

Spain: 5,000 doctors continue strike in Community of Madrid, joined by doctors in Valencia; West Bank: Palestinian teachers strike over pay; South Africa: health and public sector workers walk out for pay increase

## 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.*

### One-day general strike in Italy for wage equality

Workers in Italy joined a one-day general strike on Wednesday called by the “grassroots” USB union, denouncing “unprecedented wage inequality” on International Women’s Day, ANSA reported.

The USB called healthcare workers, teachers and workers in public transport and the private sector to walk out for the day. Media reports indicate many workers joined the strike, which was especially visible in widespread disruption of public transport.

### Dutch regional transport workers continue strikes over pay

Regional transport workers in the Netherlands held strikes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday this week, as part of a long-running pay dispute involving 13,000 workers, *De Telegraaf* reported.

The Federation of Dutch Trade Unions demands a 16.9 percent pay rise for this year, and the Christian National Trade Union Federation is calling for 14 percent spread over 18 months. The Public Transport Employers Association, which represents transport operators, including multinationals Arriva and Keolis, says it has offered an 11 percent pay rise.

### Doctors strike over staffing and pay in Madrid and Valencia, Spain

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

According to *Europa Press*, around 400 doctors joined a protest in

Madrid on Wednesday. They presented a petition to the ministry of health signed by 225,000 people in support of public health.

Doctors in the autonomous community of Valencia also began a one-day strike on Monday, demanding a 35-hour week and maximum patient-staff ratios. The Medical Union of the Valencian Community (CESM) denounced the acceptance of the government’s proposal by the national General Workers’ Union (UGT), Workers’ Commissions (CCOO) and Spanish Central Independent and Public Employees’ Trade Union, and said they “enthusiastically join the deception of the ministry,” *ABC* reported.

The Valencian government claimed that only 7.4 percent of doctors joined the strike, but the CESM told *ABC* it accused the government of “an abusive application of minimum services” which completely banned doctors in many specialisms from walking out. The CESM said 70 percent of doctors able to join the strikes did so. Two more 24-hour strikes are planned on April 3 and May 8.

### International Women’s Day strike in Catalonia, Spain, met with draconian minimum service requirements

On Wednesday, six unions in the Spanish autonomous community of Catalonia called a 24-hour general strike for International Women’s Day. Spain’s two largest unions, CCOO and UGT, did not call their members to join the strike, and the Catalan government imposed draconian minimum service requirements to limit participation.

*El Periódico* reported the restrictions imposed on workers in the public and private sectors. At least 85 percent of transport services were required to run, and 100 percent of primary school transport. Between a quarter and a half of teachers were included in the minimum service requirements. Healthcare workers were kept on the job to provide normal services in many hospital departments, and cleaning and food service workers in hospitals were declared “essential” and banned from striking.

### Care home workers strike against privatisation and for equal working conditions in Bizkaia, Spain

Workers at care homes in the Spanish province of Bizkaia held a one-day strike on Wednesday against privatisation and unequal working conditions between the public and private care homes.

The Basque-separatist Nationalist Workers' Committees called the walkout and further stoppages for three days in April and six days in May, telling *Europa Press* "privatisation of the service imposed by the Provincial Council drowns the workforce, makes working conditions precarious and abandons the care of the residents."

### **Further UK strikes planned for next week, as unions cancel strikes for talks**

Further strikes in the UK over pay and the rejection of well-below inflation pay offers are planned, as a number of trade union enter negotiations aimed at sell-outs deals.

Several unions suspended planned stoppages for talks in long-running disputes, in the face of strike mandates by their members, to pave the way for substandard deals.

Among the unions suspending action recently are the Royal College of Nursing, and other health unions including Unison, Unite and the GMB as government offers of talks were enthusiastically taken up by the trade union bureaucracy. In Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland suspended a series of ongoing strikes over pay in return for talks. The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) cancelled the stoppage at Network Rail planned for March 16 after receiving a new offer it is putting to a ballot. The Communication Workers Union at Royal Mail has also called off action and is preparing a sellout.

