

Strike wave continues across UK in run-up to Christmas; French railway conductors continue strikes organised outside the official unions; strikes and protests continue in Iran; port and railroad workers walk out across South Africa

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

22 December 2022

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

Run-up to Christmas sees strike wave continue across UK

Tuesday saw the second 12-hour strike by nurses in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Tens of thousands of Royal College of Nursing members took part across England where the threshold turnout of 50 percent was reached in the ballot for industrial action. Nurses, having seen a fall in the real-term wages over several years and chronic staff shortages, oppose the government-imposed pay rise of around four percent for most nurses and want a rise of inflation plus five percent.

On Wednesday, tens of thousands of ambulance workers in the Unite, Unison and GMB unions in England and Wales walked out in opposition to the four percent pay offer. Those taking part included call handlers, emergency care assistants and paramedics. Around 10,000 GMB members will strike again on December 28.

Sections of civil servants, members of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union, also walked out. Driving examiners working for the government Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency at various centres throughout the country are taking part in ongoing action. This week the areas affected were north west England, Yorkshire and the Humber. The PCS members are holding stoppages over pay, job losses and cuts to redundancy terms.

Other PCS members striking this week are highway workers in London and the southeast, who will walk out from Thursday until Christmas Day (inclusive). Border Force staff at major airports will stop work December 23-26.

Royal Mail workers are set to walk out Friday and Saturday. The Communication Workers Union members are calling for a pay increase and opposing Royal Mail's plans to cut jobs and change working conditions.

Rail workers in the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union at Network Rail will continue their programme of strikes from Christmas Eve for four days. While train services normally do not operate Christmas Day and Boxing Day, Christmas Eve is usually very busy with people

going home for the Christmas holidays.

Additionally, bus workers at Abellio in London will strike Christmas Eve as part of a programme of strikes. This will impact routes in west and south London. The Unite union members are demanding an improved pay offer.

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 Glasgow, Scotland came out on strike Monday until Friday.

The Unite union members held previous walkouts from the end of October. They voted by a 96 percent majority to reject a pay offer less than half the current RPI inflation rate of 14.2 percent. An improved pay offer from the Co-op was also rejected.

The site supplies coffins to the Co-op funeral business throughout the UK. According to Unite, the dispute is likely to continue into a fourth month. The Co-op spent £1 million buying in coffins from a third party.

UK Rural Payments Agency staff hold further strike over pay

UK workers employed by the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) are on strike all this week.

The PCS members held walkouts last week and will be holding stoppages in the first two weeks of the new year. They are responsible for paying grants and subsidies to farmers and landowners.

RPA members voted to strike by a 91 percent majority on a 73 percent turnout. Along with other PCS members, the RPA workers are taking part in the strike of civil servants seeking an improved pay offer and protesting job cuts and proposals to cut redundancy payments.

Further stoppages by workers at Disclosure and Barring Service

office in Liverpool, England over pay and conditions

Around 80 UK workers employed by Hinduja Global Solutions (HGS) in Liverpool began a two-week strike on December 12.

The PCS members have already held four weeks of strikes since August. HGS is an Indian-based IT services management company, which provides contact centre and back-office facilities for the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS). DBS provides police check information on people wanting to work with children or vulnerable adults.

The workers began their stoppages after rejecting a 3.25 percent pay offer, subsequently raised to 3.5 percent. The owner of HGS is on the *Sunday Times* Rich List, with a personal wealth of £24.5 billion. HGS directors and top management got a 13 percent pay rise last year.

The strikers are demanding at least the Living Wage Foundation figure of £10.90 an hour, paid sick leave, 27 days' annual leave allowance, paid breaks and job security. They are due to begin an indefinite overtime ban from December 26.

UK train drivers announce further stoppage

UK train drivers at 15 train operating companies (TOCs) will hold a further stoppage on January 5.

The ASLEF union members are seeking a pay rise to compensate for the escalating cost of living, and not having had a rise since 2019. The strike, which falls between two 48-hour strikes by RMT members on January 3 and 6, will heavily impact rail services in the first week of the New Year.

ASLEF members recently renewed their strike mandate with a 93 percent majority of drivers voting for the action, an increase on the 85 percent majority for the initial stoppages.

