

National one-day strike against pension reforms in France; doctors strike across Spain over staffing levels and pay; UK health workers' strikes over low pay and staff shortages continue; protests continue across Iran over police murder of Mahsa Amini joined by cost-of-living strikes; strikes by Lebanese workers in response to ongoing economic crisis

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.

National one-day strike against pension reforms in France

Workers throughout France walked out on a one-day national strike on Thursday against government plans to raise the minimum retirement age by two years.

Estimates from union figures say that nearly two-thirds of teachers joined the strike, transport workers brought many services to a halt nationally, and *Le Figaro* reported that fuel shipments were suspended at refineries. The General Confederation of Labour (CGT) union estimated more than a million people joined demonstrations. More than half a million signed a petition against the reform.

The government is determined to push through its reforms despite overwhelming public opposition, with polls showing around two thirds against the measure. The mass protests show the determination of French workers to defend their pensions, but the unions have limited the struggle to the single day walkout.

Government spokesman Olivier Véran implied the state would repress any movement that went further than mere symbolic demonstrations: “Debating, expressing oneself, demonstrating: yes. Block the country and the daily life of the French, no.” More than 10,000 police were deployed to the demonstrations, against the alleged presence of “radical elements” and “yellow vest” protestors, referring to the social media-coordinated protests in 2018-19, which were brutally repressed by the police.

Doctors strike across Spain over staffing levels and pay

Doctors in Spain continue a widespread wave of strikes over low staffing levels and pay.

In Madrid, primary care doctors have been on indefinite strike since January 12. *Europa Press* reported that around 30,000 people protested in the capital on Sunday, demanding the resignation of the president of the Community of Madrid and that more money be invested in public health.

Madrid doctors have been fighting since November 22 for maximum staffing ratios of 35 patients per day for family doctors and 25 for paediatricians, and an unconditional pay increase of 479 euros. On December 22, the unions called off a previous indefinite strike, until new negotiations with the Community failed last week.

Healthcare systems are deteriorating in every autonomous community across Spain, but the unions have divided healthcare workers regionally. In Aragon, the unions called off a planned doctors' strike after agreeing with the government to establish maximum ratios of 35 patients for family doctors and 28 for paediatricians, with “voluntary” extra consultations for additional patients.

The unions and Aragonese government agreed to increase the health budget by 25 percent over four years—the equivalent of a 5.7 percent annual increase, equal to the current inflation rate, although prices rose by more than this over 2022.

Primary care doctors in Andalusia also begin an indefinite strike this Friday, demanding increased staffing levels. The government agreed minimum service levels with the Union of Primary Care Physicians of 100 percent for emergency healthcare and 40 percent for consultations.

La Nueva España reported that healthcare workers will also strike in Catalonia on January 25-26, and Extremadura on January 26-27. It also listed strikes in Valencia—planned to start this week—delayed to March 6, a one-day stoppage in Navarra on February 1, and a demonstration by doctors in Galicia planned for February 12.

Greek municipal workers strike to end unsafe work after colleague's death

On Tuesday, municipal workers in Greece held a one-day national strike to demand enforcement of health and safety measures, following the death of a colleague.

On January 8, Eleni Karagiannis, a mother of five working in the municipality of Xylokaastro-Evrostina, was killed when a car collided with her bin lorry.

According to *Ef.Syn*, the Independent Labour Inspection Authority found that Karagiannis and the two colleagues with her at the time were uninsured and undeclared employees. The Panhellenic Federation of Employees of Local Government Organisations revealed that all three were hired on contracts lasting just five days, and denounced a “big cover-up.” The municipality was fined a mere 31,500 euros, which could be reduced further if the two survivors of the crash are given contracts, although a criminal investigation is still possible.

Striking municipal workers denounced unsafe conditions, which have seen 64 of their colleagues killed since July 2014 and 102 seriously injured, *Ef.Syn* reported.

Italian steel workers demand state investment to save plant

Steel workers in the Italian city of Taranto began a strike late on Wednesday night, to last until Friday morning, demanding the state intervene to protect jobs at the Acciaierie d'Italia plant.

Acciaierie d'Italia, formerly known as Ilva, is 38 percent-owned by the state and 62 percent-owned by multinational steel company ArcelorMittal.

Il Quotidiano di Puglia reported that around 750 workers, including many who were laid off when Ilva went into administration, came to Rome to protest on Thursday, during a meeting between the government, ArcelorMittal and trade unions. Most of the unions demanded the state take a majority share in Acciaierie d'Italia, using the 680 million euros it plans to invest.