Several high-profile stoppages are scheduled next week. Monday will see the start of a 72-hour stoppage by around 50,000 junior doctors rejecting a two percent pay offer. They will be joined by the 900 junior doctors belonging to the Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association who will also begin a 72-hour strike, the first in its history.

Tens of thousands of teachers represented by the National Education Union in England and Wales will walk out for two days for higher pay from March 15, coinciding with the Tory government's budget announcement.

Over 100,000 civil servants across more than 100 government departments will also walk out on Wednesday. The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members will be joined by professional and senior civil servants in the smaller Prospect union.

Academic staff belonging to the University and College Union at around 150 universities across the UK will begin three days of strikes over pay, pensions and conditions. The strikes are taking place while UCU negotiators continue weeks of talks aims at ending the dispute.

RMT members employed by the 14 train operating companies plan to walk out over pay, working conditions and threatened job losses on March 16, 18 and 30, and April 1.

### **Further strikes by UK civil servants at government education body over pay and conditions**

UK workers employed by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) began a three-day strike on Monday. Three-day stoppages will be repeated each week throughout March.

Ofsted is responsible for inspecting and maintaining standards in

schools and other educational bodies in England. The PCS members are among the 100,000 civil servants who voted in November to walk out over pay, attacks on jobs and pensions and reduction in redundancy terms.

Rather than sanction all-out action, the PCS union bureaucracy limited action to sporadic strikes by a few thousand members.

### **London Underground rail workers to walk out on UK budget day**

Rail workers employed by Transport for London (TfL) underground rail system will walk out on March 15.

The drivers, belonging to the ASLEF union, and other London Underground Ltd rail workers, RMT members, are protesting over pay, attacks on pensions and job cuts. The RMT members held six 24-hour strikes last year over pay, job and pensions cuts. TfL has already begun to impose the up to 600 planned job losses.

### **Bus drivers in English West Midlands set to strike over pay**

Around 3,000 bus drivers working for National Express in the English West Midlands region are to begin an all-out continuous strike on March 16.

The Unite union members voted by a 96 percent majority to walk out over pay. Unite states some of the drivers are only on £11.80 an hour. Pay rises to £14.40 an hour after three years. The drivers will be joined by around 200 engineers, who previously voted to strike over pay.

National Express said it had made a 14 percent pay offer, which Unite said was worth just eight percent. The company increased its offer, which works out at 11.1 percent for drivers and 11.5 percent for engineers. RPI inflation is currently 13.4 percent.

The company announced its latest profit figures last week, stating its pre-tax profits for 2022 were £146 million, up from £40 million the previous year. The strike is expected to disrupt National Express services in the West Midlands, with the conurbations of Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Walsall, West Bromwich and Wolverhampton impacted.

### **Workers at UK power company to strike over pay**

Around 1,300 workers at UK Power Networks (UKPN) are to strike this month and in April over a pay offer.

The Unite union members rejected a below-inflation pay offer from UKPN. Unison and Prospect members accepted the offer, while GMB members have not been balloted. UKPN supplies electricity to around eight million customers across London and the southeast of England.

### **Midwives in Northern Ireland vote to strike over pay**

Midwives in Northern Ireland have voted by a 90 percent majority to strike to demand an improved pay rise, after being awarded a four percent rise in December.

The Royal College of Midwives (RCM) vote will be considered by the

RCM before announcing the next step.

### **UK senior doctors could ballot over pay and conditions**

Senior UK doctors may ballot for strike action over pay, pensions and pay review procedures.

The British Medical Association (BMA) members voted by an 86 percent majority on a 60 percent turnout in a consultative vote that they were prepared to ballot for strike action. The BMA said it will give the UK government until April 3 to come up with proposals on pay and conditions. Should the government fail to come up with agreeable proposals, the ballot for stoppages will begin mid-April and run until the end of May.

### **UK firefighters' union pushed through below-inflation pay deal lifting strike threat**

UK firefighters have voted by a 96 percent majority on an 84 percent turnout to accept a revised pay offer of seven percent backdated to July last year, plus an additional five percent increase from July 2023.

