UK ambulance workers hold one-day strike over pay as NHS staff prepare for further stoppages; protests and strikes continue in Iran over cost of living and police violence; health workers in Zimbabwe planning national pay strike face new anti-strike law

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.*

Doctors in Madrid, Spain resume indefinite strike over staffing levels and pay

Doctors in Madrid, Spain, walked out again on indefinite strike on Thursday. This follows the failure of negotiations between unions and the Community of Madrid, which administers the capital city and its surrounding municipalities.

Primary care doctors and paediatricians began an indefinite walkout over staffing levels and pay on November 21, which was suspended by the unions on December 22 until this week's meeting.

In December, the Community of Madrid offered to meet some of the doctors' demands on staffing levels, but the strike committee said it was unclear what would happen when there are more patients than the agreed staff-to-patient ratios allow. According to *EFE*, the Community offered a pay rise in the form of various performances bonuses—for treating more patients than the agreed 35 a day. The Amyts doctors' union called for an unconditional pay increase of 479 euros.

Workers in the emergency health services, both healthcare workers and operators of the 112-emergency number in the Community of Madrid, also held a three-day strike from Monday against reorganisation of services. According to *Europa Press*, workers denounced the 100 percent minimum service requirement imposed by the Community, effectively depriving workers of the right to strike.

Around 15,000 cleaners strike for new collective agreement in Castilla-La Mancha, Spain

On Tuesday, around 15,000 cleaners in the Spanish autonomous community of Castilla-La Mancha began a nine-day strike called by the Workers' Commissions (CCOO) union. Workers want a new collective agreement containing substantial pay rises, after their previous contract expired more than a year ago in December 2021.

The workers are usually employed by large cleaning companies, which receive lucrative contracts from hospitals, care homes and schools, as well as many private companies. *Europa Press* reported statements by the CCOO that these companies increased their profitability throughout the pandemic while workers were declared "essential" and forced to expose themselves to COVID-19.

CCOO also said the ASPEL employers' association, representing the larger companies, refused to agree any salary increase higher than two percent, and even demanded cuts to benefits.

The PSOE-led government in Castilla-La Mancha imposed minimum service requirements, preventing many workers from joining the strike. According to *Europa Press*, workers cleaning state-owned institutions were forced to provide the same level of service as on public holidays, and half the workers were prevented from joining the strike in all other institutions.

Unions in Spain and Belgium suspend strikes over Ryanair's alleged refusal to follow labour laws

Trade unions in Belgium and Spain suspended strikes against the low-cost airline Ryanair. Both strikes were called to demand the company comply with local laws over working conditions and minimum wages.

Belgian cabin crew held five days of strikes the past few weeks, during which the unions accused Ryanair of bringing in employees from other countries to break the strikes. The union representing pilots threatened to join the cabin crew in walking out if the company did this, but a joint struggle has now been blocked after the strike suspension was announced Saturday.

Also on Saturday, the unions representing Ryanair cabin crew in Spain announced they would not renew the strike notice begun on August 8, ruling out strikes in the near future. Spain's PSOE-Podemos government imposed draconian minimum service requirements, and Ryanair sacked at least 11 workers for refusing to comply with them.

The Belgian unions say that if Ryanair does not respond to their demands by the end of January, then it would "step up" walkouts by calling two days of strikes each month. *Het Laatste Nieuws* reported that

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Ryanair expects to make profits of between 1.325 billion and 1.425 billion euros in the current financial year, thanks to unions across Europe blocking an international strike to reverse cuts to pay and conditions by agreeing separate deals which take years to return wages to pre-pandemic levels.

Bus ticket inspectors hold wildcat strike against "reorganisation" in Liège, Belgium

Ticket inspectors on the TEC bus network in Liège, Belgium, held a wildcat strike on Monday against an announced "reorganisation." According to *BRF*, workers were opposed to the changes to their hours, and blocked two depots.

The walkout ended Tuesday morning, following talks between the union and TEC management. According to *Today In Liège*, a TEC spokesperson claimed the strike was "incomprehensible" because the reorganisation plan was "the culmination of more than 20 months of discussion with the inspectors' teams," likely referring to discussions with the unions.

24-hour strike over pay in Belgian prisons

Prison guards and other staff held a 24-hour strike, starting late on Thursday evening, in all Belgian prisons. The three unions who called the strike—following a walkout last November—called for a wage increase as workers in prisons "haven't received a pay rise for 20 years."

According to *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the police were used in some prisons to replace striking prison guards. The minister for the civil service, Petra De Sutter of the Green Party, said she could "understand" the demands for a rise, but one union official replied "[u]nderstanding is a nice thing, but it doesn't change anything in the wallet."

