

Tens of thousands strike across Norway as Swedish train drivers hold three-day wildcat job action

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Around 24,000 workers in the transportation, energy, construction, and the food and drink industries have been on strike across Norway since Sunday.

The action was called by the main trade union association Landesarbeiderorganisasjonen (LO) and the smaller Federation of Vocational Unions (YS) after talks broke down over the employer's organisation's attempt to enforce below-inflation pay increases.

Strikes of this size are rare in Norway, which has relied on an extensive corporatist relationship between the unions, employers, and the state for decades to smother the class struggle. The last time LO organised a larger strike was over two decades ago, when 86,000 workers participated in a walkout in 2000. Many of the businesses where workers are striking have not experienced a strike since World War II. If a deal is not reached by Friday, an additional 17,000 workers from manufacturing companies and other sections of industry could join the strike.

LO demanded in negotiations wage increases that keep pace with inflation, which is expected to run at 4.9 percent in Norway this year. The employers' organisation NHO claimed to have made a fair offer that met the unions' demand. However, the leeway granted to individual employers to reach pay settlements with their workers within a 2 percent range of the centrally agreed pay increase, a procedure that can result in what is known as "wage slippage," would have resulted in a real-terms pay cut for most workers.

The failed negotiations were part of a bargaining round set for the halfway mark of the centrally negotiated wage agreements, which typically run for two years. The unions felt they had no option but to reject a mediator's proposal on April 16, reflecting the

pressure of the workers for higher pay increases. Anger has been fuelled by massive pay increases for top managers, with 3,100 managers across industry enjoying average pay increases of 9.6 percent last year. Raises in the profitable oil and gas sector for managers were even higher at an outrageous 21 percent.

The fact that the unions felt compelled to call the strike and could expand it further underscores how the basis upon which Norway's corporatist structures have suppressed the class struggle is breaking down. For much of the post-war era, centralised bargaining between the unions and employers resulted in relatively generous wages and benefits for workers. These policies were made possible by Norway's extensive oil and gas wealth, and by the temporary post-war economic stability secured by the hegemony of US imperialism.

The US-NATO war on Russia has transformed Norway and the other Nordic countries into frontline states in the imperialists' drive to reduce Russia to the status of a semi-colony. Norway has experienced a vast expansion of US military activity, especially in its far north where it has a short 196-kilometre border with Russia. Finland and Sweden are being rapidly integrated into NATO, facilitating the deployment of military forces from the US and European imperialist powers throughout the Nordic region.

The sweeping economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the Western powers have also made Norway an even more important player on Europe's energy markets, where its supply of oil and natural gas to Germany and other major economies has risen sharply. The Labour Party-led government took the unusual step last July of banning a strike by oil workers, fearing that its

continuation would disrupt Norwegian energy supplies to Europe and thereby hinder the war effort. The ban was enforced by the trade unions, which support weapons deliveries to Ukraine, and followed closely on the heels of a visit to Oslo by German Economy Minister Robert Habeck.

While Norway's Labour Party/Centre Party coalition government is demanding that workers bear the burden of inflation and the war against Russia, it has no problem massively expanding the military budget. Centre Party Defence Minister Bjørn Arild Gram announced a defence spending hike in the 2023 budget of 6.7 billion Norwegian kroner (€580 million), an approximately 9 percent increase compared to the 2022 budget. Significant investments are being made in the far north, where the US military has been granted unimpeded access to "agreed areas" and a massive military build-up directed at Russia is far advanced.

A similar process is under way throughout the Nordic region. In neighbouring Sweden, the right-wing coalition government led by Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, who relies on the fascistic Sweden Democrats for a parliamentary majority, is committed to hiking military spending by over 60 percent by 2028. The largest military exercise in Sweden in 30 years began this week, with 26,000 soldiers from 14 countries practicing a scenario where the country is attacked by an external foe. Meanwhile, social inequality is skyrocketing as years of public spending austerity, privatisation, and tax cuts for the rich take their toll.

These developments are creating the conditions for a dramatic upsurge of the class struggle. On Monday, 150 train drivers in Stockholm launched a wildcat strike to protest a decision by the Stockholm transportation authority SL to remove guards from the region's commuter trains. The strike was decided on at a meeting of 150 drivers and in explicit opposition to the Seko trade union, which ordered its members not to participate. The drivers ignored this injunction, halting most commuter trains from 3am Monday. On the first day of the strike, 127 out of 199 trains scheduled to run between 9am and 4pm were cancelled. On the third and final day of the strike, between 80 and 90 percent of all trains were cancelled Wednesday.

The drivers' stand attracted powerful public support, notwithstanding the inconvenience posed to

commuters. A crowdfunding appeal issued by the strikers collected 500,000 kronor (about €44,200) in donations in just 48 hours. Explaining the reasons for their strike, the drivers wrote on a Facebook page, "We do not believe that a single Stockholmer would want to sit on a train knowing that there is only one responsible person on board, who in the worst case of an accident might be put out of action from the very start. This could be with up to 1,800 travellers, stuck in the middle of the forest with 20km to the nearest station."

The post denounced local politicians from the Green Party, Social Democrats, and right-wing Moderates for their responsibility in imposing one-person crews on commuter trains. Local politicians have boasted that the change will save 150 million kronor (€13.2 million) in annual municipal spending.

MTR, the private operator running the trains on behalf of SL, took the drivers to Sweden's labour court Tuesday. The company demanded damages of 100,000 kronor (about €8,800) from the Seko union and more than 3,000 kronor (€270) from 74 wildcat strikers listed by name in the court filing.

The upsurge of workers' struggles across the Nordic region is part of an international process. Strikes will take place Friday at German airports and across the rail network, while powerful strikes by health workers and postal workers have developed in Britain. In France, workers have engaged in three months of strikes and protests against President Emmanuel Macron's gutting of pension rights.

These struggles are driven by the effort of the ruling class to subordinate society's resources to the imperialist war against Russia, which they demand workers pay for through wage and benefit cuts, public spending austerity, and job cuts. Striking workers in Norway and Sweden must turn to their international class brothers and sisters and make contact with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to build new organisations of struggle in opposition to the pro-capitalist and nationalist trade unions.



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