Fire Brigades Union general secretary Matt Wrack, while conceding that seven percent was a real-terms pay cut, tried to spin the five percent rise from July with forecasts of lower inflation, saying it, "may amount to a slight increase in real-terms pay."

In January, the 30,000 UK firefighters voted overwhelmingly to strike after rejecting the original five percent pay offer.

### **National strikes this week in Belgium over pay and conditions**

Belgian workers joined several strikes this week, including a walkout for International Women's Day on Wednesday, and a stoppage in all public services planned Friday.

On Wednesday, *The Brussels Times* reported, many workers in Brussels held a strike and joined a protest in the city centre, demanding pay increases to ensure equal pay between men and women, improved working hours and measures against workplace sexual harassment.

On Friday, teachers, transport workers, prison staff and other workers in public services plan to join a national strike, called by the General Union of Public Services. According to *Het Laatste Nieuws*, workers are opposed to both underfunding of public services and new pension plans announced by the government. Among other attacks, the government plans to limit pension increases, which currently rise in line with wages, to at most 0.5 percent per year.

### **Strikes at Delhaize supermarkets across Belgium against franchising plan**

Workers at most of the Delhaize supermarkets in Belgium spontaneously began a strike on Tuesday morning, after the company announced in a "special works council" meeting with the trade unions that

it would convert the 128 supermarkets it directly operates into franchises.

According to *The Brussels Times*, 636 of Delhaize's shops are already franchises, and the company complained that the profitability of its directly operated shops had fallen.

Delhaize claimed workers would be able to remain on their current wages and conditions, but many strikers told the media they did not believe this, as pay is lower and hours more flexible at the franchises. A representative from the General Labour Federation of Belgium told *Nieuwsblad*, "Legally, [the promises not to cut wages and conditions] are valid for six months, but what will happen after that?"

Workers in several stores told the media they intended to continue their walkout for at least a week.

### **Crnogorski Telekom workers in Montenegro continue months-long strike**

Around 200 workers at Crnogorski Telekom, Montenegro's largest telecommunications provider, have been on strike for three months over pay and collective bargaining.

According to *SEEBiz*, workers are demanding a 30 percent pay rise, and the union at Crnogorski Telekom accuses the company of planning to cancel the collective agreement and dictate terms unilaterally.

Crnogorski Telekom is part of the Deutsche Telekom group (formerly T-Mobile), which is around 30 percent owned by the German state.

### **Finnish union ends bus drivers' strike for below-inflation deal**

At the weekend the Finnish transport workers' union AKT announced it had signed a deal with employers for a new national collective agreement for bus drivers, which increases wages by much less than inflation, ending a strike begun on March 1.

The AKT isolated the strike, shutting down a strike by lorry drivers and port workers before the bus drivers walked out, after accepting a similar below-inflation pay rise.

According to *YLE*, the bus drivers' collective agreement will increase wages by around six percent between now and January 2025, which is around 3.2 percent per year, while inflation is 8.4 percent. Similar two-year deals with wage rises around six percent were agreed by unions representing manufacturing, retail and warehouse workers.

The contract did not deal with the 11.5 hour days drivers can currently work, only promising to "agree locally on trials of shorter working days," and the fact that many bus drivers lack access to toilets is to be looked at by a "joint working group of employees and employers." One bus driver commented on *YLE*, "A shocking mockery of the situation of bus drivers!... to top it all the human rights issues of the drivers to be fashionably 'locally agreed,' which until now have not been fixed!... I hope that at least someday the day will come when employers and AKT also consider bus drivers as human beings?"

The AKT published a defensive press release attempting to shield itself from members' anger at the deal, claiming its negotiators defeated many further proposed cuts to working conditions, "as if they were a goalkeeper, fending off the employer's shots, which is not easily seen. Negotiations take place behind closed doors."

### **Strike by teachers in the West Bank over pay enters second month**

The strike of Palestinian teachers in the West Bank begun on February 5 is continuing. The stoppage has affected the ongoing education of around one million students.

They are protesting the failure of the Palestinian Authority (PA) to pay a promised pay increase in full. Parents of the affected students have shown their support for the teachers. Teachers have called on PA president Mahmoud Abbas to intervene to resolve the strike.

