

Italy: national one-day rail strike over work conditions; Iran: ongoing protests over pay and social conditions; South Africa: auto workers at Tenneco South Africa Inc. strike over pay cuts and sackings

## 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.*

Europe

### National one-day rail strike in Italy over conditions

Workers at the primary Italian rail operator Trenitalia will strike on April 14, between 9am and 5pm. The action is expected to cause major disruption to services across the whole country and will involve all workers at the company.

The strike has been called jointly by six unions. In a statement, the unions noted that “Since the end of the pandemic, the working conditions of both railway workers and contractors in cleaning and catering have actually worsened.”

### Doctors and health workers’ stoppages across Spain over staff shortages, long hours and pay

Doctors in Galicia, Spain walked out on indefinite strike on Tuesday, reported *El Español*.

The State Confederation of Medical Unions in Galicia (CESM) members are demanding a 35-hour week to end to work overload, the freezing of salaries, plus improved work conditions. The staffing crisis was exacerbated during the pandemic leading to burnout.

CESM delegates appealed to the Galician Health Services Sergas with an “outstretched hand” to begin negotiations, although they had lacked the “political will” to address doctors’ concerns before, reported *Europa Press*.

The medics will maintain emergency and urgent care during the stoppage.

Indefinite strikes continue in Ceuta and Melilla, as specialist doctors demand new equipment and improved career opportunities. Around 1,600 consultations have been cancelled and 120 surgeries postponed. Primary care doctors also went on strike on Tuesday, to protest understaffing,

which is affecting time spent with patients.

Also on Tuesday, 250 UGT members at six hospital laboratories also walked out for three days. In 2008, the public laboratories were taken over by private companies Unilabs and Ribera Salud. Since then, half the workforce left due to a freeze on salaries and precarious contracts.

On Wednesday, Andalusian Medical Union members held a demonstration and marched to the Andalusian Health Service headquarters in Seville. The primary health care physicians walked out for 12 hours to demand pay parity with hospital doctors, and will strike every Wednesday until local elections on May 24.

Minimum service levels were set at 100 percent in emergencies and 30 percent in consultations.

### Bus workers to strike in Las Palmas, Gran Canaria over attacks on pay

Workers at the public transport company in Las Palmas, the capital of Spanish island Gran Canaria, plan to walk out on April 14, 17 and 19 from 6am to 9 am and from 7pm to 10pm. Further partial stoppages follow from April 25 to May 1, and from May 2 the strike will be indefinite.

The Municipal Workers union members oppose the employer’s attempts to recoup hours workers did not work during the pandemic when they were on call. They also demand staff are paid supplements for seniority and night shifts, as agreed at mediation.

### Municipal prefecture workers in Romania strike over wages

On Monday, around 1,800 civil servants and contract staff in 30 prefectures in Romania began a general strike over wages and conditions. The strike continued Tuesday, after no resolution was offered.

Prefecture staff are on lower wages than workers at county councils, town halls or other decentralised public services. Salaries have not changed in years, while their responsibilities have increased regularly. Strikers at Buz?u Prefecture carried placards describing the prefecture as

the “Cinderella of the administration.”

The strikers are demanding salaries to reflect their duties, with the union pointing out that the prefecture is “a control body for the activities of local public administration and coordination of decentralised services.” They are calling for their positions to be transferred from territorial to state responsibility, and to fall under the regulation of central government rather than being subordinate to the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

When none of these demands were met, strikes continued Tuesday. Union leader Stelic? Bordea said all services remained suspended at Buz?u apart from receipt of correspondence at the chancellery, although press report work continued at the Passport Service. “For now, we are talking about a strike on indefinitely,” said Bordea.

### **Bus drivers in Brittany continue wage strike**

Drivers employed by Keolis at QUB, the regional bus network around Quimper in Brittany, France, continue their strike for better wages and working conditions.

The strikers held a demonstration on Friday outside the Quimper town hall. While the company predicted only minor reduction in service during Tuesday’s strike, *ici* were reporting “major disruption” on Wednesday. Workers again demonstrated outside the town hall, blocking access with their cars. Unions claim nearly 60 percent of workers due to work Wednesday were on strike.

### **Cancer care workers strike at Nantes University Hospital, France over workload and lack of staff**

Health care workers in the cancer surgery department at Nantes University Hospital, France have been on strike since April 3 over excessive workloads and a shortage of qualified staff. They say patients are placed in danger because there are insufficient staff to take care of them, and describe exhaustion at their workload.