Contracted-out UK rail cleaners set to strike over pay and conditions

Around 1,000 UK cleaners working for contractors providing cleaning services for rail companies such as Avanti West Coast, LNER and TransPennine are to walk out Thursday and Friday this week and again on December 31, seeking improved pay and conditions.

The RMT members, who work for contractors Atalian Services, Churchill and Mitie, are demanding £15 an hour, company sick pay and improved leave and pension provision. While some of the contracting cleaning companies are making in excess of £100 million in profits, many of their workers are on the minimum wage of £9.50 an hour.

UK rail workers in administrative and management roles announce further strikes over pay and conditions

Hundreds of UK rail workers employed in administrative and management roles announced strikes immediately after Christmas in their campaign for improved pay and against attacks on jobs and conditions.

The TSSA members at CrossCountry will hold a 24-hour walkout on December 26, while those working for Great Western Railways and West Midlands Trains will begin 24-hour strikes on December 28. In addition, TSSA members working for TOCs including Avanti, LNER and

TransPennine Express will carry out action short of a strike December 26-29.

Workers at UK Amazon plant vote to strike over pay

Workers at the Amazon fulfilment centre in Coventry, England voted to strike in the new year to demand £15 an hour.

Workers at the site took unofficial strike action in the summer, after Amazon announced it would only increase the basic rate of pay by 50p to £10.50. A ballot of GMB members resulted in a 98 percent majority on a 63 percent turnout. A previous ballot failed to achieve the 50 percent threshold. The GMB represents less than a quarter of the Coventry Amazon workers.

French railway conductors continue strikes organised outside the official unions

Conductors at the French state railway company SNCF begin a new strike from Friday to Monday, which is predicted to cancel around a third of train services.

Conductors are calling for bonus payments, which supplement their low basic wages, to count towards the calculation of their pension, and denounce poor working conditions.

The strikes were organised by the National Collective of Commercial Train Conductors (CNA), a movement which has distanced itself from the trade unions. Speaking to *Ouest France*, one co-founder of the CNA said that conductors set up a WhatsApp group to discuss working conditions, and it grew to a Facebook group with 3,500 members among the 7,000 SNCF conductors.

The CNA issued a demand that the unions file the necessary legal paperwork for the strike on their behalf but has not dissolved itself into the unions. An expert from the Higher Institute of Labour told *Ouest France* that the unions had filed the paperwork because, "It's a classic technique of the trade unions called 'capping the movement'. It consists of sticking to a movement which gets out of control, then trying to take control of it. That's not to say that it [the unions' taking control] is going to work."

Workers strike at Air France over contract negotiations, alongside other airline and airport workers

Cabin crew at Air France began a strike on Thursday, called by the SNGAF and UNAC unions, which represent 52 percent of the workforce, *Le Figaro* reported.

The unions are calling for Air France to negotiate a new collective agreement on pay and working conditions and extend the contract which expired in October until a new agreement is signed.

Air France announced in advance of the strike that it did not plan to cancel any of its flights for Thursday. The strike notice filed by the unions at Air France covers the period December 22 to January 2, and further stoppages can be called in that period.

At the low-cost airline French Bee, cabin crew also began a strike on Thursday, calling for a 12 percent pay rise. Inflation in France is currently

6.2 percent, further eroding workers' wages after French Bee pushed through a 20 percent pay cut during the pandemic.

Workers at Clermont-Ferrand Auvergne airport will hold a two-day strike over the Christmas weekend, with another 48-hour walkout planned for December 31. The General Confederation of Labour and French Democratic Confederation of Labour denounced the airport management for imposing a pay freeze for 2023, after "the salaries of some have already been cut by 20 to 30 percent" in the past two years, *La Montagne* reported.

Clermont-Ferrand Auvergne airport is operated by Vinci, a multinational company operating concessions in airports and other infrastructure, whose revenue for 2021 was more than 49 billion euros.

National rail strikes in Portugal over pay

On Friday, workers at Comboios de Portugal and Infraestruturas de Portugal, the state-owned companies respectively responsible for running and maintaining the railways, are set to walk out on a 24-hour strike over pay.

