

Italy: national public transport workers strike against pay and conditions; Iran: continuing protests over police violence and cost of living crisis; South Africa: public sector workers to strike over pay

## 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 public transport strike in Italy against privatisation, insecure employment and low wages

On February 17, public transport workers throughout Italy joined a strike called by the “grassroots” union USB, calling for equal pay in the public and private sector, improvements to salary and working hours, and an end to outsourcing, insecure contracts and privatisation, *Contropiano* reported.

USB, which has attracted support by calling for an end to arms shipments to Ukraine and criticising the traditional union federations, reported large numbers joining the strike. In many cities at least half of transport workers and in a few cities upwards of 80 percent came out on strike. *ANSA* reported that services were reduced in Rome. In Italy’s second most populous city, Milan, three out of five underground lines were closed and almost all trams and buses were cancelled.

### Greek healthcare workers strike over staffing levels, underfunding and privatisation

Healthcare workers held a national strike in Greece on Tuesday, demanding pay rises and adequate funding for health.

The Panhellenic Federation of Employees in Public Hospitals, one of the unions whose members walked out, denounced the government for spending only five percent of GDP on health, while the European average is 7.5 percent, and said, “This is how the quality of services degrades, the system is privatised slowly but surely and citizens put their hands deep in their pockets to buy health services,” *Alfavita* reported.

Striking healthcare workers also denounced the planned conversion of the oncology departments of two children’s hospitals, including the largest in the country, into a separate legal entity, which would be the first step towards privatising it.

### Two wildcat strikes in Turkey against union-backed pay deals

Workers at two factories in Turkey held wildcat strikes in the past week against below-inflation pay deals signed by their unions without their consent.

At GAMAK Motors in Istanbul, which employs nearly 1,300 workers, members of the Özçelik-?? union protested on February 17 and denounced it as a “bosses’ union” after it signed off on a 22 percent pay rise, *Evrensel* reported. This is below even the 57.7 percent inflation rate claimed by government statistics, although the independent Inflation Research Group estimates actual annual inflation at 121.6 percent. Workers called for a 90 percent pay rise, an end to job losses and for GAMAK to pay for private health insurance.

Workers at the Ünal synthetic fabrics factory in the city of Antep also walked out during the afternoon shift change on Tuesday, against the acceptance of a 58 percent pay offer by the company’s recognised union, Öz ?plik ??, according to *Evrensel*. Like Özçelik-??, Öz ?plik ?? is a member of the Confederation of Turkish Real Trade Unions.

### Joint strikes by health and education workers in Northern Ireland

Thousands of health and education workers in Northern Ireland walked out on Tuesday, fighting for improved pay.

Health workers at the five Northern Ireland Health Trusts and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service were involved. GMB, Nipsa, Unison and Unite union members oppose the government offer of four to nine percent. RPI inflation is at 13.4 percent.

Irish National Teachers’ Organisation, NASUWT, NEU and the Ulster Teachers Union members were also on strike over pay. The Northern Ireland NEU say that in real terms teachers’ pay has fallen by around 40 percent since 2010.

The striking teachers and nurses held a joint rally outside Belfast City Hall, attended by thousands. Three feeder marches from hospital picket lines headed to the rally. A rally of striking workers also took place outside the Guildhall in Derry.

In England, the Royal College of Nurses called off planned strikes on Tuesday, ahead of talks aimed at a sellout.

## **UK junior doctors vote to strike over pay and conditions**

Around 40,000 junior doctors (doctors below consultant level) in England voted by a 98 percent majority on a 77 percent turnout to strike over pay and conditions.

The British Medical Association (BMA) members rejected a two percent pay rise offered by the government. Junior doctors had agreed to a four-year pay deal in 2019 giving them a two percent rise each year, but the sharp rise in inflation eroded the value of their pay.

The BMA press release announcing the ballot result this week explained, “We have had real-terms pay cut of more than 26 percent since 2008. This year we were offered an insulting two percent pay, which means with inflation at over 10 percent we are working more than a month for free.”

It went on to say that the low pay and poor working conditions were driving many doctors to work abroad.