Hospital management temporarily closed half of the 28 cancer surgery department beds from April 7 to April 12, according to the CFDT union, which called the strike. The union has called for the beds to remain closed until there are enough staff “to meet the real needs of the service.”

### **Strikers at Delhaize supermarkets in Belgium face bailiffs, threat of fines**

Workers at Delhaize supermarkets in Belgium continue strikes against company plans to convert its 128 directly operated stores into franchises.

Although the unions are not paying strike pay, the walkouts have continued for a month. In a bid to break the strike, the company has now called bailiffs to reopen stores, and threatened strikers with punitive fines.

Around 9,000 jobs are affected by the proposed changes. The company claimed workers would be able to keep their current pay and working conditions, but only for six months. Existing Delhaize franchises pay less than the directly operated stores. Workers fear losses of 25-30 percent of their salary as well as travel expenses and other benefits, as well as having to work Sundays and bank holidays.

Delhaize has stepped up its efforts to break the strike, this week calling

bailiffs to force the reopening of 19 affected stores, most of them in Flanders. Bailiffs were also sent to the Zellik distribution centre, where 300 workers picketed last week.

Strikers have been threatened with fines of 1,000 euros per customer or supplier prevented from entering each store. Trade unions claim that Delhaize used students as scab labour to keep the Hornu store open over Easter weekend, as well as paying security guards to keep the doors open.

Despite this, 46 stores remain closed, primarily in Wallonia and Brussels.

Negotiations are scheduled for April 18. Two unions, ACLVB and ACV Pils, called for a strike across the whole retail sector on April 17.

### **Warning strikes at Amazon warehouse in Germany over pay and conditions**

Workers at Amazon logistics warehouse in Winsen/Luhe, Germany, walked out for three warning strikes of three and a half hours each on April 2-3.

The Verdi union is seeking the same collective bargaining agreements for Amazon workers that cover retail and mail order workers in Lower Saxony. Union secretary Havva Öztürk said, “High levels of sick leave, mental stress, inadequate pay and the lack of inflation compensation are the major issues facing the workforce.”

### **Warning strike by workers at insolvent department store in Germany facing thousands of job losses**

Workers in 19 department stores in Germany went on a warning strike on Saturday against restructuring of the insolvent company, meaning job losses.

The Verdi members walked out at five stores in Hamburg, six in Baden-Württemberg and eight in Hesse of the group Galeria Karstadt Kaufhof. They face the closure of 47 of its 129 branches nationwide, with the loss of around 4,000 jobs.

Verdi claimed the strike was called over deadlocked collective bargaining for the 17,000 employees, according to *Suddeutsche Zeitung*.

On April 6, 35 workers held a stoppage at Ikea furniture stores in Magdeburg and Gunthersdorf. Long hours and unfilled vacancies increasing workload has led to high sickness rates. The Verdi union wants the company to engage in collective bargaining.

### **Ear, nose and throat doctors in Germany calling for strikes over lack of health funding**

Ear, nose and throat (ENT) surgeons in Germany are calling for indefinite strike action in certain children’s surgeries over lack of funding, according to *dpa* news channel.

Health insurance for minor surgical procedures has been slashed from 111 to 107 euros. Some doctors receive an average fee of 10-20 euros per surgical procedure, before tax and pension contributions are deducted, leaving many to leave the profession.

In Hamburg, the number of tonsil and middle ear operations fell by 76 percent in three years. The number of ENT surgeons fell from 50 to 20

between 2019 and 2022. In Baden-Württemberg, outpatient children's surgeries decreased by almost 53 percent, the number of surgeons by almost 29 percent. The total number of ENT paediatric operations fell by almost 32 percent in Bavaria.

### **Portuguese workers employed by union strike over pay**

Workers at Portuguese Mais Sindicato union have called a two-day strike April 19-20, accusing the union of "total disrespect" and failure to increase wages for a decade.

Mais Sindicato employs 1,359 workers, and the strike will involve workers at SAMS, a private health subsystem managed by the union.

The strike was called by Siteze, the union of service sector workers. Siteze said it had "done everything to obtain consensus solutions" to labour issues at Mais Sindicato, but the employer had long adopted "practices of total disrespect" for workers and their representative organisations.

Mais Sindicato is accused of not paying overtime, discriminatory awards practices, failure to raise wages for over a decade, restricting union activity and breach of commitments to unions, as well as "unacceptable attacks on parental rights."