Portuguese teachers escalate strikes over pay, workload and career progression

Teachers in Portugal began a stoppage on Monday, due to last until February 8, called by eight unions including the National Federation of Teachers (Fenprof). Fenprof had not joined strikes called by the Union of All Teachers since December 9.

At a rally on Saturday, tens of thousands of people protested in support of teachers and education—more than 100,000 according to the organisers and 20,000 according to the police, *ZDF* reported.

According to the *Anadolu Agency*, an entry-level teacher in Portugal earns just over 22,300 euros per year, barely half the average of other western European nations. As well as pay rises, teachers called for extra staff to reduce class sizes, and a change to career progression rules.

Although teachers assessed as “Excellent” or “Very Good” in professional evaluations are supposed to be automatically promoted, *Lusa* reported teachers complaining that there are quotas for assigning these grades, so many teachers are given poorer evaluations than they should and cannot be promoted.

Regional transport workers strike over pay in the Netherlands

Thousands of transport workers in the Netherlands began a two-day strike on Thursday, after the Association of Public Transport Employers (VWV) and Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV) failed to reach an agreement in collective bargaining negotiations. The agreement covers 13,000 transport workers.

According to *De Telegraaf*, thousands of FNV members will strike throughout the country, apart from at the national rail company NS and transport workers in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and The Hague, where the unions negotiate separate agreements.

The VWV called the strikes “incomprehensible” since its offer of an 8 percent pay rise was “above average.” While it may be above the deals forced on many other Dutch workers, eight percent is below the current inflation rate of 9.6 percent, and would leave transport workers worse off.

Delivery workers strike in Bursa, Turkey after meagre pay rise

Delivery workers for the Turkish e-commerce platform Trendyol held a two-day strike in the city of Bursa on Monday, after the company raised delivery fees from 14 lira per package to only 18 lira, a mere 28.6 percent rise.

Officially inflation is 64.3 percent, but the independent Inflation Research Group estimates annual inflation at 137.6 percent.

Workers speaking to *Evrensel* described unbearable working conditions and below-minimum-wage pay. During designated “flaming hours,” in blocks of five hours on weekdays and seven on weekends, they were obliged to take on any delivery and could not even stop for a toilet break. *Duvar* reported that workers are demanding, among other things, a minimum daily pay of 1,300 lira, abolition of the “flaming hours,” maximum distances, and that the company pay for health insurance.

Workers threatened further strikes if their demands are not met by Monday.

Gig economy taxi drivers strike in Sweden

Taxi drivers working at gig economy app-based companies Uber and Bolt held a 24-hour strike in the Swedish cities of Stockholm and Malmö on Tuesday, demanding a higher price per ride and for the companies to take a smaller fee.

The Taxi Union called for all Uber and Bolt drivers to disconnect from the apps for 24 hours, estimating a large number of their more than 500 members would do so. According to *di.se*, drivers for Uber and Bolt are formally self-employed, paying employers' taxes and costs themselves.

UK health workers' strike over low pay and staff shortages continue

On Wednesday, thousands of nurses began a two-day walkout over a pay offer worth around four percent. RPI inflation is over 14 percent.

The action of the Royal College of Nursing members followed one-day strikes on December 15 and 20, the first in the union's 106-year history. This week the strikes were limited to 55 health trusts across England.

The real terms value of nurses pay has fallen by 20 percent since 2010, leaving some relying on food banks. Many nurses have left the profession and the number of vacancies is rising, putting further pressure on those

remaining.

On January 19, 1,000 ambulance workers in Unite walked out in Wales. Also on Wednesday, the GMB union announced a further series of stoppages by more than 10,000 ambulance workers in their fight for improved pay. Following strikes earlier this month, the GMB announced stoppages on February 6 and 20, and again on March 6 and 20 at eight ambulance trusts.

Additionally West Midlands ambulance staff will walk out on January 23, and those at North West Ambulance Service will stop work on January 24.

On February 6, nurses will join ambulance drivers and call handlers in the biggest NHS strike in its history.

The Unite union, which also represents ambulance workers, will meet this week to set new dates for further strikes.

While the government is bringing in further anti-strike legislation, the unions refuse to mobilise their members in united action and have already agreed to accept a below-inflation pay award if only the government will engage with them in talks.

Fight of teachers for improved pay continues across the UK

Teachers in Scotland began a rolling programme of stoppages on Monday until February 6, with strikes in two of Scotland's 32 local authorities per day until February 6 and a further 22 days of rolling strikes to begin at the end of February.