According to *Noticias ao Minuto*, eight unions called the stoppage to demand a bonus payment to make up for rising prices, and the "end of discrimination between workers."

The unions also called a ban on overtime and work on holidays and rest days from Friday, and will call a second walkout on December 26.

Doctors continue indefinite strike for maximum patient-staff ratios in Madrid, Spain

In Madrid, Spain, around 5,000 primary care doctors and paediatricians continue an indefinite strike begun November 21, demanding maximum ratios of patients to staff.

Around 400 joined a march in the city centre on Wednesday, denouncing the government of the Community of Madrid. According to *Europa Press*, slogans at the demonstration included "No more deaths due to precariousness," and "Today, when looting they call it 'privatisation'."

The Community of Madrid proposed some limits to patient numbers, but 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.

Retail workers in Germany strike against Amazon and Ikea

Retail and logistics workers in Germany are fighting against several big corporations this week, demanding higher wages and new collective agreements.

Workers at Amazon began another campaign of rolling strikes this week, walking out from several sites on different days in a long-running dispute over pay. The United Services Union is calling for Amazon to apply the same collective agreement as the rest of the retail and mail order sector.

On December 16, workers in Ikea furniture stores also walked out, demanding a new collective agreement over pay, but also expressing

concern about the company's digitisation plans. One striking Ikea worker, speaking to *taz*, said the new digital systems imposed additional burdens at work, and they were worried about increased surveillance and lower pay as the technology simplified work tasks.

Metal workers continue strike in Turkey, defying government strike ban and threats of dismissal

Around 400 metal workers employed by multinational steel wire manufacturer Bekaert in İzmit, Turkey continue a strike begun December 13 in defiance of a government ban.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan signed an order last week postponing the strike for 60 days—an effective strike ban—supposedly because it was "disruptive to national security."

Evrensel reported that striking Bekaert workers received a message threatening them that "if you continue to participate in an illegal strike, your employment contract will be terminated without compensation," but workers were not intimidated into ending their strike.

The paper also reported on Wednesday that workers at Bekaert's factory in Kartepe, near İzmit, did not go in for the evening shift during negotiations in which the company offered only an 80 percent pay rise, against workers' demands of 106 percent. The offer was below even the official inflation figure of 84 percent published by the government controlled TÜRKSTAT. The independent Inflation Research Group estimates inflation at 171 percent.

Numerous trade union officials visited the striking workers in İzmit, and top European bureaucrats from the IndustriALL global union confederation made demagogic statements of support. However, despite the outrage among workers at the government's strike ban, the unions have not mobilised their members in defence of the Bekaert workers.

Delivery workers in Cyprus strike against "medieval working conditions"

Delivery workers for the "gig economy" company Wolt in Cyprus began an indefinite strike on December 13, which ended after a week when the government began a meeting on a collective agreement for the whole sector.

A representative of the Pan-Cypriot Labour Federation (PEO) told *RIK* that Wolt workers had to buy their own vehicles and bear all the fuel and maintenance costs, as well as paying around 40 percent of their income as a "commission" to Wolt.

The PEO spokesperson also described "medieval" working conditions, in which workers were injured or killed in traffic accidents.

"Gig economy" delivery workers strike in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia

Delivery workers on the app-based delivery service Yandex Food began a five-day strike on Tuesday in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia, *Kommersant* reported.

The Courier trade union called workers to refuse to take orders, demanding an increase in the payment per delivery. Courier estimated that

around 600 workers in Moscow would join the stoppage.

School workers protest against low pay and funding in Bihor, Romania

On December 16, around 150 non-teaching staff from schools in the Romanian county of Bihor protested outside the county's prefect's building. One cleaner told *Bihoreanul* she was only able to work part-time and could barely raise her child on her income of 1,000 lei per month.

The president of the Bihor Free Education Union also told *Bihoreanul*, "The budget allocation [for education] is about 2.1 percent of GDP, the lowest in recent years, when we know very clearly that Article 8 of the Education Law says that it must be 6 percent of GDP."

Continuing strikes by Iranian workers

Different sections of Iranian workers continue to hold stoppages over pay and conditions.

