

Greece: further general strike after train crash; Strikes across different sectors as UK government announces budget; West Bank: Palestinian teachers continue pay strike

## 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.*

### Greek general strike after deadly train crash

On Thursday, workers in Greece joined another general strike and major protests, begun after the death of 57 people in the train crash in Tempi on February 28. Tens of thousands of people joined a rally in Athens, holding banners reading, “It was not human error, it was crime,” and “Our dead, your profits,” *Kathimerini* reported.

Thousands of workers from airports, public transport, shipping and students joined the strikes and protests. Protesting workers and students denounced the conservative New Democracy government’s attempts to blame the disaster on “human error” and scapegoat low-level employees.

The opposition SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) party made a cynical attempt to cover up its own responsibility for the unsafe condition of the railway network, which it privatised in 2017. Party leader Alexis Tsipras told *AMNA*, “This tragedy is not an issue for confrontation between parties but a matter for the collective confrontation of society as a whole against those trying to conceal the truth.”

### Greek archaeologists stop work after “mafia-style attack” on colleague

Archaeologists working for the government on the Greek island of Mykonos held a one-day work stoppage on Tuesday. They protested a brutal attack on Manolis Psarros, an archaeologist who reported two companies for breaking the laws protecting historic sites.

Psarros told *The Telegraph*, “I remember approaching my car and then the next memory I have is being loaded into the ambulance.” *Kathimerini* reported that after being attacked by two men he “suffered a severe blow to the back of his head, broken ribs and fractures to his nose and face” and had to be flown off the island to a hospital in Athens.

The Association of Greek Archaeologists (SEA) told *The Telegraph*, “The assault was professional,” and accused the Minister of Culture Lina Mendoni of intervening “in favour of business interests”

against the protection of Greece archaeological heritage. Mendoni visited Psarros in hospital, but he described the minister’s visit as “completely perfunctory” and agreed with the SEA’s criticism of the ministry.

### Public sector workers hold national one-day strike in Portugal over pay and conditions

Workers in public services in Portugal, including teachers and nurses, will hold a national one-day strike on Friday. The strike was called by the Common Front of Public Administration Unions to call for a pay increase and improved career progression.

*Lusa* reported comments by the Common Front that it expected a “massive adhesion” to the walkout, as “Public administration workers have been losing purchasing power for decades, the Government remains unresponsive, we have a picture of general impoverishment of workers in the country.”

### Public sector warning strikes continue in Germany for pay increase

Workers in German public services continue a series of warning strikes for an above-inflation pay increase, with healthcare and airport workers stopping work this week alongside transport and day care workers.

The strikes are being called by the United Services Union (Verdi) during collective bargaining negotiations for 2.5 million public-sector workers. Verdi is calling for a 10.5 percent or 500 euro wage increase, whichever is higher.

The *Berliner Morgenpost* reported that workers at four airports in northern cities, including Berlin, walked out all day on Monday, cancelling 351 flights. Workers at public clinics began a two-day walkout from Wednesday.

Healthcare workers spoke to WSWs reporters on Wednesday and called for the extension of warning strikes into a real struggle over pay and the defence of public services. One said, “I’ve been working here for three years and there has never been a wage increase since then. What we really need now is a wage increase of 25 percent. 10.5 percent is still a real wage reduction. At 10.5 percent, we will not be able to remedy the staff

shortage either.”

Many were also critical of Verdi, which has limited the struggle of public sector workers to short stoppages by a few sectors at a time. A worker from the Charité clinic said, “The union does too little and hardly makes itself felt.” Another said, “They’re pretending that no one wanted to go on strike before. But we always wanted to go on strike, it just didn’t happen. I think the people at the post office, the airports and the hospitals should all strike together.”

### **Spanish lawyers continue indefinite pay strike**

Public lawyers in Spain continue an indefinite strike over pay which has now lasted more than seven weeks. Last week, 2,000 lawyers joined a demonstration in Madrid.

The Lawyers of the Administration of Justice (LAJ) union says that 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 strike had a major impact, with widespread participation across Spain. According to *La Nueva España* on Wednesday, 392,300 trials were suspended nationwide, and nearly 1.2 billion euros held by the courts have not yet been paid out in fines and compensation from court cases.

