

French energy, refinery and dock workers strike against pension reforms; Spanish doctors continue widespread strikes over low staffing levels and pay; UK university academic staff, teachers, civil servants and train drivers to walk out in day of action; strike by Lebanese teachers continues over pay and working conditions; Makro workers in South Africa due to walk out as talks break down

## 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.*

### French energy, refinery and dock workers strike against pension reforms

Workers in energy and fuel refinery companies in France walked out on Thursday on a two-day strike called by the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) against the government's massively unpopular pension reforms, which would delay retirement by two years.

They were joined by a 24-hour strike of dock workers on Thursday, also called by the CGT.

During the mass one-day strikes on January 19 against the pension reforms, in which the CGT reported 2 million people joining demonstrations, the government's official spokesman Olivier Véran threatened workers who went beyond token stoppages and protests. "We do not confuse demonstration and the right to strike with blocking," he said. "Debating, expressing oneself, demonstrating, yes. Blocking the country and the daily life of the French, no."

The unions fully agree to keep the fight against the pension reform within acceptable limits. One CGT representative speaking to *Reuters* said, "The goal is to keep pressure on the government and to encourage workers from other sectors to mobilise... [but there is] nothing spectacular planned at our sites, no well-organised pickets or blockages."

*France Bleu* reported that the refinery strikes were carefully planned to avoid shutting down production, merely blocking (i.e. slightly delaying) shipments of fuel.

### Spanish doctors continue widespread strikes over low staffing levels and pay

Doctors in Spain are continuing a widespread strike wave over low staffing levels and pay, while the union bureaucracy is working overtime to preclude the development of a national movement by signing local deals.

Primary care doctors and paediatricians in Madrid began an indefinite strike on November 22. After the unions suspended it during the Christmas period, this has been running for seven weeks. Madrid doctors are fighting for maximum staffing ratios of 35 patients per day for family doctors and 25 for paediatricians, and an unconditional pay rise of 479 euros.

Healthcare workers throughout the Community of Madrid also held strikes on Monday and Wednesday against the reorganisation of the out-of-hospital emergency care system. Emergency phone operators in the privatised 112 service will begin an indefinite strike on January 30 against their transfer to a new hospital.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, thousands of doctors in Catalonia walked out over workloads and insecure contracts, and hundreds of nurses demonstrated in Barcelona on Tuesday against understaffing, low pay and insecurity. *La Nueva España* reported that official figures show there is a shortage of 24,000 nurses in Catalonia alone.

Health unions in two other autonomous communities, Andalusia and Extremadura, called off strikes this week, signing separate deals with the local governments.

### Teachers strike to reverse education cuts in Catalonia, Spain

Teachers in Catalonia, Spain, walked out on Tuesday and Wednesday, coinciding with a doctors' strike in the autonomous community, to demand additional staffing levels and the reversal of previous cuts to the education budget.

At joint protests with doctors, and in an occupation of the government's Barcelona Education Consortium building, teachers called for the

resignation of the Minister for Education.

The Catalan government imposed high minimum service requirements on the teachers' strike, *El Periodico* reported, so there were no school closures. The unions reported that around 20 percent of teachers joined the walkouts, and a number of secondary schools were affected by student walkouts in support of the teachers.

### **Three-hour national strike in Cyprus over cost-of-living payment**

Up to three-quarters of all workers in Cyprus, according to the unions, joined a three-hour strike on Thursday to demand the restoration of the "Automatic Price Index Adjustment" (ATA) system, under which wages were automatically adjusted in line with inflation.

ATA adjustments were suspended in 2013, during a national economic crisis when the European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund demanded austerity "reforms."

According to Reuters, a "transition agreement" from 2017, which increased wages by only half the rate of inflation each year, expired in December 2022. Employers are threatening not to reinstate any form of inflation adjustment. The Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry sent a letter to its member companies instructing them "not to make a unilateral agreement with the Trade Unions," *Politis* reported.

While the unions claim they will wage a fight to protect workers' wages, they were instrumental in the imposition of austerity in 2013 and have suppressed wages since. The *Cyprus Mail* quoted Averof Neofytou, president of the Democratic Rally party, this week: "With the harsh measures we took in 2013 to rebuild the economy, had it not been for the responsibility shown by the trade union movement, we would not have had the results... there occurred no social unrest, and this is to the credit of the responsibility of the trade unions." He added, "I feel confident that they will not demolish societal calm or the stability of the country."

### **Teachers in Hungary begin week-long strike over pay**

Teachers in Hungary began a week-long strike on Monday, the latest walkout in a long-running dispute over pay. As well as pay demands, the Teachers' Union and Democratic Union of Teachers called for the repeal of laws attacking the right of teachers to strike.

Students and parents have joined many of the demonstrations called during the strikes since September, supporting the pay demands and calling for reinstatement of the teachers sacked for defying draconian minimum service requirements.

### **Greek workers in municipal construction services announce paperwork boycott; plan strike against understaffing and degradation of services**

Workers in the municipal construction services throughout Greece began a campaign of boycotting administrative duties on Monday, called by three unions denouncing a government policy which "degrades public services and assigns responsibilities to private individuals," *Ef.Syn* reported.

