

Doctors' strike continues in Madrid, Spain, with mass demonstration; Three day nationwide strike by UK university academics over pay and conditions; French workers continue strikes against pension reform; National strike in Belgium in defence of wages; Municipal workers strike in cities across the Netherlands; Lebanese teachers' strike over pay and conditions enters seventh week; Strikes and protests by Iranian workers; Residents in Zenzele, South Africa march to demand public services

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' strike continues in Madrid, Spain, with mass demonstration

The indefinite strike by around 5,000 doctors and paediatricians over patient ratios and pay continues in the Community of Madrid, the autonomous municipality containing the Spanish capital.

On Sunday, hundreds of thousands joined a rally in support of the doctors and in defence of public health. According to the organisers, one million people were present, while even the government's figures say 250,000 joined. A petition with 50,000 signatures was delivered to the ministry of health.

The government of the Community of Madrid reacted to the demonstration by intensifying its attacks on striking doctors. An official spokesman said the support for doctors by leftist groups and workers on Sunday meant it was a "political strike" and refused to meet the demand for a pay increase of 400 euros per month. This was already watered down by the Amyts doctors' union from its previous demand for a 479.77 euro pay rise, *Europa Press* reported.

In a direct attack on doctors' freedom of speech, the ministry of health announced on Wednesday that random inspections would take place to ensure doctors were not collecting signatures or putting up posters during working hours, according to *Europa Press*.

Three-day nationwide strike by UK university academics over pay

and conditions

Around 70,000 university academic and other staff at 150 universities across the UK walked out Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday this week.

On February 1, University and College Union (UCU) members took part in strike action alongside teachers, civil servants and rail workers, who were also taking industrial action over wages and conditions, and to protest against the introduction of new anti-strike laws.

UCU members have completed nine days of action this academic year, with a further 10 days of stoppages planned in February and March. The walkouts will take the form of two three-day strikes, a two-day and a four-day strike.

While RPI inflation is above 13 percent, the latest pay offer from the employers is for just 5 percent. This was rejected by 80 percent of UCU members who took part in an online poll.

As well as calling for a reversal in cuts to pension provisions previously pushed through, university staff oppose worsening working conditions, particularly the use of short-term contracts that provide no security of employment.

A UCU press release said the action will impact around 2.5 million students and that picket lines will be mounted at all 150 institutions involved. The UCU is in talks with the employers' body at mediation service Acas.

From February 22, UCU members will be re-balloted to extend their six-month strike mandate.

Week-long strike by driving vehicle licence staff in Wales

Workers employed by the Driving and Vehicle Licensing Authority (DVLA), based in Swansea, Wales, began a week-long strike on Monday.

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) members work for the DVLA Output Services Group at two sites in Swansea and are responsible for printing documentation and licences. The walkout has led to a backlog of documents and the DVLA has had to extend the deletion dates of licence applications made between February 6 and 26, by 45 days.

This week's action by DVLA staff is part of a partial strike by UK civil servants who want a 10 percent pay rise, and are protesting attacks on jobs, pensions and redundancy terms. Other PCS members on strike this week include around 100 workers at the British Museum in London. Their walkout led to the museum having to cancel a programme of events organised around the half-term school holiday this week.

Other PCS members were on strike this week at the Animal and Plant Health Agency in the Centre for International Trade in Bristol and Carlisle.

In November last year around 100,000 UK civil servants in 123 government departments voted by an 85 percent majority on a turnout of over 50 percent to strike.

More strikes by Amazon workers in Coventry, England, announced

Following a 24-hour strike by Amazon workers at the Coventry fulfilment centre on January 25, further industrial action has been announced.

The new action announced in support of £15 an hour pay claim comprises a walkout between February 28 and March 2 and then from March 13 to 17.

The action in January was the first official stoppage by Amazon workers in Britain, although unofficial walkouts took place last year at several Amazon sites following the company's announcement of a miserly 50p an hour pay rise. Around 350 GMB members took part in the 24-hour stoppage.

Nurses to escalate strike action in pay fight

In an historical first, nurses in England have been taking strike action to fight for a 19 percent pay rise after rejecting a government offer that would only increase pay on average by 4 percent.

The next round of strikes from March 1-3 will involve 48-hours continuous walkouts in half of hospitals, mental health and community services. For the first time it will include its members working in emergency, intensive care, and cancer care services.

During six previous walkouts since December the RCN exempted core services from strike action - dialysis, neonatal care, intensive care, paediatric, A&E and chemotherapy.

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) leadership is anxious for the Westminster government to agree to talks over pay. RCN leader Pat Cullen made it clear she would settle for a 7 percent rise if offered, following the agreement reached with the devolved Welsh government. The union previously accepted an offer for a below-inflation deal in Scotland.

Further strikes planned by ambulance staff and teachers in Wales as

they reject latest offers

Ambulance staff in Wales are to hold further strikes on February 20, 21 and 22. The Unite unions members recently rejected a new pay offer from the Welsh government. In a ballot, members rejected the offer by a 92 percent majority on a 70 percent turnout.