Last week, Educational Institute of Scotland members walked out against a pay offer from the SNP government of five percent, rising to just 6.5 percent for the lowest paid.

On Monday, the result of the ballot of teachers in England and Wales was announced. The National Education Union (NEU) members in England voted by more than 90 percent to strike, while those in Wales voted by over 90 percent to strike. Support staff also voted to strike by more than 80 percent majorities in both England and Wales, but the turnout in England fell below the 50 percent level set by Tory anti-trade union law.

The NEU press release announcing the result calls for a fully funded pay offer of 12 percent against the government's imposed five percent, which has to come out of existing school budgets.

The union announced seven days of stoppages in February and March. The first will take place on February 1, affecting 23,400 schools in England and Wales, coinciding with a day of action organised by the Trades Union Congress against the new anti-strike laws stipulating minimum service levels on strike days, including in education. Individual schools will only be affected by four days of stoppages. The other education unions, the NASUWT and NAHT just missed the 50 percent threshold.

The unions see the limited action as a last resort, in order to pressure the government to negotiate.

Strike of UK Environment Agency staff over pay

Thousands of UK Environment Agency (EA) staff walked out on Wednesday protesting a two percent pay rise plus a £345 lump sum. They have imposed a work to rule since December in their fight for improved pay.

The stoppage by Unison union members is the first in the agency's

history. According to Unison, since 2010 the pay of EA staff has fallen by around 20 percent in real terms. Many staff rely on food banks in the escalating cost-of-living crisis. Low pay has also led to staff leaving and vacancies rising, leading to low morale.

EA staff are responsible for protection of the environment, including monitoring waterways for the risk of flooding and pollution. On the eve of the stoppage, the agency issued around 70 flood warnings and over 110 flood alerts. Normally EA staff would be monitoring possible flood events in person, but during the strike the EA will have to rely on instruments being triggered automatically to monitor any possible danger.

Abellio bus workers strike in London, UK as struggle enters third month

Around 2,000 bus drivers at six garages in south and west London run by Abellio took strike action Thursday. This was the nineteenth strike day as drivers entered their third month of walkouts. They are demanding £20 an hour for all drivers, along with improved overtime rates and an end to punishing work schedules.

The weekend before, WSWS reporters visited Armstrong Way garage to speak with workers about the dispute. One told us, "I believe all the drivers should be paid fairly. 18 pounds is nothing. After bills and taxes and rent there's nothing left. If a flat is £1500 a month, you don't even make £2000 working on £18 a hour. Drivers should be on £20 an hour. We get less break than other companies and I think that's discrimination. We do the same job and the same hours. It's not fair.

"They're paying agency drivers to cover the strikes but they're not paying their own drivers."

He added, "The union has been very lazy on fighting for wage agreements."

The strike on Thursday had a widespread impact, hitting 60 bus routes in the capital.

Bus driver John spoke to WSWS reporters on the picket line at Abellio's Walworth garage. He said, "We want more pay. We are the lowest-paid company. We want them to equal us with the other companies. We want to strike until they back down."

He added, "I don't see why rest day pay should be the same as normal day work. And we are night drivers. The difference between day and night drivers is not good enough. It's £1.50. We don't have pay reflecting unsociable hours."

Asked about how low pay was affecting drivers, John explained, "It's difficult. We have to pay mortgages, rents, energy bills—all gone up. Where are we meant to get that extra money? We don't have it. We want the company to fork it up."

Company profits and dividend payouts were "a big, big issue. If they can afford to pay people big money, and the directors' bonuses, then they can afford to increase our wages as well. We're the ones working for them, producing that money. There's no way they can say they cannot afford to pay.

"Everybody is suffering. People going to food banks. People don't have the money they need. And then the government is sitting there, not wanting help. So we have to strike. It's hurting our pocket, but we have to sacrifice to get somewhere, otherwise we won't get anything at all."

Speaking about the Conservative government, John said, "Look at how much they are earning, including outside Parliament through donations and fees. They don't care about the common workers at all."

On its proposed anti-strike laws that will impose minimum service levels across many sectors, he said, "If the government bring that legislation to stop people from striking we will go back to the 1990s and

the poll tax—what happened, there was a big riot. And I'm sure that will happen again. When you are at breaking point, what do you do? Defend yourself.

“If the government bring that in, we will say ‘okay, arrest all of us, where are you going to put us all?’