### **Doctors’ union announces agreement to end staffing and pay strike in Madrid, Spain**

The Amyts doctors union announced this Wednesday that it had reached a verbal agreement with the Community of Madrid to end the indefinite strike by around 5,000 doctors and paediatricians, begun in January. Doctors walked out to demand maximum patient-staff ratios and a pay rise.

Amyts called an online meeting at 10 p.m. on Wednesday night, *La Nueva España* reported, at which members reportedly voted in favour, although the vote totals have not been reported in the media. The strikes will be called off once the final details of the deal are decided between the strike committee and the Community.

Amyts promoted the deal as allocating “more budget than there was” to public health, but has made few details public apart from the monthly wage increase of 450 euros. The union told *ABC*, “We have never thought that a labour conflict of this kind would resolve the complicated situation in which the Madrid Health [system] finds itself, but we would settle for it being a change of course so that it stops deteriorating.”

### **Delhaize supermarket workers across Belgium continue strikes against franchising plan**

Workers at the Delhaize supermarket chain in Belgium continue strikes which began spontaneously last week. This followed the company announcing it would convert the 128 supermarkets it directly operates into franchises, affecting around 9,000 workers.

Workers at individual supermarkets told the media they would stay on strike until Sunday, or even into next week.

Delhaize claimed workers would be able to remain on their current

wages and conditions, but this only applied to a period of six months, and the 636 existing Delhaize franchises have lower pay and more flexible hours. *The Brussels Times* reported that 240 workers have already been told they may lose their job.

The trade unions have directed their appeals towards politicians and openly plan to limit the strikes. A spokesperson from the General Labour Federation of Belgium told *The Brussels Times*, “After the end of this week, we will probably switch to planning phased strikes, meaning one week we will focus our actions on one area and the next week in another.” She added that they intended to avoid all workers striking together because “people on strike don’t receive pay” from the unions.

### **Firefighters begin indefinite strike in Brussels, Belgium**

Firefighters in Brussels voted on Monday to indefinitely extend the strikes begun last week, according to *Het Laatste Nieuws*.

Between 500 and 600 firefighters joined a protest in the Belgian capital last week, calling for increased staffing and funding levels for the fire service, and the right to early retirement due to the difficulties of their work.

The fire service issued requisition orders to force enough firefighters back to work to provide a normal service. A spokesperson for the Brussels fire brigade told *Het Laatste Nieuws* last week that a number of firefighters had also called in sick.

### **Couriers strike against excessive fines at Wildberries, Russia’s largest online retailer**

Couriers working for Wildberries, the largest online retailer in Russia, began a strike this week against the company’s policy of fines for returned or defective goods. *Lenta* reported that after a protest in Moscow, the walkout spread nationwide with deliveries halted in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg and cities throughout the east.

Wildberries has around 9,000 delivery points in Russia, and around 3,500 of those are owned by workers who are technically classed as self-employed. The self-employed workers are reportedly fined 100 percent of the payment for a delivery if the customer reports that the goods received are defective.

The *Baza* Telegram channel reported that Wildberries had ended its contracts with many of the self-employed delivery workers who had gone on strike, firing them for taking part in protests and strikes. According to *Versia*, the company also threatened fines to strikers for disseminating “inaccurate or inciting information” and not accepting deliveries of new goods.

According to *Lenta*, Wildberries has now reduced its fines from 100 percent of salaries to 40 percent. The Wildberries worker who gave this information to the newspaper said many workers intended to continue the strike as the company had not changed its debt policy. Under this policy, debts can be deducted from pay, and he said he owed the company 350,000 rubles.

### **Mass strikes across UK as chancellor announces budget**

As the UK Tory government's Chancellor of the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt announced his budget on Wednesday, around half a million workers were out on strike opposing his government's punitive pay policy.

Wednesday marked the third day of the three-day strike by junior doctors across England. Around 45,000 junior doctors represented by the British Medical Association and the smaller Hospital Consultants and Specialist Association walked out to protest a two percent pay rise. The RPI rate of inflation is 13.4 percent. In real terms, junior doctors have seen their pay eroded by around 26 percent since 2008.

Wednesday was the first day of a two-day strike by tens of thousands of teachers across England, leading to the closure or partial closure of thousands of schools.

The National Education Union (NEU) members are campaigning for a fully funded 12 percent pay rise. The NEU organised a march Wednesday in London from Hyde Park to Trafalgar Square, organising transport from many parts of England to bring striking teachers to the rally.