The National Education Union (NEU) called off a strike by teachers in Wales due Tuesday to hold further talks with the Welsh government. These only resulted in an offer of an additional 1.5 percent and an additional 1.5 percent lump sum, which was rejected by rank-and-file teachers. A strike affecting all Welsh schools will now take place on March 2.

London Heathrow airport ground staff to be balloted on pay offer

Around 3,000 workers employed by Heathrow Airports Ltd (HAL) are to be balloted beginning Friday for strike action, the ballot closes March 17.

The Unite union members, who work for HAL as security guards, firefighters and engineers, are protesting against a below inflation 10 percent pay offer. Any stoppages would coincide with Heathrow's busy Easter holiday period. Many of the HAL workers receive low pay, with security staff only earning £24,000 a year despite working many unsocial hours.

Further strike in France against attack on pension rights

Workers across France held another strike on Thursday against the Macron government's assault on pension rights. Under the laws the retirement age will be increased by two years, cutting tens of billions of euros from pensions.

At the same time, Macron announced a 40 percent increase in military spending. According to *C'est la grève*, workers in many sectors walked out, including in transport, education, electricity and gas, and air traffic controllers.

Millions have joined the strikes since they began in January, and surveys show the majority of the population rejects the pension reforms.

Doctors in France strike over consultation payments

On Tuesday, local doctors in France held a one-day strike to demand an increase in consultation payments from 25 euros to 50 euros. In response to their previous strikes, the national health insurance agency proposed an increase to 26.50 euros, well below the average for Western Europe and one which only just meets inflation.

The walkouts were organised through a Facebook group "Doctors for tomorrow," outside the trade unions. Doctors are also opposed to a bill in the Senate "simplifying" healthcare by allowing patients to receive prescriptions from nurses and other healthcare workers without needing to see a doctor.

National strike in Belgium in defence of wages

Belgian workers joined a national strike on Tuesday to call for the defence of wages. Workers denounced calls from employers' groups to undermine Belgium's system of "indexation", which automatically increases wages in line with inflation.

The indexation system already leaves many workers struggling to pay their bills as prices increase continually but wages are only indexed at certain times, for many workers at six-month or even yearly intervals. The calculation used for the wage increase also excludes the increase in fuel prices.

Many transport workers joined Tuesday's stoppage, leading to the cancellation of services throughout the country. Hundreds joined rallies in several cities.

Belgian rail workers hold wildcat strikes and protests against violence

Rail workers in Belgium held several wildcat strikes and protests this week, following rising incidents of violence towards conductors. *The Brussels Times* reported that several trains at the Brussels-Midi train depot in the capital were cancelled on Wednesday by a "spontaneous" stoppage in response to assaults on rail staff in Antwerp and Braine-le-Comte.

Ticket inspectors also held a wildcat protest against attacks in Liège, Kortrijk and Lier by refusing to check passengers' tickets this week, *RTL* reported. An official from the General Union of Public Services told *RTL* "The unions are not in charge, but we understand."

Municipal workers strike in cities across the Netherlands

Municipal workers, particularly in waste collection, held strikes throughout the Netherlands this week to demand a 12 percent pay rise for the 187,000 covered by the municipal collective agreement.

They also demand that future wage rises be tied to inflation. The stoppages, which lasted between three and six days in different cities, were called by the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV) after rejecting a below-inflation offer of 5 percent pay for 2023 and 3 percent for 2024.

Dutch media reported that hundreds of workers had joined rallies during strikes in Groningen and The Hague, with around 500 joining a national demonstration in Utrecht.

Teachers strike in Greece against "anti-educational" evaluation scheme

Teachers in Greece held a one-day national strike on Wednesday against a new government scheme supposed to evaluate teachers. Many have declared they will boycott the scheme and oppose the categorisation of schools into "tiers."

Members of the Federation of Secondary School Staff also held partial stoppages on Monday and Tuesday, for three hours each day. *Ef.syn* reported that more than 5,000 teachers and students joined a protest in Athens against the government's education reforms as well as its recent

law downgrading arts degrees.

One recently appointed teacher wrote an open letter, published in *Alfavita*, explaining why she and other teachers were fighting the evaluation scheme. She wrote that the government "systematically ignores the fact that we have been teaching in unsuitable school buildings for years now, in buildings that are not heated well, in schools that flood with rain," but was asking teachers "to shoulder yet another volume of bureaucracy for the rulers to boast that 'we have evaluated our schools and our teachers.'"

Portuguese government imposes draconian minimum service requirements on national teachers' strike

Portuguese teachers joining the week-long national strikes called by the Union of All Teachers (STOP) from Thursday have had draconian minimum service requirements imposed by the government. Teachers are fighting for secure contracts, better pay and staffing levels, and improvements to the promotion system, which currently makes it difficult to find a permanent job.

Previous minimum service requirements were imposed to ensure special education was provided, cafeterias operated and schools remained open, but on Saturday, a court imposed the additional requirement that at least three hours of classes must go ahead.

All other education unions had already suspended the regional teachers' strikes they had called in favour of new negotiations with the government. The National Federation of Teachers suggested it will call new strikes in March if no deal can be worked out by then.

