

Spain: health workers walk out to demand fully resourced health system; Iran: wave of strikes over pay and conditions; Nigeria: schoolteachers in Akwa Ibom State resume strikes

## 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.*

### Health workers strike in Andalusia, Castille and Leon and Madrid, Spain to demand fully resourced healthcare system

On Wednesday, primary care doctors in Andalusia, Spain walked out to demand a fully resourced healthcare system. This follows three previous 12-hour stoppages, with more planned for May 3 and 10.

A spokesman for the Andalusian Medical Union said, “patient schedules... exceed the work capacity of the physicians.”

Doctors rallied outside the Ministry of Health and Consumption in Malaga.

From May 4, 36,000 health workers will be involved in strikes every Tuesday and Thursday to demand the end of temporary contracts. There are 3,600 doctors affected in the Community of Madrid, and more than half of specialists in Madrid have not got a permanent contract.

Health workers in Castille and Leon plan to walk out on May 10 and 17. The 50,000 CCOO, UGT and CSIF members demand a 35-hour week and an end to staff shortages. The CESM medical union and the SATSE nursing union are not involved.

According to EFE, the unions stated: “Sacyl [Castille and Leon] staff deserve more competitive working conditions and remuneration comparable to national averages and those of the surrounding communities of Castilla y León, which make it possible to attract health professionals.”

While the unions refuse to unite the struggles of health workers, the right to strike is under attack as the government imposes minimum service levels from 35 to 59 percent.

### Justice officials in Spain plan national strike over pay and work conditions

After partial strikes of Spain’s justice officials were called off for talks which proved fruitless, the CSIF, UGT, CCOO and STAJ unions have called seven days of national strike action.

The justice officials have engaged in six days of three-hour strikes to demand a pay rise of up to 450 euros a month in line with that received by administrative lawyers. The action affected tens of thousands of trials. They are also fighting the imposition of new work conditions without negotiation.

Workers will walk out on May 4, with a demonstration in front of the Ministry of Justice in Madrid. There will be further strikes on May 9, 10, 11, 16, 17 and 18. In return, the three-hour partial strikes that have been taking place since last week have been suspended.

### Workers at EMFI in Athens, Greece walk out after worker dies during 12-hour shift

Dairy workers at EMFI in Athens, Greece walked out on April 17 following the death of colleague on the job. Vangelis Tsambas was working a 12-hour shift when he was involved in a work accident on April 11, reported *efsyn*.

Many Panhellenic Federation of Craftsmen and Employees of Dairy Food and Beverages work unsustainable 12-hour shifts due to staff shortages, without a safety technician in the plant.

### Teachers in rolling strikes across Portugal over staff shortages and career progression

Teachers have been striking in Portugal since Easter against the lack of career progression and staff shortages.

The education unions including STOP, SIPE, Fenprof and FNE organised the action on a regional rolling basis, with the last stoppage in Lisbon on May 12.

To get round the minimum service level requirements, the walkouts begin at 12 noon until the end of the school day. A petition to defy this attack on the right to strike gained 3,000 signatures by April 23, according to the *VNEXPLORER*.

## Strikes at German airports continue over pay and conditions

Strikes by German airport workers continued this week, after action last week at four airports coincided with a two-day warning strike on the national rail network, Deutsche Bahn.

Security workers at Cologne/Bonn, Düsseldorf and Hamburg airports walked out on April 20, joined by workers at Stuttgart the next day. They are demanding improved bonuses for irregular and inconvenient shifts and forced overtime, as rates have not been raised for years.

On Monday, security and ground services workers at Berlin and Hamburg held a one-day strike over pay. Berlin-Brandenburg cancelled all departures, and some arrivals were also affected. Workers at Aviation Handling Services Hamburg (AHS), a private company handling check-in and boarding for several airlines at the airport, called a 24-hour strike at short notice.

Public services union Verdi, which called the airport and rail strikes, last week concluded a public sector pay deal far below what was required. Having originally demanded a 10.5 percent increase, Verdi accepted a two-year deal involving a 3,000-euro payment in instalments until February 2024—to offset inflation, according to the government—followed by a 5.5 percent rise and a 200-euro a month increase.

Verdi's Frank Werneke said the union had "reached our pain threshold with our decision to make this compromise."

Workers cannot live with it, and Verdi has had to announce more rail strikes in five federal states this week.