The BMA says it will hold a 72-hour strike by the doctors in March, but has not yet announced a date for walkouts.

In January, UK junior doctors belonging to the smaller 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. The HCSA announced its members will walk out on March 15, the first such action in its history.

## **Additional strike date announced by UK health union**

UK National Health Service (NHS) nurses, ambulance workers, health care assistants, cleaners and porters in Unison will walk out over pay, staffing and patient care on March 8.

The Unison union announced the further strike of around 32,000 NHS workers to pressure the government into talks. Unison stated its concern at the Tory government’s decision to open pay talks with the RCN to the exclusion of other health unions, including Unison, Unite and the GMB.

In a press release announcing the strike, Unison’s general secretary, Christina McAnea, stated, “There can be no pick-and-mix solution. NHS workers in five unions are involved in strike action over pay, staffing and patient care. Choosing to speak to one union and not others won’t stop the strikes and could make a bad situation much worse.”

New sections of health workers will be included. The press release noted, “Health workers at NHS Blood and Transplant, Great Ormond Street Hospital, the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, Liverpool Women’s Hospital and the Bridgewater Community Trust will now be among those now walking out for the first time.”

Ambulance staff in all but one ambulance service in England will also strike that day. Ambulance staff working for South Central, East of England, West Midlands and East Midlands ambulance services will join the action after a strike vote taken last week.

## **Planned strikes by UK teachers over pay in danger of union sellout**

Next week’s strikes by teachers in England may be called off after the National Education Union (NEU) was invited for talks with Education Secretary Gillian Keegan.

The NEU said it was “prepared to recommend a pause to strikes” to its national executive committee as “a sign of goodwill.”

NEU members held an England-wide strike on February 1 in pursuit of a 12 percent fully funded pay rise, after a 90 percent majority vote.

On February 28, teachers in the Northern, North West and Yorkshire and Humber regions plan to strike, with rallies in Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle.

On March 1, strikes are planned in the East Midlands, West Midlands and Eastern regions, with rallies in Birmingham, Leicester, Nottingham and Cambridge.

On March 2, teachers in the London, South East and South West (including Wales) regions plan to walk out, with rallies in Bristol, Plymouth, Chichester, Cardiff, Reading and the Oval cricket ground in London.

Teachers in Wales plan to strike on March 2, after rejecting a 1.5 percent extra offer from the Welsh Labour-run government. Following regional strikes, all teachers in England and Wales plan to walk out on March 15, budget day, and March 16.

## **Further strikes by sections of UK civil service workers over pay and attacks on conditions**

Sections of UK civil servants are continuing to take strike action. In November, 100,000 workers across 123 government departments voted to walk out over pay, attacks on jobs and pensions and reduction in redundancy terms.

Rather than sanction all-out action, the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union bureaucracy limited action to sporadic strikes by a few thousand members.

Around 1,000 Border Force officers working in Dover, Calais, Coquelles and Dunkirk ended a four-day strike on Monday. PCS members at Jobcentres in Liverpool and Toxteth were on strike this week, as were Maritim and Coastguard Agency staff.

Around 1,600 driving examiners in England, Wales and Scotland working for the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) are to hold a series of rolling days of strikes from March 6 to 28.

## **Walkout by housing maintenance staff at Essex council**

Around 300 workers employed by HTS to maintain council-owned housing and grounds in Harlow, on the border of London, stopped work on Tuesday and Thursday. They are due to strike again on February 28.

The Unite union members voted by an 87 percent majority to walk out, calling for pay to be increased in line with workers in other local authorities doing similar work. HTS is a wholly owned subsidiary company of Harlow Council. They are demanding a cost-of-living payment and for a regrading of pay bands in line with industry standards.

## **Strike by staff at airports serving the north of Scotland**

Around 120 airport workers, including those in administration, baggage handling, fire and rescue, ground crew and security at regional airports in the north of Scotland have been on strike.