“If they impose on us that we can't strike, then we go to the Parliament, everybody stops working, and we see who wins.”

Community charity workers in London borough walk out over staffing levels

Community support charity workers employed by Hestia Hounslow LIFE in the UK capital began a week-long strike Monday.

The Unite union members offer support to adults with mental health and addiction problems and provide immigration and language services. They are protesting understaffing and changes to working practices. A protest outside the Hestia charity headquarters took place on Wednesday.

Further strikes by UK court workers over new computer system

Around 300 UK court associates and legal advisers working for the HM Courts and Tribunals Service at around 80 courts across England and Wales continued their series of strikes with a walkout on Saturday, following a strike the previous Saturday.

The PCS union members oppose the introduction of a new computer court system, the Common Platform, because it increases their workload. They voted by a 97 percent majority for the stoppages.

The action follows walkouts at courts in England December 2-5, and again at courts across England and Wales on various dates from December 24 to January 4. Further stoppages are planned for January 21 and 28.

Strike of library staff in London opposing job cuts

Library staff working for Hackney Borough Council in London walked out on Monday over plans to cut 19 full-time equivalent posts.

The Unison union members held two stoppages last week and are due to strike Friday. Although the cuts involve 19 full-time equivalent posts, 44 jobs are under threat because of part-time working.

Strike by workers on the cross-London rail line over pay

Workers on the Elizabeth Line, which runs east to west through central London, walked out on January 12.

The RMT, TSSA and Prospect union members oppose a four percent pay offer for 2022. To date, none of the unions involved has announced further stoppages.

Dates announced of further strikes by UK train drivers

Train drivers in the UK will walk out again on February 1 and 3. The ASLEF union members have held a series of strikes since last year, the latest one a one-day stoppage on January 5.

ASLEF members renewed their mandate for the stoppages in December with a 93 percent majority, larger than the previous one.

The train drivers have endured a four-year pay freeze while inflation has soared, eroding their spending power. Yet ASLEF leader Mick Whelan is only calling for a “serious and sensible offer.” The ASLEF leadership has isolated the pay fight of train drivers from the assault on jobs, terms and conditions facing other rail workers.

The train operating companies affected are Avanti West Coast, Chiltern Railways, CrossCountry, East Midlands Railway, Great Western Railway, Greater Anglia, GTR Great Northern Thameslink, London North Eastern Railway, Northern Trains, Southeastern, Southern/Gatwick Express, South Western Railway (depot drivers only), SWR Island Line, TransPennine Express, and West Midlands Trains.

The rail workers' ongoing dispute over pay, major restructuring including job losses and the further expansion of driver only operated trains is under threat as the RMT leadership considers a substandard deal following talks with the rail companies last week.

UK university academic staff to hold further strikes over pay, pensions and casualisation

A strike of UK university academic staff was announced for February 1.

The University and College Union (UCU) members oppose an imposed three percent pay rise, as well attacks on pensions. They are also fighting the increasing casualisation of academic jobs. They rejected a revised pay offer of four to five percent.

UK academic staff have been involved in a long-running dispute over pay and pensions. A further 17 days of strikes are planned in February and March. UCU members held three days of strikes this academic year.

Long-distance bus drivers at UK firm to ballot over pay

Around 3,000 UK bus drivers working for West Midlands National Express are to ballot over pay.

The Unite union members, some of whom are on as little as £11.80 an hour, recently rejected an eight percent pay offer for 2023. The company returned profits of £15.8 million in the first half of last year.

Around 200 engineers responsible for maintaining National Express's fleet of 1,200 coaches, including most of the West Midlands coaches, recently balloted over pay. The ballot closed on Wednesday.

Protests continue across Iran over police murder and cost of living

Protests continue after more than 125 days across Iran, sparked by the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini at the hands of the morality police for wearing her hijab “improperly.”

The protests have been joined by various other protests over the living conditions of masses of Iranians. On Tuesday, fresh strikes by oil and gas workers broke out, joined by official Oil Ministry employees. Aghajari oil and gas workers rallied to push for improved pay and working conditions.

On Tuesday, farmers in Isfahan rallied outside the governor's office to protest against corruption. They demonstrated again on Wednesday.

Reports speak of the deaths of over 750 people to date as a result of the protests, with 30,000 arrests.

Strikes by Lebanese workers in response to ongoing economic crisis

Telecom workers employed by the Lebanese Ministry of Telecommunications were scheduled to strike Tuesday, protesting non-payment of wages.