On Saturday, oil and petrochemical workers at several facilities in southern Iran held a one-day stoppage against low pay and harsh working conditions, holding protests to promote their cause. Truck drivers already on strike continued their action.

On Sunday, firefighters in the city of Tabriz walked out in opposition to poor living and working conditions. They also oppose the use of temporary contracts. The same day Deholran cement workers walked out, protesting poor living conditions.

Three-day strike launched across Iran and East Kurdistan to protest killing of Mahsa Amini

A three-day strike was launched on Monday across Iran and East Kurdistan, protesting the killing of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in September.

Shops in East Kurdistan were closed in response to the strike call. Protests have been taking place for over 90 days over the death of Amini, affecting nearly 300 cities.

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. According to the Iran Human Rights Organisation, Iranian state forces have killed at least 469 people, including 63 children, in protests against the death of Amini.

General strike across Israeli-occupied West Bank following death in prison of Fatah leader

A general strike called by Fatah was declared across the Israeli-occupied West Bank on Tuesday, following the death of Nasser Abu Hamid in jail.

Hamid was jailed in 2002, accused of the death of seven Israelis in the second intifada. Hamid developed lung cancer in jail and Fatah accused

the Israeli authorities of delaying his treatment.

Israeli YMCA staff strike in Jerusalem to protest slow progress of new collective bargaining agreement

Around 200 striking YMCA staff in Jerusalem, Israel protested outside the YMCA premises on Monday.

They provide cultural, educational and sport services to thousands of residents in Jerusalem. The action was against the slow progress in negotiations over a new collective bargaining agreement.

Represented by the Israeli trade union body Histadrut, negotiations have been dragging on for three months. The workers, most of them on minimum wage, face attacks on their already minimum conditions.

Jordanian truck drivers' strike over high fuel costs

Truck drivers in Jordan went out on strike at the end of last week to protest the high cost of fuel.

Merchants and small businesses closed in support of the truck drivers, as they too are hit by high fuel costs. The strikes and protests led to congestion in the Red Sea port of Aqaba.

Bus drivers in Johannesburg strike for five days

Bus drivers working for the Rea Vaya bus service in Johannesburg walked out on strike last week for five days. They are members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU). According to media outlets this was over "undisclosed labour issues."

Sudanese teachers' strike extended in face of dismissal threats

Teachers in Sudan took part in a nationwide strike on December 13, continuing action begun earlier in the year. Teachers are demanding higher public spending on education, improved working conditions and an increase in the minimum wage.

The strikes are escalating after the authorities announced a derisory six percent increase in teachers' pay. The Sudanese Teachers Committee denounced statements by acting Minister of Education, Mahmoud Sirelkhitim, who threatened to dismiss teachers for going on strike. Sudanese Teachers' Committee member Kamaria Omar said, "Teachers will abide by the announced strike schedule during the month of December until all their demands are met."

Students at a number of schools in Ed Damazin, capital of the Blue Nile region, demonstrated against increased tuition fees. They are angry that fees have doubled since last year, and now stand at SDG10,000.

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

The United Nations Children's Fund reported serious concerns about

prolonged disruption to education in Sudan. At least one in three Sudanese children of school age does not attend school.

Workers in Plateau State, Nigeria shut down state government operations

Workers in Plateau State, Nigeria held a five-day strike on December 12 in response to non-payment of staff salaries and other welfare issues. The main entrance of the state assembly building was sealed shut, although members of the state assembly were able to access their offices.

The state government responded to the stoppage by giving itself the description of being “labour-friendly.”

Workers in Ghana to strike over government “debt swap” of their pensions

Workers in Ghana are to strike over government plans to carry out a “debt swap” as part of terms for receiving a loan from the International Monetary Fund. Ghana has been hit hard by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, despite rich natural resources including gold, oil and gas.

Yaw Baah, secretary general of Trades Union Congress told a press conference on December 19, “We have decided firmly that because the government has refused to grant us our request that all pension funds must be exempted from the domestic debt exchange programme, all workers of Ghana are going to strike on 27 December 2022.”

The unions attending the press conference included the Ghana National Association of Teachers, the Ghana Medical Association, the University Teachers Association of Ghana, the Ghana Registered Nurses and Midwives Association and the Teachers and Educational Workers Union.



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