## Workers at arms factory in Kragujeva, Serbia strike over unpaid wages

Workers at Zastava Weapons Factory plants in Serbia have announced a warning strike over delayed wages. Workers say wages are increasingly late, and only 70 percent were paid this month.

Members of five unions are involved. At the Kragujevac factory, one worker told *Infostija*, "I want to retire. I cannot. They did not pay me for 18 months of service." He said the company had no director and "Liquidation is coming."

Work stopped completely at the Novi Pazar plant on Friday, according to workers. They are demanding full wages, a pay rise, and the appointment of a general director.

## Wildcat stoppage forces union to call health and safety strike on Swedish railways

On Monday, the Seko union called a one-day "protective stop" action against driver only operation (DOO) on the pendeltåg commuter rail network out of Stockholm. It was called as a health and safety measure under the Work Environment Act.

The strike follows last week's highly effective wildcat strike by 150 drivers against the removal of guards from the pendeltåg, which disrupted the network. Seko had disowned the strike, and one striker said, "Our view is that the union does not take the issue of train attendants seriously, we do not trust them."

Seko's Susann Högge-Bäckmann admitted that the protective stop is of limited effectiveness, saying they "have been tried in the past and they have been lifted faster than ever. However, they are an uphill battle for the

employer, if nothing else."

Monday's action is an admission of the success of the wildcat strike, and a recognition of the support it won. Guards are responsible for onboard service and safety, including operating train doors and making announcements in the event of disruption. In 2021, Stockholm's traffic committee called for their replacement with cameras. Drivers opposed this attack on safety, which would leave them working alone on a train.

The programme was paused, but the phase-out began again this year. There are around 350 guards on the pendeltåg, and since last month half of all Stockholm commuter services operated without one. Responding to last week's strike, the Swedish Young Conservatives called for driverless trains, too.

MTR, the operating company, is suing the wildcat strikers through the Labour Court, issuing a demand that 73 named drivers pay around SEK6,000 each in compensation. A strike fund set up on Swish quickly raised more than SEK2m.

One of the drivers being sued said, "It feels fantastic in a way... There are several ways that MTR can lose this, and one of them is that all the 73 drivers... are sitting in [court] instead of out in traffic."

## Supermarket workers in the Netherlands strike over pay

Workers at distribution centres for the Dutch supermarket chain Albert Heijn came out on strike over wages on Sunday. Workers at Geldermalsen, Pijnacker and AH headquarters in Zaandam walked out on Sunday, with Tilburg and Zwolle joining them on Monday. The strikes follow earlier wildcat action at Pijnacker and a walkout at Tilburg.

The supermarkets were well stocked ahead of the King's Day holiday, but AH is now facing the possibility of empty shelves in the Netherlands and Belgium.

The company employs around 6,000 workers, half of them on temporary contracts. The strike was driven by the part-time workers. They demanded a 14.3 percent pay rise and an extra 100 euros net a month. AH offered six percent this year and another two percent from January.

The FNV union has also called for new workers to be paid double on Sundays, while the company wants to halve its Sunday bonus.

Inflation last year was 10.6 percent, when AH workers received only a 2.75 percent rise.

## Norway general strike in private sector ends after union/employer talks

The escalation of the four-day general strike by private sector workers in Norway was prevented after unions agreed a settlement on April 20. The union confederation LO agreed a pay offer with employers' body NHO of around 5.2 percent, according to *DN*.

The stoppage involved 25,000 transport, construction, brewing, manufacturing and ferry workers. A further 17,000 workers were to join the action. This was the first strike between LO and NHO since the war. Inflation is predicted to be 4.9 percent this year.

## Croatian firefighters announce action over failure to implement rulebook regulating minimum wage

Unions representing Croatian firefighters have announced action “in the form of a protest or a strike” to begin May 4. They are protesting the continued failure to implement a new rulebook officially adopted nearly three years ago. Firefighters in Istria, Dalmatia, and Kvarner will join the action.

The rulebook on classification of firefighters’ work, agreed between the Association of Professional Firefighters’ Unions (USVPRH) and the Croatian Firefighting Association (HVZ), was due to be implemented June 30, 2020, but has still not come into effect.

At present, only a few stations have collective agreements, without which there is no basis to calculate wages. As a result, say the unions, firefighters do not have a regulated minimum wage.