Wednesday also saw over 130,000 civil servants walk out across the UK. Around 120 government departments were affected, including the Department for Health and Social Care, Department for Transport, the Home Office and Border Force.

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) members stoppage is part of an ongoing programme of mainly sporadic limited partial strikes by civil servants protesting pay, attacks on jobs, pensions and a reduction in redundancy terms.

The PCS organised rallies across the UK alongside other sectors to mark the walkout. Rallies were held in major cities including Belfast, Birmingham, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, London and Manchester.

Around 70,000 university academic staff at some 150 universities began three days of stoppages on Wednesday. The University and College Union (UCU) members are fighting for improved pay and against cuts in pension provision, jobs and the ongoing casualisation of the profession. They are also due to walk out Monday to Wednesday next week.

Journalists working at the BBC began a 24-hour strike Wednesday. Around 1,000 journalists took part in the stoppage, including around 25 at Broadcasting House in London who set up a picket line.

The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) members are opposed to plans for 39 BBC local radio programmes to share programmes with neighbouring local radio stations after 2 p.m. 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 members say the proposals would mean job losses and journalists applying for their own jobs. It would also mean nearly six million local radio listeners left with a "much-reduced service." The strike led to the disruption of local TV and radio programmes.

Workers on the London Underground rail system began a 24-hour strike Wednesday morning, involving train drivers, ASLEF members, and around 10,000 station staff belonging to the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union.

The strike is in opposition to plans by Transport for London (TfL), which runs the tube, to impose cuts. TfL proposes to cut pension provision, adversely amend working agreements and cut around 600 jobs.

Workers face not just government attacks, but the unions closing down strikes for talks to negotiate below-inflation deals, as they did in Scotland and Wales. The Royal College of Nursing, GMB and Unison are about to put a below-inflation pay offer to hundreds of thousands of National Health Service workers after calling off planned action.

### **Week-long strike by UK Amazon workers over pay in Coventry**

Around 450 workers at the Amazon Coventry distribution centre came out on strike on Monday. The stoppage is due to last until Friday. The site employs around 1,400 workers.

The GMB members are protesting a pay rise offer of 50p an hour. Come April the proposed 50p rise would mean Amazon workers being paid only 8p above the government-legislated national minimum wage. Workers at the site held the first official UK Amazon strike in January. It has since held a further two 24-hour strikes.

Unofficial walkouts took place at several Amazon sites in August last year, after the company announced the 50p an hour rise.

### **Refuse workers walk out in Norfolk, England over pay offer**

UK refuse collectors, street and toilet cleaners and maintenance workers employed by Serco to provide services to North Norfolk and Breckland councils began a week-long strike Monday.

The Unison union members rejected a "terrible" offer from the company and are seeking an improved offer. On Monday, around 50 pickets gathered outside the Serco depot to press their demands. Some of the workers are only on the national minimum wage of £9.50 an hour.

### **Container manufacturing workers in Portadown, Northern Ireland to strike over pay**

Around 200 workers employed by Kingspan Water and Energy Ltd in Portadown plan to strike on Monday.

The Unite union members voted by a 99 percent majority on a 91 percent turnout to walk out. They rejected a five percent pay offer from the company. The workers are angry that the workers at Portadown were not offered a £1,000 cost of living payment made to other Kingspan employees. Kingspan, which manufactures containers for mass storage of water and fuels, made a £733 million profit last year, up 10 percent from the previous year.

### **Fuel delivery drivers at UK firm to strike over pay**

Around 40 drivers working for JW Suckling and Hoyer Gas and Petroleum Logistics Ltd are due to walk out on March 27.

The Unite union members are employed by the logistics company to deliver fuel as part of the Phillips 66 contract to Jet petrol stations. They are based at depots in Essex, Grangemouth in Scotland, Stockport and West London. The drivers are angry at being paid £5 an hour less than drivers employed by other haulage companies on the Phillips 66 contract.

The drivers at the Essex, West London and Stockport depots will begin an initial week-long strike on March 27. Those at Grangemouth will begin all-out continuous strike action the same day.

### **Scottish Further Education lecturers to ballot over pay offer**

Lecturers in Scotland will ballot for possible industrial action after

rejecting a two percent pay offer from the employers' body, College Employers Scotland.

