

Striking Scottish teachers join half a million workers in coordinated national strike across UK; teachers' strikes continue in Hungary and Portugal over pay and conditions; thousands of retail workers at Makro in South Africa strike

## Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

2 February 2023

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

### Europe

Scottish teachers currently taking part in a series of rolling strikes across 32 Scottish local authorities joined half a million workers in coordinated UK-wide national strike action on Wednesday.

The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) members have rejected a five percent pay offer from the Scottish government and are demanding 10 percent. The latest government offer increased the amount to 6.85 percent for the lowest paid teachers.

Around half a million workers in six unions took part in Wednesday's stoppage. It involved members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union, train drivers' union ASLEF, the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union, the University and College Union and the National Education Union. The action was called to coincide with the passage through parliament of new anti-strike laws granting minimum service levels in key sectors of the economy.

Following the rolling strikes, EIS members will hold Scotland-wide stoppages on February 28 and March 1, then 20 days of rolling strikes between March 13 and April 21.

Ambulance crews across England and Wales will strike alongside nurses on February 6, billed as the largest stoppage in the history of the National Health Service (NHS). The NHS is collapsing due to decades of underfunding and creeping privatisation.

Ambulance workers at five English hospital trusts will then walk out again on February 10, as part of an ongoing programme of strikes over a derisory four percent pay award for NHS workers and staffing levels. Unison members at London, Yorkshire, South West, North East and North West ambulance trusts will take part.

The Royal College of Nursing union, Unite, GMB and Unison did not even call their members out on the official TUC protest against the government's new anti-strike legislation.

Around 80 UK employees of Liverpool Streetscene Ltd (LSSL) were on strike last week for improved pay.

The Unite union members want a four percent pay rise plus a £1,000

lump sum. LSSL operates as a private company but is wholly owned by Liverpool City Council. A January 25 *Liverpool Echo* newspaper article on the dispute stated because of low pay some LSSL workers resort to second jobs and foodbanks to survive.

Following the participation of UK civil servants in the national strike on Wednesday, the PCS union announced a series of strikes by its members in job centres.

The workers are employed by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) at four job centres in Liverpool, as well as Stockport and Bolton. PCS members at the Liverpool job centres will hold 20 walkouts between February 9 and March 3, while those in Stockport and Bolton will hold nine stoppages between February 9 and 18.

The strikes are part of ongoing selective strike action by PCS members against low pay, attacks jobs and pensions and proposals to cut redundancy terms. The DWP workers also face government proposals to close 40 DWP offices.

UK workers employed by the Animal and Plant Health Agency at the Centre for International Trade in Bristol and Carlisle are to walk out.

The PCS members are part of the national action by civil servants over pay, pensions and redundancy terms. As well as joining Wednesday's national action, they will walk out February 13-17 and 20-24.

Thousands of UK Environment Agency (EA) staff are to walk out on February 8, protesting a two percent pay rise plus a £345 lump sum. They are also working to rule.

The Unison and Prospect union members work as river inspectors, flood forecasters, in coastal risk management and pollution control. The work to rule will be stepped up 12 hours either side of the strike by withdrawing from incident report rotas. However, EA staff will provide "life and limb" cover if necessary.

Unison members in the EA held a one-day strike January 18, the first strike in the agency's existence. According to the unions, pay has fallen by around 20 percent in real terms since 2010. Many staff rely on foodbanks due to the escalating cost of living. Low pay has also led to staff leaving and unfilled vacancies, leading to overwork and low morale.

UK rail staff at 12 train operating companies (TOCs) are balloting for strike action over pay and conditions. The ballot closes on February 28.

The Transport and Salaried Staffs Association (TSSA) represents clerical and managerial staff at the TOCs and Network Rail. The TSSA, along with the Unite union, pushed through a nine percent offer over two years along with a no compulsory redundancies deal at Network Rail at

the end of last year.

The ballot will be at C2C, Cross Country, East Midlands Railway, Greater Anglia, Great Western Railway, GTR, LNER, Northern, Southeastern Railway, South Western Railway, TransPennine Express, and West Midlands Trains.