Workers presented proposals for wage increases to meet the "galloping increase in essential goods, interest rates, transport, fuel and essential goods," but have been waiting for a response since January.

Mais Sindicato, which also represents workers in the banking sector, said negotiations were underway, but it did not expect a large turnout for the strike.

### **Local government workers in Užice, Serbia strike over wages and conditions**

Workers in Serbia at Užice PUB Bioktoš, which manages Užice city's hygiene, parking lots, cemeteries and market, were to strike on Monday after the company and local government failed to meet their demands over pay and conditions.

The company is in free fall, with its third director in three years and capital collapsing after a series of business failures. Željko Radulovi?, a refuse driver, told *Danas* the company had reached a crisis within a year and a half, and that workers have been "brought to the brink of existence." Most of the workers, said Glišo Vidovi? of the Sloga union, "today receive minimum wages."

The members of the Sloga, Nezavisni and Samostalni unions called for a 20 percent wage increase, payment of an increased holiday allowance, a 500-dinar daily hot meal allowance, the payment of solidarity aid and trade union representation at company supervisory boards.

The company and City administration agreed to the corporatist union presence on supervisory boards, to raise holiday pay, and pay solidarity aid. They offered only a 330-dinar meal allowance, but rejected the pay demand.

Deputy Mayor Dragoljub Stojadinovi? said "increasing wages is not possible, because it would endanger the business and functioning of all public companies in the city."

The unions called the strike after spontaneous protests by workers. Vladimir Ristanovi?, president of Sloga in the city, said that management had not even fulfilled their promises of last year, admitting, "We were too patient."

### **Staff at Scottish council strike over outsourcing threat**

Manual staff working for Dundee city council, Scotland began a three-week strike on April 4.

The Unite union members voted by a 95 percent majority to oppose claims that the council is preparing to outsource some of its operations. Those taking part include electricians, joiners, labourers, plumbers and scaffolders. Following the stoppage, the workers will hold a series of one-day walkouts until June 23.

### **UK Environment Agency staff to hold further strikes over pay**

Thousands of staff working for the UK environmental protection body the Environment Agency (EA) are to begin a four-day strike on Friday.

The Unison union members rejected a pay offer of two percent plus a £345 consolidated lump sum. RPI inflation is currently 13.8 percent. According to Unison, the pay of EA workers has been eroded by around 20 percent since 2010.

The EA workers previously held one-day strikes in January and February, as well as action short of striking (asos) over three consecutive weekends in March and April. The asos took the form of withdrawing from voluntary incident response rosters. The four-day strike will be the longest in the dispute.

These are the first stoppages by EA workers since the body was established in 1996.

### **UK offshore oil contractors set to hold 48-hour stoppage**

Around 1,350 UK offshore oil platform workers are due to begin a 48-hour strike on April 24.

The Unite union members work for oil contracting firms Bilfinger UK Limited, Petrofac Facilities Management, Stork Technical Services, Sparrows Offshore Services and Worley Services UK Limited. These companies provide offshore services to big oil producing companies such as BP, Shell and Total.

The electricians, engineers, pipe fitters, scaffolders and workers in other roles demand higher pay and better working conditions as well as having issues related to the three on/three off shift pattern. They voted by big majorities—100 percent at Petrofac and Worley—for the action, which Unite says will bring dozens of platforms to a standstill. The GMB and RMT unions have balloted their members working on the offshore platforms.

### **Workers at UK homelessness charity set to walk out over pay**

Around 500 staff working for the St Mungo's homelessness charity will begin a four-week strike on Monday over pay. St Mungo's operates across London and the south of England.

The Unite union members voted by a 66 percent majority to walk out,

seeking a 10 percent backdated pay rise. The charity imposed a £1,925 rise plus an additional cost of living lump sum of £700 paid to most of the staff. St Mungo's says it does not have the resources to meet the claim, but according to Unite senior management pay rose by 350 percent over the last 10 years.

### **Workers at Scottish naval dockyard to strike over pay**

Around 100 workers employed by contractor Kaefer at the Rosyth dockyard in Scotland are set to begin a 12-week all-out strike on Monday.

The Unite union members voted by over 98 percent for the action after the company failed to make a pay offer. Since the vote, Kaefer made a 7.2 percent pay offer which was rejected by the workforce.

Kaefer is under contract to the dockyard owner, Babcock International Group PLCC. Babcock's £1.25 billion contract with the Royal Navy to build five Type 31 frigates will be hit by the walkout.