The ballot of Educational Institute of Scotland–Further Education Lecturers Association (EIS-FELA) members begins on Monday.

### **St Mungo's homeless charity workers in England ballot over pay**

Around 500 UK workers employed by the homeless charity St Mungo's are balloting for strike action over pay. The ballot closes March 31.

The Unite union members have seen the real terms value of their pay eroded by 25 percent over the last 10 years, in contrast to St Mungo's chief executives, who saw their pay rise by 77 percent over the same period.

St Mungo's provides help to homeless people in areas across southern England, including Bournemouth, Brighton, Bristol, London, Oxford and Reading. St Mungo's employs 1,700 workers and recognises both the Unite and Unison unions.

### **Planned strike of bus workers at National Express West Midlands in England called off by Unite union**

The all-out continuous strike of around 3,000 bus drivers working for National Express in the English West Midlands due to begin Thursday was suspended by the Unite union.

The company made what it described as an "improved offer" which Unite is putting to the drivers. Should it be rejected, indefinite strike action will begin Monday.

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

National Express claimed its original offer was worth 14 percent, but Unite said it was worth eight percent. The company then increased its offer, which works out at 11.1 percent for drivers and 11.5 percent for engineers. The Unite press release announcing the suspension of the strike gave no details of the new offer.

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

### **Palestinian teachers on West Bank continue stoppage after government fails to keep promises over pay**

On Sunday, Palestinian teachers on the West Bank vowed to continue their strike, which is approaching its two-month mark.

Palestinian Authority Prime Minister, Mohammad Shtayyeh had promised teachers they would get a 15 percent pay increase plus a 10 percent retroactive payment. However, the amounts failed to appear in their latest pay packets and so the teachers continued their walkout.

### **Strike in Nablus on West Bank in response to Israeli security force killings**

A strike was declared Sunday in the West Bank city of Nablus, which led to the closure of shops, in response to the killing of three Palestinians by Israeli security forces earlier in the day. One of those killed was an 18-year-old. The latest deaths brings the total killed since January by Israeli forces to over 80.

### **Strike of Lebanese private school teachers over pensions and pay**

Private school teachers in Lebanon held a one-day strike Tuesday.

Among their demands were for the Lebanese government to pay a grant of 10 billion Lebanese pounds into the retired private teachers' pension fund. Many retirees are impacted by the ongoing economic crisis in the country, leaving them unable to provide for their families. They also demanded increased pay.

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.

### **South African union sabotages public sector strike over pay**

The pay strike begun last week by South African health and public sector workers has been called off by the National Education, Health and Allied Workers after the government agreed to talks at the bargaining council.

Workers walked out despite a Johannesburg court interdict to stop the action, in their fight for a 10 percent pay increase against a 4.7 percent offer.

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

### **Nigeria Labour Congress threatens national strike after calling off strike in Imo State**

On March 14, the umbrella Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) issued a seven-day strike ultimatum to the Nigerian government to put an end to the current scarcity of currency and fuel.

NLC leaders said they were "outraged" at the pain and hardship caused to their members, including workers across the public sector and most industries, by government policies.

The following day the NLC called off the pay strike in Imo State, claiming it was suspended for two weeks and would restart if the state government failed to deliver. The strike was called to protest non-payment of 20 months' salary arrears to NLC members.

### **Botswana miners at Masama coal mine walk out ahead of layoffs**

Over 300 workers at Masama coal mine walked out on March 7 ahead of being laid off on March 31, as mining contractor Jarcon Opencast Mining Botswana negotiates with mine owner, Minergy Limited.

Jarcon filed papers announcing its intention to retrench more than 300 workers. Botswana Mine Workers Union President Joseph Tsimako said, “What we have heard is that [the mine owners] have stopped production at the moment and the mining contractor [Jarcon] has asked workers to sit at home with pay until the end of the month.”

In a January 25 notice, Minergy directors said the six-month period to December 2022 had seen volumes up 53 percent and pricing up by 66 percent compared to last year, as the global energy crisis pushes up coal prices. Minergy CEO Morne du Plessis said, “The remarkable increase in demand for coal and higher prices, coupled with stable operations, continue to benefit Minergy.”

Mineworkers previously downed tools in August 2019 over a pay dispute with Jarcon.



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