Municipal workers strike in Ostend, Belgium, against job cuts and privatisation

Municipal workers in the Belgian city of Ostend held a strike Monday to oppose the privatisation and job cuts agenda of the city government. The three unions representing workers accused the mayor of having "[n]o respect for social dialogue," *Het Laatste Nieuws* reported.

Around 400 people joined the strike and protests outside government buildings.

The city council announced it will reduce staffing levels by 3.5 percent, claiming this will be done without any compulsory redundancies. Having recently privatised the city's in-home care system, the council is also planning to transfer a local hospital campus from the control of the public Sint-Jan hospital to the Damiaan hospital which, according to the unions, "de facto also means privatisation."

Teachers in Portugal continue strikes against changes to recruitment rules

Teachers in Portuguese schools will continue their strikes against changes to the rules governing recruitment into February.

The Independent Union of Teachers and Educators (SIPE) said there was a "strong turnout, which was even surprising" in response to strikes called at the start of this term by SIPE and the Union of All Teachers (STOP). Around 80 percent of teachers joined at least partial stoppages, *The Portugal News* reported.

SIPE has called a partial strike, with each teacher stopping work for one class per day, while STOP called for a strike by teachers and other school workers throughout January. Members of SIPE will continue their strikes until February 8, and members of the National Federation of Teachers will also join an 18-day walkout from January 16.

Transport workers strike over pay in Paris, France

Workers at the Autonomous Parisian Transport Administration (RATP), the state-owned company which operates public transport in the French capital, began a strike on Thursday evening, which will last until Saturday morning.

According to *CNews*, RATP workers are calling for a pay rise of 300 euros per month, after the company made millions in profits from its Paris operations for 2022.

The General Confederation of Labour (CGT) wrote in a letter to the new CEO of RATP—former prime minister Jean Castex—that the company had mostly paid one-off bonuses which did not deal with permanently increased prices, so "the consequences of inflation will continue to hit." CGT representatives said a "big rally" is planned for Friday afternoon.

Shoe-making workers strike over pay in Adana, Turkey

Workers in the Sar?yakup District of the Turkish city of Adana, where there are many shoe-making companies, are continuing a strike begun on January 2, calling for a 120 percent increase in the piecework rate.

The official inflation rate is 64.3 percent, according to the government-controlled Turkstat, but the independent Inflation Research Group estimates inflation at 137.6 percent.

According to *Evrensel*, the employers in the Sar?yakup District announced a month-long lockout after the strike began. One worker told the paper, "If they don't give us our right, we will stop work for two months." Workers rejected the offer of a 30 percent raise now and 30 percent in July.

UK ambulance workers hold one-day strike over pay as NHS staff prepare for further stoppages

Around 20,000 ambulance staff including paramedics, medical technicians and drivers across Wales and most of England walked out on Wednesday. The East of England Ambulance Trust was the only English ambulance trust not involved in the dispute.

Unison members walked out from 10am until 10pm, while GMB members held a 24-hour stoppage from midnight to midnight. Ambulance workers are seeking a pay rise, dismissing the government offer of 4.75 as inadequate in the light of inflation running at 14 percent. The starting pay

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of a paramedic is only £25,655. They are also concerned that because of low pay vacancies are high, putting pressure on the remaining workers. There are around 3,300 vacancies for ambulance staff in England.

Ambulance workers are concerned that the crisis in the NHS is leading to delays in handing over patients at A&E departments, meaning they are unable to respond to other urgent demands.

Ambulance staff held strikes in December, and further strikes are planned. Ambulance staff represented by the Unite and Unison unions are due to strike on January 23. The GMB is yet to announce further action.

Nurses will strike again on January 18-19. Tens of thousands of Royal College of Nursing (RCN) members in England, Wales and Northern Ireland held 12-hour strikes on December 12 and 20, the first strikes in the RCN's history. Rejecting the government's derisory four percent pay rise, nurses are seeking a 19 percent rise. RCN leader Pat Cullen however indicated the union leadership is ready to accept 10 percent. Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting said Labour rejected the 19 percent demand and would expand the use of the private sector.

UK nurses are paid less than in most European Union countries, the US and Australia and there are around 47,000 vacancies due to low pay and burnout.

Pay ballot of UK doctors opens

A ballot of around 45,000 junior doctors in England began on Monday. It runs until February 20.

The British Medical Association (BMA) members are protesting a two percent pay rise. According to the BMA, the pay of doctors has been eroded by around 26 percent in real terms since 2008. Should the doctors vote for action, a 72-hour strike is planned in March.

Further stoppage over pay by London bus workers at Abellio

Bus drivers working for Abellio in London walked out last Thursday, following a two-day strike last week.