### **NASUWT teachers rejects UK government's pay offer**

Teachers belonging to the NASUWT union have rejected the UK Conservative government's pay offer of a £1,000 one-off bonus plus an average 4.5 percent pay rise.

An 87 percent majority of NASUWT members rejected the offer, while 72 percent voted to ballot for strike action over the issue. Over 52 percent of NASUWT's 130,000 membership took part in the ballot.

Following the vote, NASUWT's National Executive met and confirmed its intention to ballot members in schools and sixth form colleges for industrial action. As yet the union has given no dates for a strike ballot.

After the vote, however, NASUWT's general secretary Patrick Roach called on Education Secretary, Gillian Keegan, to make an offer along the lines of the five percent pay offer plus one-off four percent made to nurses in England. He told journalists at their recent annual conference in Glasgow that he would recommend such an offer to NASUWT members, as did the Royal College of Nursing. The *Guardian* reported him saying, "I'd be prepared to put a positive spin on it—why wouldn't I?"

NASUWT's vote means all four teaching unions, the National Education Union (NEU), the National Association of Head Teachers and the Association of School and College Leaders have now rejected the government's offer. The NEU has announced one-day walkouts on April 27, May 2, and three in June and July.

### **Engineers at Scottish company ballot over pay parity**

Around 120 workers at Mahle Engine Systems in Kilmarnock, Scotland are balloting for strike action over pay parity.

The Unite union members are protesting the company's decision to pay a supplementary top-up payment worth 6.8 percent to only part of the workforce. In January the whole workforce was given a 3.4 percent pay increase. The ballot closes on April 25.

Middle East

### **Ongoing protests in Iran over pay and social conditions**

Last week, oil workers in Iran demanded the oil minister implement Article 10 relating to their working conditions. Article 10 is a decree stipulating the pay and working conditions of tens of thousands of oil workers approved in 2012. The oil workers gave notice that if the decree was not implemented by this week, they would seek to remove the oil minister.

Also last week, around 100 workers employed by the Darugr pharmaceutical company in Tehran protested the dismissal of 14 colleagues and three months' wage arrears. Nurses and nursing assistants at Reza hospital in Mashhad held a protest against low wages and heavy workloads.

This week saw ongoing protests in various cities by retirees against the rising cost of living and poor social conditions. The protest of retirees in Sush was joined by Haft Tappeh sugarcane workers. In the city of Jolfa, workers from the Para Plastic company held a protest outside the company premises protesting the wage arrears.

### **UN Relief and Works Agency staff in Gaza hold one-day strike over unmet demands**

Staff working for the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in Gaza held a one-day strike Sunday. It led to the closure of health clinics and schools, and rubbish went uncollected.

The UNRWA workers have been involved in ongoing action since November over a series of demands. UNRWA claims to be suffering budget shortages as a result of a lack of donations. Some demands were met, like the appointment of additional teachers, but other issues are outstanding, such as sanitation workers not being given employment contracts in spite of working for the organisation for 12 years.

### **Further protests in Israel following Netanyahu speech**

Protests took place in Tel Aviv on Monday night, following an earlier televised speech by Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The protest led to the closure of the Ayalon Highway and some arrests. In his speech, Netanyahu blamed recent terrorist attacks on the ongoing protest movement against his far-right coalition government's judicial reform plans.

Africa

### **Auto workers at Tenneco South Africa strike against wage cuts and sackings**

Auto workers at Tenneco South Africa in Gqeberha took strike action last week, against threatened wage cuts of 50 percent and for the reinstatement of 100 workers who have received termination letters.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa members earn R114 a day, and management wants to cut this to the lowest-paid rate of R67. The workers have been fighting for equal rates.

The union said the strike is indefinite until the demands are met.

### **COVID-19 support staff in Gauteng, South Africa protest for permanent contracts**

Nurses and other health workers in Gauteng, South Africa, whose contracts ended last month, carried out several protests last week outside hospitals and interrupted a Medical Executive Committee meeting in Mamelodi. The workers were employed during the pandemic as COVID-19 support staff.

The health workers are demanding permanent contracts, as opposed to the temporary works programme being offered.

### **Strike by housing workers in Namibia ends with union sellout**

A lengthy strike for better working conditions by employees of the National Housing Enterprise in Namibia ended on April 11, with the union agreeing a one-off payment.

Workers now face deductions from their pay for the next eight months due to implementation of the “no work, no pay” agreement accepted by the Public Service Union of Namibia (PSUN). The PSUN also agreed there would be an orderly return to work with no disruption.



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