TSSA members working for Avanti West Coast are already taking part in a ballot, due to close February 17.

A ballot over pay of over 3,000 UK bus drivers working for West Midlands National Express will begin February 8 until March 1.

The Unite union members, some on as little as £11.80 an hour, previously 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 achieved a mandate for strike action over pay.

Journalists working for BBC local radio across the UK will ballot over the state broadcaster's plans, which would lead to job losses and journalists having to fight for their own jobs.

The National Union of Journalist (NUJ) members oppose plans whereby BBC local radio programmes would share programmes with neighbouring local radio stations after 2pm during the week and all day at weekends. A compromise with less programme sharing was rejected by the local radio journalists by a 70 percent majority.

The NUJ said it will move to a formal ballot for strike action over the proposals, after its members indicated overwhelming support for it in a consultative ballot. The NUJ states the proposals would mean nearly six million local radio listeners would be left with a "much-reduced service."

Teachers in Hungary joined rolling strikes in the week from January 23, and held a national stoppage on January 31, on the anniversary of the first warning strike in their dispute over pay.

According to *Napi.hu*, the Teachers' Union (PSZ) and Democratic Teachers' Union (PDSZ) called a total of seven official strike days in 2022, although there were also a number of other demonstrations and several wildcat strikes.

Teachers in vocational schools also held a two-hour warning strike on Tuesday. Just as teachers in the past year have faced repeated attacks on their right to strike, including sackings for defying draconian minimum service requirements, vocational instructors were also threatened. *Index.hu* reported that several colleges contacted instructors to say they must stay in their office and could not speak to the press or post anything on social media about the strike.

Teachers in Portugal continued strikes this week in a dispute over pay, staffing levels, class sizes and career progression rules. They have held several stoppages since December, including an indefinite strike of one hour per day.

Around 80,000 school workers joined a march in Lisbon on Saturday, according to *Reuters*.

Last week, a court approved the government's request to impose a minimum service requirement on striking school workers, to ensure special education was provided, cafeterias operated and schools remained open. The requirement was denounced by teachers' unions as an "attack on democracy."

Around 10,000 industrial workers in Finland began a three-day strike on Wednesday, after the Industrial Union and employers failed to agree a new national collective agreement, *YLE* reported.

The pay agreement in the industrial sector is normally used as a pattern for pay increases for other Finnish workers.

Workers are demanding a pay increase which keeps up with inflation, at 9.1 percent for the past two months. The Industrial Union called limited strikes, affecting only 50 workplaces across 20 companies in the chemical and technology industries, according to *Reuters*.

Strikes by thousands of retail and warehouse workers and dock workers

are also planned in the coming weeks.

Healthcare workers in several autonomous communities in Spain are striking against understaffing and for better pay and workloads, while the trade unions have worked to block the development of a unified national movement.

Doctors and paediatricians in the Community of Madrid have been on an indefinite strike since January 12, following walkouts of several weeks at the end of last year. 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.

In Navarra, doctors also began an indefinite strike on Wednesday, over pay. The Navarrese government, a coalition of PSOE, Basque separatist parties and the pseudo-left Podemos, imposed very high minimum service levels, requiring 100 percent of usual emergency care levels and 60 percent of usual care.

A three-day strike of doctors in Catalonia was called off at the last minute after the Doctors of Catalonia (MC) union made an agreement with the government over working conditions. *El Periodico* reports that MC dropped its demands over pay, accepting the government's claims that only a certain number of "budget items" could be approved.

Strikes by doctors in Andalusia, Aragon and Extremadura were also called off by unions in recent weeks.

Air traffic controllers in privatised services at 16 Spanish airports held a one-day strike on Monday, which very few workers were able to join due to the government's imposition of high minimum service requirements.

*EFE* reported that minimum services were set between 52 and 84 percent for international passenger flights, and 100 percent for emergency, police, perishable goods or postal delivery flights.