Last week, Lebanese teachers were on strike against low wages and poor working conditions. On Wednesday, they held a protest outside the Ministry of Education. The Lebanese economy is now in the fourth year of a crisis which has left 80 percent of the population living in poverty.

Lebanese teachers earn three million Lebanese pounds a month, but because of the erosion of the Lebanese currency this is only equivalent to \$70 US. Lebanese teachers held sporadic strikes last year, with the last one lasting more than one month. Following that strike, the Education Ministry promised to triple teachers' salary and pay a monthly incentive bonus of \$130 as well as a transport allowance. However, the incentive bonus has not been paid and the value of the transport allowance has been eroded by inflation.

Sick-out protest by Israeli chicken production inspectors over new collective bargaining agreement

On Sunday, around 45 veterinary inspectors in Israel, who oversee production in chicken processing facilities, reported in sick.

They work for the Veterinary Inspection Corporation and chicken meat processing cannot take place without their presence. The rate of inspectors reporting in sick was nine times the average rate last year. The sick-out is a protest in response to the corporation bringing in a new collective bargaining agreement.

Industrial action threat by Israeli teachers over failure of Finance Ministry to negotiate over pay

The chair of the Israeli Teachers' Association, Ren Erez, has written to heads and teachers in all post-elementary educational institutions threatening sanctions including strikes.

The Finance Ministry failed to abide by previous agreements made with the teachers' association. The National Labour Court ruled the Finance Ministry must meet with teachers' representatives to discuss a wage increase and improved working conditions. The Ministry of Finance failed to meet the teachers' representatives.

Protest in Syrian province over living conditions

A protest took place Monday in Sir Karama Square in the city of Al-Suwaydaa in southwestern Syria, protesting lack of rights and the dire

economic conditions, and calling for the release of detainees.

Organised by the Peaceful Movement, it was part of a series of regular protests taking place on Mondays.

Protests by Iraqi contract workers demanding permanent posts

Protests took place on Sunday in Baghdad and Dhi Qar in southern Iraq.

In Baghdad, contract transport workers demonstrated outside the Ministry of Transport's headquarters, demanding permanent contracts. In Dhi Qar, unemployed graduates protested outside the governorate's state-owned distribution company to demand jobs.

Africa

National shutdown day planned in South Africa over hikes in the cost of living

South African workers will join a national shutdown day on February 9, to protest the rising cost of energy, food and fuel. A march is planned in Cape Town.

The General Industries Workers Union of South Africa is calling for a national walkout, saying the ANC government is pursuing privatisation, which has led to a massive rise in prices.

The National Energy Regulator of South Africa agreed government energy supplier Eskom should increase its electricity tariff to 18.65 per cent. The Federation of Unions of South Africa told *eNCA* that not only will the price of basic goods and necessities increase further, but that citizens are already paying a high price for electricity they rarely use due to regular blackouts.

Workers who live in the Boksburg area of Johannesburg built barricades with burning tyres and rocks to protest against ongoing power outages, particularly in the Dawn Park and Klippoortjie communities.

Gravediggers strike in Tshwane, South Africa over unpaid wages

Gravediggers in Tshwane who have not been paid for over a month have taken strike action. Some families are arranging their own burials and hiring tractor loaders to dig the graves.

Kenyan medical staff ready for nationwide strike over cuts in allowances

Kenyan medical staff are ready to begin a nationwide strike over the decision of the Salaries and Remuneration Commission (SRC) to cut their allowances.

The Kenya Medical Practitioners Pharmacists and Dentists Union (KMPDU) says the SRC scrapped part of their allowances that was agreed in a collective bargaining agreement. KMPDU chairperson Dr Abidan Mwachi said the cut would see the members' salaries slashed by more than 50 percent.

Local government workers at council in Mozambique strike over unpaid wages

Local government workers of the Nacala Port Municipal Council in Mozambique, who have not been paid for the last two months, walked out on January 17. They also demand their end-of-year bonus, known as “the 13th month” payment since it is equivalent to an extra month of their basic wage.

The Mozambique central government claimed there was not enough money to pay bonuses. However, Maputo and Beira Councils indicated they will pay the bonus.

One striker explained, “We have no wages and there is no information about it. We know that wages are a sacred matter. We spent Christmas with nothing. This January, we have desperate children, since they do not know if they are going to school or not. We are hearing rumours that we won’t get paid until February.”

The strike takes place two weeks after employees of Maputo Municipal Council went on strike over new salary scales.



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