USVPRH met Fire Department chief Slavko Tucakovic for negotiations. Tucakovic pledged HVZ adoption of the rulebook within 10 days but offered only a verbal guarantee. As they have already waited nearly three years, USVPRH announced the action from May 4. The date is symbolic, being St Florian’s Day, the patron saint of firefighters.

### **Protesters oppose transformation of Serbian public electricity utility into joint stock company**

Protests were held in Lazarevac, in the Kolubara mining basin, and in the Serbian capital Belgrade against the transformation of the public Electric Power Company of Serbia (EPS) into a joint stock company. Workers at EPS fear this will result in its privatisation, establishing a model for other public companies.

The Ministry of Mining and Energy had asked the supervisory board to change the company’s statutes, removing trade and supply from its basic activity. This was understood to be the first step towards privatisation, with the elimination of mining jobs and forcing EPS to buy from private traders, leading to further redundancies.

Miner Goran Perišić, founder of the “Kolubara Unity” protest group, said workers had appealed to the Ministry of Mining and Energy, the President of Serbia, the government and the Assembly to cancel the decision but received no response. They participated in protests with representatives of the opposition parties, which triggered a wave of insults from government ministers.

When President Aleksandr Vučić was told a strike was being prepared at EPS, he called the protesters a “gang of thieves” who were lying about the proposals. Vučić insisted privatisation was not on the agenda, but a business reform project with Norwegian companies.

Milan Đorđević, head of one of two groups fighting over the name of the Workers’ Union of Elektroprivreda Serbia, opposed the distribution of company shares to workers and pensioners, as this would create conditions for private ownership. Đorđević threatened strikes if privatisation and redundancies are proposed.

Dragoslav Ljubičić, of the EPS “Nezavisnost” union, however, called for giving shares to all EPS workers and pensioners. He insists he opposes privatisation and is calling for any resale to be possible only within EPS.

The transformation to joint stock company has now happened, with all 36,510,509 shares owned by the state.

### **One-day strike by teachers in Northern Ireland closes schools**

On Wednesday, teachers in five unions in Northern Ireland walked out leading to the closure of most schools in the province.

The following day, National Education Union members walked out in England, with a further stoppage planned May 2.

NEU, NASUWT, the Irish National Teachers Organisation, the Ulster Teachers Union and for the first time ever, the National Association of Head Teachers members are protesting the erosion of pay.

According to the Northern Ireland Teachers’ Council, “Teachers pay, in real terms, has dropped by nearly a quarter in the ‘lost decade’ since the pay-freeze of 2010-11... The last pay rise for teachers in Northern Ireland was 2 percent in September 2019, and 2 percent in September 2020.”

Strikers held a rally outside Belfast town hall.

### **UK civil service workers to stage one-day strike over pay and conditions**

Around 130,000 UK civil servants plan to walk out Friday. It will be the third such one-day strike, following those on February 1 and March 15.

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members are involved in ongoing industrial action, begun in November, over pay, conditions, job cuts and the dilution of redundancy terms. Rather than sanction all-out action, the PCS union bureaucracy limited action to sporadic strikes by a few thousand members. Friday’s one-day stoppage will be only the third by the whole membership since the dispute began.

The 2,000 passport examiners at offices in Belfast, Durham, Glasgow, Liverpool, London, Newport, Peterborough and Southport will stay out until May 6. From May 2, they will be joined by around 1,000 PCS members at the passport service in administration and other roles across seven offices.

The current mandate for industrial action by PCS members working in the civil service is due to end on May 6. The PCS members across 124 groups within the civil service are currently balloting to extend the mandate. The postal ballot will close May 9.

### **UK North Sea oil production workers walk out for pay rise and improved conditions**

Around 1,300 UK offshore oil platform workers began a 48-hour strike on Monday.

The Unite union members work for oil contracting firms Bilfinger UK Limited, Petrofac Facilities Management, Stork Technical Services and Sparrows Offshore Services. These companies provide offshore services to big oil producing companies such as BP, Shell and Total. They began their action with a rally at the Unite union office in Aberdeen on Monday morning.

The electricians, engineers, pipefitters, scaffolders and other workers are demanding higher pay and better working conditions, and have issues related to the three-on/three-off shift pattern. They voted by big majorities for the action.