The Workers' Commissions and the Union of Air Traffic Controllers called the strike during negotiations over a new collective agreement, after a pay offer was rejected. According to *EFE*, Saerco, one of the two large companies operating ATC towers, offered no pay rise for 2021, only one percent for 2022, two percent for 2023 and 2.5 percent for 2024. Current annual inflation in Spain is 5.8 percent, more than the total over the four-year offer.

Around 800 workers at the Amazon Martorelles site in Barcelona, Spain, began an indefinite strike on Wednesday against the closure of the warehouse.

The General Union of Workers is not opposing the closure, but has asked that more workers be offered jobs in other warehouses in Barcelona.

Postal workers at the German national post office Deutsche Post held a national warning strike on January 28 to demand a 15 percent pay rise.

*ZDF* reported that around 13,500 workers walked out in several regions of Germany, and Deutsche Post said that 20 percent of parcels and nine percent of letters were not delivered. There were also several warning strikes called by the United Services Union on January 26.

Actors and theatre workers in Greece began a national 48-hour strike on Wednesday, opposing a new government decree which would effectively downgrade arts degrees. The Union of Greek Actors told *ef.syn* the decree would prevent artists being hired in large parts of the public sector.

There was also an angry reaction to an amendment to the decree, which would allow government ministers to decide the salaries of arts workers. The Union of Greek Actors said this would effectively abolish collective agreements signed with individual theatres.

Workers in Greece's public maritime education system, which trains sailors and maritime workers, began a two-day strike from Thursday, called by the Panhellenic Union of Teachers of Public Maritime Education. Maritime teachers denounced underfunding and staff shortages, *ef.syn* reported.

The Panhellenic Maritime Federation also accused the government of planning to downgrade the degrees of qualified officers and promote private maritime schools at the expense of public institutions. The union

representing engineers said the government was attempting to “completely integrate maritime education into the directions of shipowners.”

French childcare workers walked out on a one-day national strike on Thursday, demanding improvements to pay, working conditions, and an end to bureaucratic “reforms” of the sector.

The National Union of Early Years Professionals (SNPPE) wrote in a press release that rather than raising wages to deal with a shortage of 10,000 workers, the government had instead begun hiring unqualified staff.

The SNPPE also pointed out that the work is physically demanding as well as emotionally, and the government’s pension reform, which delays retirement by two years, would have a big impact on childcare workers, who “will not last until 65 years of age.”

Workers in the fuel refineries in Turkey owned by TÜPRAŞ began a go-slow action last week, after the company, which controls most of Turkey’s refining capacity, offered them a mere 9.6 percent pay rise.

Workers speaking to *Evrensel* said their wages had been rapidly eroded since the company was privatised in 2006, and they wanted to maintain their wages at three times the minimum wage rate.

Last year the Petrol-İŞ union signed a three-year contract with Koç Holding, TÜPRAŞ’s majority owner, which increased wages by 40 percent for the first six months, and at the rate of inflation for the remainder of the contract, with a three percent additional increase after two years. TÜPRAŞ workers demanded an additional 50 percent on top of this contract, as the official inflation rate of 64.3 percent is widely known to be below the actual increase in prices.

Petrol-İŞ met with TÜPRAŞ management this week and on Tuesday said it had agreed workers should accept this year’s offer of 9.6 percent and return to work, with a vague promise of an unspecified additional increase in six months. Workers told *Evrensel* they did not accept the union’s deal and, “We did not start these actions with the decision of the [union] headquarters, 4,300 workers started the action. You [Petrol-İŞ] can’t finish it.”

## Middle East

A general strike was held in cities of the Occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem on January 26.

It was in response to the killing of nine Palestinians including an elderly woman and the wounding of 20 by gunfire as a result of a raid in the city of Jenin and its adjacent refugee camp.

Thousands of school students in Tel Aviv protested on Sunday against ultra-right-wing government plans to increase political control over the Israeli judiciary.

They marched from the Ironi Dalet high school to Habima Square shouting slogans and carrying placards. On Tuesday, Israeli tech workers marched through Tel Aviv protesting the judiciary changes, following a similar protest and rally last week.

A general strike took place on Tuesday in the town of Jabal Mukaber in occupied Jerusalem, to protest plans by Israeli authorities to demolish 800 homes in the town. Town inhabitants blocked the streets of the town to prevent bulldozers and occupation forces carrying out the demolitions.