Last April, teachers began a 50-day strike, which ended when the PA promised to address the teachers' demands but subsequently reneged on the deal.

### **General strike in Gaza and West Bank to protest killings in Jenin**

A general strike took place Wednesday in cities and towns across Gaza and the occupied West Bank to protest the killing of six Palestinians in Jenin on Tuesday by the Israeli army.

The strike call led to the closure of shops, schools and universities. Thousands of Palestinians took part in the funeral of the six Palestinians in the city of Jenin on Wednesday.

### **Lebanese teaching union ends strike, but some teachers refuse to go back to work**

The Lebanese teachers' union has ended the strike of teachers after the government agreed to give tenured teachers a fuel transport allowance of five litres of petrol four days a week, while contract teachers are to receive the petrol allowance for three days a week. In addition, all public school teachers will be given a monthly incentive bonus of US\$125 for the rest of the school year.

Many public school teachers who have returned, however, say they will refuse to teach the afternoon shift when Syrian refugee children are taught, while some contract teachers are refusing to return at all. Many teachers were angry the union ordered an end to the walkout without a general assembly meeting. Dozens of teachers held a protest outside the Ministry of Education on Monday denouncing the return to work.

### **South African health and public sector workers walk out over pay**

South African health workers began strike action this week in an ongoing dispute over pay, despite a Johannesburg court interdict to stop the action. The National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union members are fighting for a 10 percent pay increase against a 4.7 percent offer.

Hospitals in Pretoria, Gauteng and the Western Cape were affected, and workers at the department of higher education, magistrates' courts, home affairs and the department of public service and administration also walked out.

Striker Boitumelo Motaung, who earns R6,000 a month and supports a family of four, told *GroundUp*, "We are suffocating, and we are earning peanuts. I have three kids that are attending school and their father is

unemployed. I am taking care of everything and a few days after payday, I am left without a penny and survive off loan sharks. We need government to recognise our value as people. Sometimes I am forced to do the work of three people where I work because they are not employing enough cleaning staff."

### **Waste workers protest for higher grades in Msunduzi, South Africa**

South African waste management workers in Msunduzi marched to the City Hall to protest the slow response to their wage dispute last Thursday.

The South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) members have been fighting for better grading since October 2022. The workers are currently on grade 3 and demand to be on a grade 7.

According to *Citizen*, SAMWU raised a number of issues, including unroadworthy municipal vehicles for the waste department, safety of female department employees during night duty, and the bullying and intimidation of staff by departmental management.

### **Namibian city cleaners continue strike in Windhoek against union opposition**

Striking Namibian cleaning workers in the City of Windhoek took to the streets in protest on March 1, and handed in a petition to the city authorities.

They have been on strike since February 13, despite opposition from the Namibian Local Authority Workers Union (Nalawu). The workers demand improved working conditions, including better medical care, an employer-funded pension fund, and a danger allowance, as they come up against hazardous conditions on a daily basis.

Group spokesperson, Tilanus Kavaara, explained, "We are unfortunately the first point of contact to some of the most gnarly secrets of the city, disguised as rubbish. We see things no normal citizen may ever see in their lifetime"—including corpses, body parts, abandoned babies and dead fetuses, as well as hazardous materials.

The strike was denounced as illegal by both the authorities and Nalawu. 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."

### **Tunisian rail workers strike after government breaks agreement**

Rail workers at the state-owned National Society of Tunisian Railways (NSTR) held a one-day strike on March 2. The government had failed to keep its agreement made years ago on matters including promotions and working conditions.

The strike involved workers on the freight transport, commuter, long-distance and suburban lines.

### **Union calls off strike over pensions and non-payment of salaries in Abia State, Nigeria in exchange for promises**

The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) called off the strike across Abia State after signing a Memorandum of Understanding.

The NLC had declared the strike against the Abia State government on February 28, after the expiry of a two-week ultimatum on the non-payment of workers' salaries and pensioners' benefits.

The strike was effective, cutting power in the state and paralysing businesses. Assistant General Secretary, Chris Onyeka, admitted the NLC had not got "all we wanted" but that the priority was to "restore industrial peace."



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