The Unite union members demand an improved pay offer. Abellio employs 2,500 to run services across central, south and west London. The strike meant only a quarter of the normal number of buses ran on Wednesday. Previous strikes took place in December, and more stoppages are planned on January 16, 19 and 25-26.

UK logistics workers at ArrowXL, Liverpool continue pay strikes

Around 350 logistics workers at Arrow XL based in Liverpool, England are continuing stoppages for better pay that have been taking place for over 11 weeks.

The Unite union members have held stoppages each Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday since October 24, demanding improved pay. Working as drivers, warehouse and customer care staff, many are on the minimum wage. XL's highest paid director earned nearly £540,000 last year. XL workers are also striking at depots in Enfield, Wigan and Worcester.

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

The Unite union organised a series of protests at various Aldi stores across England and Wales this week to highlight poverty pay. Dressed as Robin Hood figures the protests accuse Arrow XL Logistics of robbing poorly paid drivers to enrich highly paid directors. Aldi is a major customer of the delivery firm.

Arrow XL is part of the Logistics Group Holdings Ltd owned by Sir David and Frederick Barclay.

Strike by teachers in Scotland over pay

Teachers in primary schools across Scotland walked out on Tuesday over pay. Their colleagues in secondary schools were on strike Wednesday.

The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), NASUWT, the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association and the Association of Head Teachers and Deputies members rejected a five percent pay offer from the Scottish government. They are demanding 10 percent. The latest government offer upped the amount to 6.85 percent for the lowest paid teachers.

A meeting on Monday of the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers, which included the unions, local authority and Scottish government representatives failed to come up with anything the union could try and sell to the membership. The EIS, the largest union, is due to continue the strike action next week, with a rolling strike of teachers in different Scottish local authorities on different days.

Stoppage by construction workers at Scottish pharmaceutical site over bonus pay

Around 40 construction workers employed by contractor Kaefer Limited to provide construction services at the GSK pharmaceutical plant in Irvine, Scotland, began a two-week strike Monday.

The Unite union members are seeking a £2.37 an hour bonus payment, the maximum allowed under the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry. Following the strike, an overtime ban will be in place until April 2.

Strikes by ferry workers in Northern Ireland over pay

Workers on the ferry service between Rathlin Island and the Northern Irish mainland are striking four days a week throughout January, in a dispute over pay.

The Unite union members are walking out on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays throughout the month. They want a cost-of-living increase after enduring a three-year pay freeze. Rathlin Island is the only inhabited island off the Northern Irish coast.

Health workers in Northern Ireland vote to strike over pay

Health and social care workers at five NHS trusts and the ambulance service in Northern Ireland voted to walk out over pay.

Around 4,000 Unite union members will hold a 24-hour stoppage on

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January 26, followed by 48-hour stoppages on February 16 and 23. They rejected a below-inflation pay offer and will join health care workers in Unison, Nipsa and the GMB, who have held previous stoppages over pay.

Refuse workers in Liverpool, England to strike over pay

Around 80 UK workers employed by Liverpool Streetscene Services Ltd (LSSL) are to hold a one-week strike beginning January 23.

The Unite union members seek a four percent pay rise plus a £1,000 additional payment to offset the rising cost of living.

LSSL, which operates as a private company, is wholly owned by Liverpool City Council. The workers endure low pay. Refuse lorry drivers earn only £14.71 an hour, even though they must hold Heavy Goods Vehicle licences.

UK Environment Agency staff to strike over pay

Thousands of UK Environment Agency (EA) staff are to strike on January 18 over pay. It would be the first strike ever of EA staff.

The Unison union members rejected a derisory two percent pay rise plus a £345 payment, following years of failing to be given a decent rise. Last month, EA staff began a programme of working to rule. The walkout on January 18 will be from 8am until 5pm.

EA staff are responsible for the maintenance of flood defence systems, including the Thames Barrier, as well as being responsible for maintaining water quality, and monitoring pollution and conservation among other responsibilities. The agency employs over 10,000 people. Years of low pay has led to many vacancies, putting the remaining workers under further pressure.

UK staff at the Department of Education and the education standards body Ofsted set to strike

Staff at the Department of Education (DfE) and the education standards body Ofsted are to walk out on February 1.

They will join around 100,000 colleagues across many civil service departments where the turnout in the vote to strike was above the 50 percent legal threshold.

The Public and Commercial Services union members voted by an 88 percent majority to walk out in the fight for higher pay and the defence of jobs, pensions and redundancy terms.

Unite union pushed through below-inflation deal and calls off strike by waste site workers in Merseyside, England

The Unite union suspended a scheduled strike by waste and recycling workers employed by Veolia at 22 sites across Merseyside, England last week, after the firm made a new pay offer.