The Unite union members are employed at 11 airports belonging to Highlands and Islands Airport Limited (HIAL), a company wholly owned

by the Scottish government. Twenty-four-hour strikes were held at Dundee airport last Friday and Monday. On Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday the workers held 24-hour strikes at Barra, Benbecula, Campbeltown, Inverness, Islay, Kirkwall, Stornoway, Sumburgh, Tiree and Wick airports.

Workers rejected a five percent offer from HIAL, returning a 73.5 percent majority in favour of stoppages back in December. Following this week's strikes, an overtime ban will begin Friday to last until March 2.

### **Strike by biomedical scientists in northwest England over pay and staff shortages**

Around 70 biomedical scientists working for the East Lancashire Hospital Trust, England held a 12-hour strike Wednesday.

The Unite union members are responsible for analysing patients' blood samples at the Royal Blackburn Hospital and Burnley General Teaching Hospital. They are protesting low pay and staff shortages.

### **Non-academic staff at a London University to strike over pay claim**

Around 200 workers employed at Imperial College in London as cleaners, maintenance workers, security staff and technicians walked out on Thursday.

The Unite union members held stoppages in November and January, fighting against an imposed 3.3 percent pay rise for 2022/23. Imperial College has the UK's highest paid vice chancellor, who takes home £714,000 a year.

### **Bus maintenance workers in Glasgow and Aberdeen, Scotland to strike over pay**

Around 100 workers employed by Bidvest Noonan in Scotland are to strike over low pay. They work as cleaners, maintenance staff and shunters under contract at First Bus in Glasgow and Aberdeen.

The pay of the Unite union members starts as low as £9.62, below the new national minimum wage of £10.42 an hour which will come into effect in April. The Bidvest Noonan workers in Glasgow and Aberdeen will strike from 3 p.m. on March 1 until 6 a.m. on March 4. The Aberdeen workers will also strike from 3 p.m. on March 8 until 6 a.m. on March 11.

The contract workers at Glasgow First Bus were outsourced in 2016, while those in Aberdeen were outsourced in 2020.

### **Staff at UK nuclear plant vote to walk out**

Around 300 cleaners employed by contractor Mitie at the Sellafield nuclear plant in northwest England have voted to walk out.

The GMB members are angry that a promise to increase their pay from November last year has not been fulfilled. Mitie is now saying it will pay the increase from April. GMB has not yet announced any dates for stoppages. It is seeking further discussion with the employer.

### **Strikes announced of UK rail infrastructure engineers over pay offer**

Around 100 engineering workers employed by engineering company Balfour Beatty are to hold three 36-hour stoppages over pay.

The Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) members rejected a 5.5 percent pay offer with effect from April 2022. The strike dates are March 3, 10 and 17. Balfour Beatty's revenues in 2022 were £8 billion.

### **University of Manchester, UK student rent strikers plan protest march**

Around 350 students at the University of Manchester in England are currently carrying out a rent strike. They are calling for a 30 percent reduction in rents paid for student halls of residence accommodation. The university increased rents recently during the cost-of-living crisis.

Students have called a protest march for March 1, starting at Owens Park at 6 p.m. and finishing at the Whitworth Arch.

On February 8, around 50 students began an occupation of university buildings, the Engineering building, the Simon building, the Samuel Alexander building and the high security senior management John Owens building.

### **Air traffic controllers in privatised services pay strike in Spain**

Air traffic controllers continue a campaign of 24-hour stoppages every Monday, begun at the end of January. at the Spanish airports where air traffic control is privatised.

The Workers' Commissions and Union of Air Traffic Controllers called the strikes after rejecting a pay offer. Saerco, one of the two major 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. In total this is less than a single years' inflation, currently at 5.9 percent.

ABC reported that the government plans to extend privatisation of air traffic control, recently opening a public consultation on privatising towers covering a third of air traffic.

### **Spanish lawyers continue indefinite pay strike into second month**

Public lawyers in Spain continue an indefinite strike, begun a month ago, over pay.

According to *Europa Press*, the Lawyers of the Administration of Justice (LAJ) union reports between 73 and 85 percent of lawyers stopped work during the strike, while the Ministry of Justice claims figures between 19 and 34 percent. A total of 146,000 hearings and trials had been suspended, as of last week.

