “national security” strike ban**

Around 400 metal workers employed by multinational steel wire manufacturer Bekaert in Izmit, Turkey, walked out on strike on Tuesday, defying a government ban. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan signed an order Tuesday morning postponing the strike for 60 days—an effective strike ban—supposedly because it was “disruptive to national security.”

According to *Evrensel*, Bekaert workers are demanding a pay rise which actually keeps up with price rises, after the company imposed a rise in line with only the official inflation rate. Government-controlled TurkStat puts inflation at 84.4 percent, but the independent Inflation Research Group gives a figure more than twice that, at 170.7 percent.

### **Miners in Resavica, Serbia, hold daily partial strikes over pay**

Miners in the small coal-mining town of Resavica in Serbia are holding partial strikes of one hour each shift, to demand a pay increase and a hot meal from the state-subsidised company, Danas. The miners began their stoppages on December 9 to demand a meeting with Serbia’s minister for energy and mining Đedović.

According to *Central Media*, Đedović met with the Miners’ Union on Monday, and is meeting again on Friday. The union said that the strikes would continue until the next meeting, but that it expected the government would meet their demands.

### **Protest in Syrian province Suweida over living conditions**

Following a week of protests, demonstrators rallied outside the Suweida governorate office on Sunday, storming the building. They demanded the fall of the Syrian regime as they protested the poor living conditions and called for a general strike.

### **Tunisian bakery strike demands subsidies for bread-makers**

Thousands of bakeries in Tunisia stopped work on December 8 as part of a general strike to demand the payment of government subsidies owed for a period of 14 months—estimated to be 260 million dinars.

The head of the National Chamber of Bakery Owners, Mohamed Bouanane, said 90 percent of over 3,100 bakeries joined the strike. He warned, “We will continue the strike because we did not receive any positive response from the government.”

Tunisia is mired in a deep crisis, with regular shortages of basics including sugar, milk and rice, and an inflation rate of at least 10 percent and rising.

A similar strike was held at the end of October.

### **Strike by Lebanese telecom workers over promotion procedures continues into second week**

The open-ended strike by Telecom workers at the Lebanese telecom firms Touch and Alfa begun on December 5 has continued into its second week.

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

### **Strike by Lebanese judges continues over erosion of pay**

The strike by Lebanese judges begun in mid-August is continuing.

They are protesting the erosion of their salaries since the Lebanese economy went into free fall in 2019. To date the Lebanese currency has lost 95 percent of its value against the US dollar. Despite a doubling of public sector wages in September, the current average value of judges’ salary is only around \$160 a month.

### **General strike call in Jenin in the occupied West Bank in response to killings by Israeli army**

On December 8, a call for a general strike was made across the Jenin governate in the occupied West Bank.

It followed the fatal shooting of three Palestinians at the Jenin refugee camp by Israeli army personnel. Businesses, schools and stores closed for the strike.

### **Many Kenyan health workers in Mombasa County defy court order to end strike**

Health workers in Mombasa County, Kenya ready to strike over delayed and unpaid salaries were served a court order proclaiming their strike illegal. Many doctors, nurses and clinical officers, however, defied both the order and union instructions to comply with it.

Many health workers refused to report for work as instructed. Services were reported as “minimal” with only emergency cases attended, meaning that many workers defied the unions’ surrender in the face of the court order.

On December 5, the unions issued a seven-day notice of impending strike action to the Mombasa County government. On December 9, the court order was issued. The Mombasa governor, Abdulswamad Nassir, pleaded with health workers to give his new administration time, while at the same time using the courts against them.

The national secretary-general of the Kenya Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentist Union, Davji Bhimji Atellah, said the salary delays were appalling and a great injustice which has continued for many years but, “We have been served with a court order that essentially stops the industrial action.”

### **Civil servants on five-day strike in Plateau State, Nigeria over unpaid wages and conditions**

Civil servants in Plateau State, Nigeria began a five-day “warning” strike on December 12. The Nigerian Labour Congress and Trade Union Congress members are angry after the state government failed to pay their salaries or release their deductions—including their contributory pensions—for three months.

On December 8, the union leaders wrote to the state government warning they would call a strike if the outstanding salaries were not paid. The unions said the government failed to honour an agreement made with them.

The chairman of the Joint National Public Service Negotiating Council Titus Malau listed the grievances as, “Non-payment of salaries for three months from September 2022 to date; lack of release of Salary Structure to guide salary computation; non-release of third-party deduction from August 2022 to date and non-release of promotion and annual increment with its arrears in full respectively. Others include non-payment of January and February 2022 annual increment arrears.”

Malau said “of all we have discussed and agreed on, nothing has been done.”

### **Judicial support staff strike in Malawi**

Judicial support staff in Malawi, including court marshals, clerks and messengers, began a nationwide strike on December 12. On the first day of the strike, more than 60 cases were suspended indefinitely.

The strike was caused by the government’s failure to heed workers’ concerns about their terms of service, revised every three years.

Andy Haliwa, a union spokesperson claimed the workers were “OK with that [lack of a pay rise] because we understand the economic situation now.” But he said there were a number of allowances that they depended upon, which were now being cut.

The strikers used branches to build barricades outside court buildings, preventing judges and lawyers from entering. They were reported to be spending time chanting slogans, chatting and playing football and netball around the court premises.

### **South African Makro workers to strike over pay**

South African Makro workers in Johannesburg planned a further walkout on Thursday over pay. Talks at the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration between the union and retail parent company Massmart broke down on Tuesday. Workers at other Massmart companies are expected to strike in solidarity.

The South Africa Commercial, Catering, and Allied Workers' Union members work at Game, Builders Warehouse, Rhino, Fruitspot, Shield and Jumbo.

The workers, in dispute for most of this year, demand an across-the-board increase of R900 or 12 percent, whichever is greater, a minimum wage of R8,000, an increase in sales commission payments to 20 percent, a thirteenth monthly cheque, and a moratorium on retrenchments for the duration of the agreement.

The workers held nationwide marches outside various Makro branches on Black Friday. Some workers were injured at the Germiston branch as a result of a clash with police.

According to the company, wage negotiations were closed for 2022 as 800 workers resigned from the union because they accepted Massmart's pay offer including nine months' back pay. Makro has almost 3,000 employees.

### **Sacked South African electricity supply workers at Eskom demand reinstatement**

Around 80 Shoprite truck drivers protested outside the Brackenfell, Cape Town distribution centre in South Africa December 8, demanding all drivers have a fixed basic salary and transport allowance.

Intermittent picketing by Shosholozu Workers Union of South Africa members went on throughout the week. The dispute has been ongoing since July.

Drivers are paid per hour. They must work a minimum of 195 hours a month including overtime to get a basic salary, and to make up for any time lost through sickness or leave.



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