According to a Unite union press release announcing the deal, workers will get a backdated 10 percent rise for 2022/23 and an 8.4 percent rise for 2023/24. Inflation is currently over 14 percent. The lowest paid workers will get a £375 one-off payment. Workers voted to accept the offer.

Protests and strikes continue in Iran over cost of living and police violence

A January 7 press report stated that workers in 34 of the 37 oil platforms in the South Pars oil field, Iran were protesting for a third day over poor living conditions. The protests took the form of refusing to send the daily production reports necessary for maintaining production.

On January 5, the political editor of *Etemad* newspaper was arrested, his mobile phone and notebook confiscated. According to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, 80 Iranian media workers have been arrested.

These arrests occurred in the wake of the death in custody in September of Mahsa Amini, detained 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.

On Sunday. the Iranian judiciary issued 10-year sentences to four Iranian protestors who had called for strikes by truck drivers over the death of Amini. Monday night saw demonstrations in several Iranian cities following the execution of two protestors.

Israeli civil servants in dispute with new coalition government over ministry reorganisation

The Israeli trade union body Histadrut and the Israeli Union of Government Employees have declared a dispute over plans by the new Likud-led coalition to unilaterally reorganise government ministries.

Around 70,000 civil servants are involved in the dispute. One government ministry slated for reorganisation is the Ministry of Economy and Industry. The new government is seeking to divide the ministry into three separate units. Negotiations between the government and the union are taking place, but if no progress is made the union could begin to take strike action in just over a week’s time.

Lebanese teachers strike over poverty pay

Teachers in Lebanon came out on Tuesday, planning to stay out until Sunday.

The League of Public Basic Education Teachers members are protesting low pay and poor working conditions. Protests took place in several cities in Lebanon, including Tripoli. The pay of Lebanese workers has eroded since the Lebanese economy went into freefall in 2019. To date the Lebanese currency has lost 95 percent of its value against the US dollar.

Health workers in Zimbabwe planning national pay strike face new anti-strike law

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State-employed health workers in Zimbabwe are being threatened with being fired, fined or imprisoned for up to six months if a planned national strike goes ahead.

Health workers want wages increased to US$540 a month, which the government said it cannot afford. Nurses are paid less than US$100.

On Tuesday, the draconian anti-strike Health Services Bill came into force. Strikes by health workers classed "essential" must be declared 48 hours in advance and are limited to 72 hours in duration. An internal government memo said strikes will be "almost impossible…HSC [Health Services Commission] has the power to deregister any member from professional body registers after disciplinary procedures."

Power cuts in Durban, South Africa lead to street protests

Ongoing power cuts in Maryville, Durban in South Africa which left the area in darkness led to massive street protests last week.

Residents burned tyres and blocked roads, as the power cuts meant not only trying to manage in the dark but having to throw rotting food away.

One worker told *IOL* news, "Our lives have been thrown into disarray. We have had to throw away some food because it is going rotten, as our fridges are off. Paraffin and candles are not only expensive, but also dangerous, because they can result in houses burning down."

Students back lecturers exam boycott in Taraba State, Nigeria

On January 9, lecturers at the Taraba State University in Jalingo decided to boycott examinations at the start of the year.

The Academic Staff Union of Universities, Non-Academic Staff Union and Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities members are protesting the failure of university management and the state government to pay staff their entitlements for 10 months. Students responded by blocking major roads into the city.

"Instead of addressing our demands and secure our future, the governor ordered police to teargas us on our way to the Government House to register our protest," said one student. Students carried placards demanding better treatment of university staff.

Egyptian cement workers hold sit-in to protest against working conditions

Cement workers at Misr Cement, Qena in Egypt began a sit-in protest at their workplace on December 31, demanding improvements in working conditions. Last month, the workers held a protest to demand payment of unpaid bonuses since 2016 and to oppose the company's refusal to raise their wages despite high inflation.

Misr Cement was established in May 1997, with a capital of 600 million Egyptian pounds. Several protests by its workers have occurred since then. One in 2011 contributed to a fall in the company's profits by 16 percent.

In Egypt last year there were 8,041 violations of workers' rights, with 254 cases of unfair dismissal and 214 cases of forced resignation, according to data compiled by the Centre for Trade Union and Workers Services.

Unions call off Malawian teachers' pay strike

Unions in Malawi have called off the planned pay strike by teachers and civil servants, due to begin January 9, after meeting with a government negotiating team.

Teachers were threatened by management with disciplinary action if they walked out over pay falling behind the cost of living.

Since December, the Civil Service Trade Union (CSTU) and Teachers Union of Malawi (TUM) had claimed they would call off the planned action only after the government addressed their demands. Reports made no mention of changes in management's position.

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