The LAJ says lawyers were deceived in 2009 when they were given new responsibilities but no increase in payments, and is demanding lawyers' salaries be set to at least 85 percent of the salary for a judge. The Secretary of State for Justice, Tontxu Rodríguez, attacked strikers as

“privileged people who earn between 40,000 and 60,000 euros a year.” He said, “They have already had an increase of 14 and a half percent this year,” but since this is spread over three years, it is effectively a pay cut relative to inflation.

While the lawyers’ walkout has had a powerful impact, the General Workers’ Union (UGT), close to the ruling PSOE, openly argued that it wanted its members to undermine the strike. *Información* reported that the UGT complained that other court workers it represented were unable to carry out certain duties as they would normally require the involvement of a lawyer and, in a comment identical to that of many employers threatening picketing workers, said, “It will be monitored that there is no pressure from [LAJ] on the staff of the General Bodies who want to exercise their constitutional right to work freely.”

### **Strikes continue in Finnish ports over collective agreement**

Port workers in Finland continue a strike begun last week during collective bargaining negotiations between the AKT union and employers’ organisations. The collective agreement will cover port workers and others in transport industries, including waste collection workers.

The strike called by AKT initially included waste collection workers as well, and the PAU postal and logistics workers stopped work in support of the transport strike, but now port workers are the only ones walking out.

AKT says it is seeking a deal similar to that negotiated by the German IG Metall union, of 8.5 percent over two years. This itself is well below inflation, which is currently 8.4 percent, but the employers claim even this is too high. *YLE* reported that the Finnish Port Operators’ Association expects AKT to settle for a pay increase similar to that imposed by the Industrial Union and retail workers’ union PAM, which increased wages between 5.6 and six percent over two years.

### **German municipal workers continue stoppages in pay dispute**

Municipal workers across Germany joined warning strikes this week called by the United Services Union (Verdi) during pay negotiations for 2.5 million workers covered by public sector collective agreements. Verdi is asking for a pay rise of 10.5 percent, or at least 500 euros per month.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported Verdi’s estimate that 14,000 workers joined warning strikes on Tuesday, and more stoppages continued on Wednesday and Thursday.

### **Dutch regional transport workers continue strikes over pay**

Regional transport workers in the Netherlands held a 24-hour strike over pay on Wednesday, with another planned for Friday, stopping many services throughout the country. The Public Transport Employers Association (VWVOV), representing transport operators including multinationals Arriva and Keolis, has offered only an eight percent pay increase for 13,000 workers, after inflation averaged 10.1 percent over the past year.

Transport workers are demanding reductions in workload and pay rises. The Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV) has called for a 16.9

percent pay rise this year, while the Christian National Trade Union Federation is asking for 14 percent across 18 months, *De Telegraaf* reported. Transport workers held a five-day strike over the same demands two weeks ago.

### **Federation of Dutch Trade Unions ends municipal workers’ strikes**

The FNV announced on Wednesday that it had reached an agreement over pay with the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG) and called off strikes by municipal workers. Workers in many cities, especially in waste collection, stopped work in past weeks after rejecting a below-inflation offer of a five percent pay rise for 2023 and three percent for 2024.

FNV’s demand had been for 12 percent to compensate for past and future inflation. Inflation is currently 7.6 percent, but averaged 10.1 percent over the past 12 months. According to the *Algemeen Dagblad*, the deal signed this week increases wages by between 5.6 and 16 percent for different workers, but the average increase is 9.1 percent, less than price rises over the past year.

### **Continuing protests in Iran over state violence and cost-of-living crisis**

Last week saw protests across Iran marking 40 days since the state execution of two men who took part in the ongoing protests sparked by the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini. Amini died at the hands of the morality police for wearing her hijab “improperly” in September last year.

Forty-day commemorations are an Iranian and Middle Eastern tradition. Protests took place in the capital, Tehran, as well as the cities of Arak, Isfahan, Izeh in Khuzestan province and in Karaj.