Finnish port and transport workers begin strike, while unions work to shut down action with below-inflation settlements

Around 9,000 road transport and port workers began an indefinite strike on Wednesday during collective bargaining negotiations between the AKT union and employers' organisations. Members of the PAU postal and logistics union also stopped work in support of the transport strike, *YLE* reported. The government intervened last week to forcibly postpone a strike by logistics workers to February 20.

The strikes by transport workers follow walkouts by industrial and retail workers in the past two weeks, which were quickly shut down as unions agreed pay deals well below the 9.1 percent inflation rate. Last week, the Industrial Union signed a two-year agreement for 90,000 workers in the industrial sector, which increases wages by only 3.5 percent in 2023 and a 400 euro one-off payment, and a mere 2 percent in 2024.

The industrial sector collective agreement is often used as a template for deals in the rest of the economy. Sticking to this pattern, a strike by retail workers was sold out by the PAM union this week, which agreed a settlement worth an average of 3.8 percent this year and 2.1 percent the next, also with a one-off 400 euro payment.

PAM claimed its deal was a significant victory because the pay rise was a flat-rate 165 euros per month for full-time workers, and so was worth slightly more for the lowest-paid. However, as it admitted to *YLE*, "this does not compensate for all the weakening of purchasing power" due to inflation, which it falsely claimed "cannot be compensated with any salary increases in one or two years."

Retail staff, many of whom work part-time, attacked the PAM deal on social media. Comments denounced "a shockingly bad deal," and said of

PAM, “They don’t know how to negotiate,” and “I think you are an employers’ union. The part-timers were completely forgotten.”

Workers strike at seven German airports

A 24-hour strike will begin at seven German airports on Friday, as part of a collective bargaining dispute for municipal workers. Workers in public services throughout several states walked out on a warning strike on Wednesday, and the United Services Union (Verdi) called a stoppage by airport workers covered by the same collective agreements.

Verdi is asking for a pay rise of at least 10.5 percent for the 2.5 million workers covered by public sector collective agreements. The airport employers’ association ADV estimated that 2,340 flights would be cancelled by Friday’s strike, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported.

German media reported extensively on whether the strikes would impact the Munich Security Conference, where imperialist politicians including US vice president Kamala Harris, French president Emmanuel Macron and German chancellor Olaf Scholz are expected to attend. The German government is expected to present its new national security strategy at the gathering.

However, Verdi assured Reuters “We assume that the participants in the Munich Security Conference, who come in government planes, can land via the emergency service,” referring to the exceptions to the strike established for aid to Turkey and Syria and other emergency flights.

Lebanese teachers’ strike over pay and conditions enters seventh week

Teachers at public schools in Lebanon have now been on strike for over six weeks. They are calling for a pay increase, help with transport costs, better health insurance cover and for part of their salary to be paid in dollars.

Lebanon is suffering a continuing economic crisis, which has seen the value of the lira fall while prices, particularly of food and fuel, continue to rise. Around 80 percent of the population live in poverty.

A recent statement from the League of Public Basic Education Teachers called on the teachers to maintain their strike, saying Abbas Halabi, the caretaker Education Minister, had not offered any real resolution to their plight.

Strikes and protests by Iranian workers

Iran continues to be hit by strikes and protests. On Monday, temporary contract workers employed by the National Oil Company protest outside its headquarters in Tehran. They were protesting the low value of a New Year bonus payment.

Also Monday, telecommunication retirees from Ahvaz, Kermanshah and Isfahan protested outside the Regional Telecommunication General Administration against the low value of their pensions, which are not keeping up with rising prices fuelled by inflation.

Monday was the fourth day of a strike by copper miners at the Derakhshan copper mine in Takht e Gonbad Sirjan in Kerman province. The miners are protesting against low wages, late payment of wages and

problems with insurance.

On February 10, workers on the night shift at the Yazd Tyre Company held a sit-in protesting their low wages.

February 9 was the third day of a strike by drivers and workers at KEP Kish in Dareh Shahr in Ilam province, protesting poor living conditions and the company’s failure to respond.

Residents in Zenzele, South Africa march to demand public services

Residents from the informal settlements in Zenzele marched to the Rand West City Local Municipality to demand electrification and other services. Their demands include a mobile clinic, primary school and to have local roads properly surfaced with tar.

The Herald reported Hamilton Sathekgi who said, “We are here today to raise our frustration with the municipality for their lack of service delivery. We feel as though we are not being prioritised as the people of Zenzele.” The main issue, he said, was the formalisation of Zenzele, “We believe that once this is done, we can be able to get some sort of assistance from them.”

South African security workers protest against non-payment of medical insurance

Security workers at iMvula Group carried out protests in Woodmead, Johannesburg last Tuesday against the non-payment of health benefits.

Members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (Satawu) and the National Union of Metalworkers Union (Numsa) say their medical insurance deductions are not being paid over to their chosen health provider.

The unions say that this affects more than 30,000 security guards and about R75-million in deductions so far, which, due to them being paid to the wrong company, means the workers are instead forced to rely on public health facilities.



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