The strike of workers employed by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian refugees in the Gaza strip which began on January 23 continues.

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, the UNRWA

Director in the West Bank called on the union to end its strike, citing the impact it was having on Palestinian refugee children.

January 25 saw protests in Baghdad against the falling value of the Iraqi currency. The dinar has lost seven percent of its value since November.

Protesters marched through the city to rally outside the Central Bank. They shouted slogans accusing politicians of corruption. The falling value of the dinar, together with rising food prices, is eroding the living standards of Iraqi workers.

On January 25, protests took place across Lebanon as the economic crisis continues. The lira has fallen to its lowest value and prices, particularly of fuel, continue to increase.

The protests took the form of blocking major highways. Burning tyres blocked the road linking Borj Chmali and Tyre. The Beddawai to Tripoli road was blocked in both directions by cars and vans parking up to jam up the highway. Protesters also set tyres ablaze at the entrance to the Banque du Liban. Other roads were also blocked by protesters.

Lebanese teachers announced a warning strike for February 1. The Teachers Syndicate union members are calling for more support for Lebanese private schools, as they are impacted by the ongoing financial crisis.

## Africa

Thousands of South African workers at retail giant Makro began strike action last week over pay and conditions. The walkout is scheduled to continue for ten days. Workers from the Cape Gate, Ottery and Montague Gardens area took part.

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 workers striking at Makro in Germiston.

The South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union members are demanding a pay increase of 12 percent, a sales commission increase of 20 percent, a R100 uniform increase and a thirteenth cheque at the end of the year.

Talks broke down with Makro owner Massmart, which is offering workers who leave the union a larger increase. According to *IOL*, the company spokesman Brian Leroni said, “We will however process the 4.5 percent 2022 increases, plus backpay for Makro employees who choose to accept the company offer.”

Unemployed medical doctors marched through the Gauteng, Eastern Cape and KZN provinces to South Africa’s Department of Health in Pretoria last week to demand jobs.

A South African Medical Association Trade Union spokesperson told *IOL*, “The march is to raise the plight of more than a thousand unemployed doctors in the country, as we all know the South African healthcare system has plunged into a crisis so we can’t then have doctors sitting at home when we know that we have a very strained doctor to patient ratio.”

He explained that the health system is in collapse, and the poorest struggle to get any healthcare.

On January 23, Nigerian aviation workers employed by the Nigerian Aviation Handling Company (NAHCO) took wildcat strike action to demand a significant pay increase, in defiance of a court order against any strike.

The general secretary of Air Transport Services Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (ATSSSAN), Ocheme Abo, explained that as a law-abiding organisation, the unions obeyed the court order. The ATSSSAN and the National Union of Air Transport Employees (NUATE) said the strike was

carried out independently of the unions, which they said should “steer clear” of the action. The airline lost about N100 million, due to the 14-hour flight disruption.

The unions tried to rescue their deflated credentials by issuing NiMET management on January 26 with a 14-day ultimatum to implement the minimum wage.

Employees of the National Housing Enterprise (NHE) in Namibia voted to begin strike action after the failure of negotiations over pay.

The workers are angry at the NHE’s failure to give them a one-off agreed payment. Management threatened to impose a “no work, no pay” rule to force workers back to work.

Public Service Union of Namibia (PSUN) secretary general Matthew Haakuria declared, “After counting the ballots, the voice of the NHE employees is loud and clear. ‘Enough is enough!’ Ninety percent voted in favour of a strike.” His conclusion, however, was to call on NHE management to “engage” with the union to avoid a stoppage.

Workers of the Nigerian Postal Service (NIPOST) held a protest on January 27, and planned to strike from January 30. Workers accused the Federal Government of abandoning the postal service, by not providing any federal funding for it.

General Secretary, Senior Staff Association of Statutory Corporations and Government-Owned Companies, Ayo Olorunfemi said, “One naira has not been given to NIPOST and NIPOST is not on any capital budget of the Federal Government.”



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