Workers' demands also include improved staffing levels and

equipment, pay increases, and an end to privatisation and outsourcing. A one-day national work stoppage is planned on February 2.

*902.gr* reported that the government applied for a court order declaring the boycott "illegal."

### **Hundreds of workers strike over pay and working conditions at Berlin Brandenburg airport, Germany**

Workers at Berlin Brandenburg airport, the main airport for the German capital, held a warning strike on Wednesday, cancelling 300 take-offs and landings, *DW* reported.

The United Services Union (Verdi) called the stoppage during collective bargaining negotiations for the 6,000 workers at the airport. They demand a 500-euro monthly salary increase and an improvement to working conditions because the "strain is unbelievable, there is a lack of staff." Around 1,500 workers joined a strike rally in front of the airport.

Despite major participation in the strike showing enthusiasm for a fight, Verdi has only called a single one-day warning strike. A union negotiator told *dpa*, "We can already say that there will be no further strikes during the winter holidays."

### **Turkish metal workers' strike, begun in defiance of government ban, shut down by union**

Hundreds of metal workers in Turkey, employed by the French multinational Schneider Electric, began a strike on Monday, defying a government ban.

Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan signed an order before the beginning of the strike, imposing a 60-day postponement—an effective strike ban—supposedly because it was "disruptive to national security," as he did in December against a strike by workers at steel company Bekaert.

*Evrensel* published a quote from Erdoğan about the state of emergency imposed between 2016 and 2018: "Now, we are taking advantage of the State of Emergency to intervene immediately where there is a threat of strike."

On Tuesday, the second day of the strike, the Birlleşik Metal-İş announced a deal with Schneider and called off the strike. The union said on social media, "May our collective agreement be beneficial to [Schneider] workers and all metal workers," but it falls well behind prices which continue to rise at astonishing speed.

For the first six months of the deal, wages will increase by 46.3 percent plus 20 lira, and from March a backdated pay increase will be applied in line with official inflation. However, the official inflation rate in Turkey is widely mistrusted and several unions said they refuse to base their pay demands on it. Government figures show inflation at 64.3 percent, but the independent Inflation Research Group estimates it at 137.6 percent. This discrepancy will lead to a huge fall in Schneider workers' living standards.

On January 17, the 15,000 workers in France at Schneider Electric and its subsidiaries also held a three-day strike over pay, *Le Figaro* reported.

### **Waste collection workers hold wildcat strike against sacking of colleagues in Zagreb, Croatia**

Hundreds of waste collection workers in Zagreb, Croatia walked out in a wildcat strike on Monday, after three of their colleagues were sacked for allegedly failing to separate different types of waste.

Local politicians and the CEO of the state-owned Zagreb Holding service company accused workers of an “illegal” strike. Zagreb Holding agreed to reinstate the dismissed workers by Tuesday, but workers also refused to return to work until their other demands over pay were met.

The strike ended on Thursday, after the company agreed to provide improved equipment and free parking but said the demand for a 12 percent pay rise and a 200 euro supplement would be negotiated with the trade unions, *NI* reported.

The mayor of Zagreb declared the unions should pay the cost of workers’ wages and other expenses of the city, but the unions stressed that they did not organise any stoppage. A striking worker speaking to *Jutarnji* said many workers wanted to leave the union, as they thought their “representatives” should be doing more.

#### **UK logistics workers at ArrowXL continue strike over pay**

Around 200 non-academic staff at Imperial College, London, walked out on Monday protesting a 3.3 percent pay offer. RPI inflation is 13.4 percent, with food and drink at 16.8 percent.

The Unite union members work as cleaners, in maintenance, as security staff and technicians. They previously stopped work in November over the same issue and further strikes are planned.

#### **Staff at Sheffield College, UK strike over pay**

Around 200 UK teaching staff at Sheffield further education college walked out on January 20 over a 2.5 percent pay offer.

The University and College Union (UCU) members are to hold further stoppages on January 30 and February 7 and 9. They voted by an 87 percent majority for the industrial action, which includes a work to rule begun Monday.

#### **UK university academic staff, teachers, civil servants and train drivers to walk out in day of action over pay, conditions and anti-strike laws**

Around 70,000 UCU members will take part in the coordinated day of strikes on February 1. They will be joined by around 300,000 teachers in the National Education Union, around 100,000 civil servants in the Public and Commercial Services union and about 12,500 train drivers in Aslef.

The Trades Union Congress is mounting protests that day against the government’s minimum service level anti-strike proposals.

#### **London Underground drivers to hold stoppage over safety concerns**

Train drivers on the London Underground Bakerloo line are set to strike over safety concerns.

The Aslef union members voted by a 99 percent majority for the action. They are protesting management proposals that physical checks of trains about to go into depots or sidings at the end of service are dropped. Currently such checks are carried out to ensure no passengers end up in parked trains. London Underground is proposing the measure to cut costs.

As part of the action, the drivers will continue to carry out such physical checks and will strike on February 4 and 11.