As well as protests over the death of Amini, there have been ongoing protests and strikes as workers face a squeeze on living conditions as the economy contracts and the currency falls to a new low against the US dollar. The economic crisis is exacerbated by ongoing US economic sanctions.

On Tuesday, workers at a petrochemical plant in Masjed Soleyman in Khuzestan held a protest over wage arrears going back six months as well as missing pension insurance payments. Taxi drivers in the city of Nur in Mazandaran began a stoppage Monday over the deteriorating economic situation. Teachers in Tehran held a protest this week outside the Education Ministry against the squeeze on their pay and poor working conditions.

According to Human Rights Activists in Iran, since protests against Amini’s death began 529 people have been killed by the authorities and 19,700 have been detained. Protests have taken place at over 280 Iranian cities.

### **Continuing strike by Palestinian teachers on the West Bank**

Thousands of Palestinian public school teachers rallied in Ramallah on Monday. A general strike of teachers in the West Bank began three weeks ago.

They are protesting the failure of the Palestinian government to adhere

to an agreed 15 percent pay rise following a previous strike of teachers last year. However, the promised increase did not appear in the teachers' January pay slips.

### **General strike protest in East Jerusalem over police harassment**

Palestinians in East Jerusalem held a general strike on Sunday in response to Israeli police action at the Shuafat refugee camp, part of a programme of civil disobedience in four areas of eastern Jerusalem.

Police harassment had been stepped up following the recent death of a border police officer. He was killed accidentally by a security guard firing at a 13-year-old boy who had attacked border police with a knife.

### **Public sector unions in South Africa give notice of indefinite strike action over pay**

Public sector workers in South Africa plan indefinite strike action for a ten percent increase in a longstanding pay dispute.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union and Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA) members picketed and protested outside parliament in Cape Town on Wednesday during the national budget speech.

Financial Minister Enoch Godongwana denied this was an austerity budget, but said, "It is a budget that makes tough trade-offs in the interests of the country's short- and long-term prosperity."

The Federation of Unions of South Africa-affiliated unions, which includes the Public Servants Association, refused to join the strike as they do not want to jeopardise the 2023/24 negotiations. DENOSA president Simon Hlungwani, however, made it clear that, "We are giving government this opportunity over the next seven days to come and give us a better offer."

Unemployed doctors are also demanding increased employment in the public sector. According to *Beyond Words*, this is the first time that COSATU and South African Federation of Trade Unions have held joint action.

### **Namibian city cleaners' wildcat stoppage over work conditions**

Namibian cleaning workers in the capital city of Windhoek have been on strike since February 13 in rebellion against the Namibian Local Authority Workers Union (Nalawu). The workers are demanding improved working conditions.

A representative of the workers, Frans Paulus, said, "We did not tell [the union] about the strike because we have lost trust and interest in the unions... So, we decided we are going to take action by ourselves and go on strike because both the unions and the municipality are quiet, so that they can see we are tired of their promises."

Nalawu Secretary General Chris Katjitundu said, "For them to take the law into their own hands, as a union member it is difficult to be associated with illegal activities."

Activist Michael Amushelelo was detained at the Otjomuise Police Station in Windhoek after his arrest on February 15 for his involvement in the protest. His lawyer said the police failed to charge him or even give

any grounds for his arrest.

### **Nigerian university workers in Edo State protest non-payment of wages**

Workers at the Edo State-owned Ambrose Alli University in Ekpoma, Nigeria held a protest on February 20 demanding payment of salaries, withheld for 13 months. The protest broke out spontaneously, bringing all academic and administrative activities to a halt.

Workers condemned the "selective payment of salary, victimisation and oppression of workers... by the University Administration and Special Intervention Team (SIT)."

### **Ugandan specialist doctors walk out on strike to demand payment**

Ugandan Senior House Officers walked out on February 21 to demand payment of allowances covering four months. Dr. Robert Lubega, the Chief Resident, stated they last got their allowances in October 2022.

The Senior House Officers are qualified Senior Medical Doctors registered with the Uganda Medical and Dental Practitioners Council, who are engaging in postgraduate training to become expert in specialities of medicine.



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