#### **Further strikes announced by UK ambulance workers over pay and collapsing NHS**

Following Monday’s strikes by around 18,000 ambulance workers, members of the GMB, Unison and Unite unions, against the imposition of a four percent rise across England and Wales, further walkouts were announced.

The GMB union said its members at eight ambulance trusts across England and Wales will walk out on February 6 and 20 and again on March 6 and 20.

Unite announced dates for stoppages at six ambulance trusts in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in February and March, with some dates coinciding with the planned GMB stoppages. Unite is also balloting its members at another four ambulance trusts who could walk out in February if they vote to strike.

#### **Thousands of UK junior doctors vote to strike over pay**

UK junior doctors in the Hospital Consultants and Specialist Association (HCSA) union voted by 97 percent majority on a 75 percent turnout to strike over pay.

The HCSA has around 3,500 members. Junior doctors in the larger British Medical Association (BMA) with more than 40,000 junior doctor members are currently balloting to strike over pay. The ballot closes on February 20. Doctors demand the restoration of their pay level, which has declined by 26.1 percent since 2008/09 according to the BMA.

#### **Strike by Lebanese teachers continues over pay and working conditions**

The strike by Lebanese teachers against low pay and terrible working conditions is now in its third week.

With inflation in triple digits, teachers’ pay has been eroded as a result of the four-year ongoing economic crisis. The strike has had a major impact, disrupting education for 1 million school children.

#### **Protest strikes by Israeli high-tech workers against undemocratic judicial reforms**

High-tech employees held one-hour protest strikes on Tuesday to protest judicial changes by the far-right Israeli government.

The protests took place at the Sarona complex, a business park in Tel

Aviv, as well as at a high-tech complex in Herzliya and the Airport City business park. The strikes and protest were supported by high-tech companies who fear anti-democratic judicial changes deter investors in their companies.

### **United Nations Relief and Works Agency employees in Gaza strike to oppose union head firing**

Workers employed by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestine Refugees in the Gaza strip began a partial strike on Monday.

They are protesting the sacking of the head of the Employees Union in the Occupied West Bank. Those involved in the dispute work in schools, food distribution centres and funding centres. On Monday, workers walked out of the UNRWA regional office for an hour at 11am to hold a press conference in front of the office.

### **Makro workers in South Africa due to walk out as talks break down**

Workers at the cash and carry retail giant Makro in South Africa are due to walk out on Friday over wages and conditions, with marches and pickets planned at stores around the country.

The latest talks between the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (Saccawu) and owner Massmart Group at the Commission for Conciliation and Arbitration broke down last week.

The dispute over wages and conditions has been ongoing for nearly a year, with strikes and protests including battles with the police, who fired rubber bullets and injured 20 during a protest by strikers at Makro in Germiston.

Workers' demands include a pay increase of 12 percent, a minimum wage of R8,000, a sales commission increase of 20 percent, a R100 uniform increase and a thirteenth cheque at the end of the year.

According to Times Live, Saccawu said it will be "galvanising other stores within the Massmart Group and retail sector to join the strike through a secondary or sympathy strike. These companies include Game, Fruitspot, Builders Warehouse, Rhino, Shield and Jumbo."

Also in South Africa, a national shutdown against an 18.6 percent hike in electricity prices and energy blackouts by state-run Eskom is looming.

### **Nigerian airport workers strike over pay**

Employees of the Nigerian Aviation Handling Company Plc at the Murtala Mohammed International Airport, Lagos walked out on January 23 over a pay rise.

The workers are responsible for handling check-ins, boarding, and ramp services for many international airlines including Delta, Turkish Air, Ethiopian Airlines, Virgin Atlantic, Qatar, and Air France-KLM. Strikers told passengers they would not work or attend customers until their demands were met. Many of the Virgin Atlantic customers among the stranded passengers were students trying to return from Nigeria to schools in the United Kingdom. Cargo aircraft arriving in the morning could not be unloaded for hours due to the strike.

The strike was suspended after the National Union of Air Transport

Employees met with the Directorate of State Service and Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria. Management agreed to withdraw their threat of court action due to the lack of notice given before the strike but did not accept the union's demands.

### **Ugandan medical interns threaten strike unless allowances are paid**

Around 1,700 Ugandan medical interns are threatening a stoppage by the end of January unless their allowances are paid after three months of non-payment.

The interns can barely pay for food and transport to and from the health facilities. "We don't have money for rent or feeding because medical interns are not provided with meals and among other day-to-day activities that require money," said Dr. Kigozi Edwin, head of medical nurses.

Interns including doctors, pharmacists, and nurses are critical to the running of the health service.

### **Senegalese transport workers strike over lack of road safety**

The transport sector in Senegal ground to a halt on January 18, when workers went on strike over the lack of road safety, demonstrated by a deadly bus accident two days earlier in the area of Kaffrine. The accident cost at least 19 lives, bringing the death toll from road accidents to around 60 in a few days.

A number of unions came together to denounce government measures taken on January 9 to combat road insecurity. Data from the World Bank show that Senegal, with a population of 17 million, has 24 road deaths per 100,000 inhabitants annually.



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