### **Academic staff at UK universities begin marking boycott**

Academic staff at 145 UK universities began a marking and assessment boycott (MAB) on April 20.

The University and College Union (UCU) members are taking the MAB

action in their fight for improved pay and conditions. Some universities are threatening to withhold full or partial pay of those taking part.

They recently renewed their mandate to take further strike action in their dispute over pay and pensions at 150 universities across the UK, voting by an 85.6 percent majority on 56.4 percent turnout in the pay and working conditions ballot, and by an 89 percent majority on a 58.4 percent turnout on pensions. The number voting for stoppages is up on previous ballots.

Whether the UCU will implement the ballot result is moot. In late February, UCU general secretary Jo Grady called off planned strikes shortly after university academics had held three days of stoppages. The UCU and other unions representing university staff are in talks with the employers' body, the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA). The UCEA stipulated talks would only begin if no further industrial action was called. The UCU said it would not agree to any cessation of action, but entering the talks is a de facto acceptance not to undertake industrial action.

On March 16, the UCU declared the employers had agreed to restore the 35 percent cut in pensions, but this is conditional on pension valuations to be announced in September. Higher education workers' pensions are far from safe in the hands of UUK (Universities UK, the body representing universities over pensions), the USS (Universities Superannuation Scheme) governors, or supposedly neutral central bankers.

A UCU press release announcing the result stated, "Members will now be consulted on proposals in both disputes, and employers know strike action can be called again at will. Importantly, we have shown university bosses that it is staff who are in the driving seat."

#### **Staff at London sixth form college continue series of strikes over cuts**

Around 25 teaching staff at London's biggest sixth form college (teaching 16 to 18-year-olds), NewVic in Newham, continued their series of three-day strikes this week.

They NEU members began their series of 10 three-day walkouts last week. They are striking Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday each week, this Thursday's strike coinciding with the national NEU strike across England.

This is their third dispute in the last 12 months. They plan to continue their strikes each week throughout the summer term. They are opposed to college management plans to cut administration and security posts. In January, they passed a vote of no confidence in the college headmaster. They previously took strike action to prevent academisation plans.

#### **Workers at Harlow council, London continue dispute with further strikes**

Around 300 workers employed to maintain housing stock, buildings and council grounds for Harlow council, just north of London, are to strike Thursday and Friday this week, and May 2-4.

The Unite union members are employed by HTS, wholly owned by Harlow council. They have been in dispute since February. Some HTS workers are on less than £12 an hour. They want pay parity with workers in other local authorities carrying out similar work, as well as a cost-of-living boost. On the first day of the strike, workers are planning to hold a march to Harlow civic centre at midday.

#### **Hospital workers in south London walk out over pay parity and working conditions**

Staff working at South London and Maudsley NHS sites began a 48-hour strike on Sunday night.

The GMB union members work for outsourcing company ISS as domestics and hostesses, providing cleaning services and food provision. They want parity of pay and conditions with workers directly employed by the NHS. They also oppose cuts in jobs and hours at Lambeth Hospital following the restructuring of mental health services.

#### **Parking wardens in Westminster borough council, London to strike over pay**

Parking wardens in the London borough of Westminster are to walk out and take action short of strike action over pay.

The GMB members are employed by contractor NSL to provide civil enforcement services on behalf of Westminster borough council in London. NSL failed to award a cost of living pay increase following a forced restructuring that has meant drastic changes in terms and conditions.

The workers are to take action short of a strike May 1-8, and hold stoppages on May 2, 4 and 6. The May 6 walkout coincides with the coronation of King Charles III, which takes place within the borough of Westminster.

#### **Water workers in Ireland vote to strike over protection of earnings**

Water services workers in four local Irish authorities have voted overwhelmingly to strike over protection of wages and conditions, following the planned transfer of work from councils to a new national water body.

Votes in Limerick, Cork, Dún Laoghaire/Rathdown and Fingal all returned votes above 90 percent. In Limerick the vote was 98 percent for strike, and 96 percent for other industrial action against a move which could cost workers up to 600 euros a month.

The government set up Uisce Éireann as an independent body taking over responsibility for water services from local councils. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage said workers who chose not to transfer voluntarily to Uisce Éireann could remain in local authority employment on their current terms and conditions until December 31, 2026, when all direct provision would be taken over by the national body. The department left it up to workers to decide individually on their best options.

The transfer was agreed by the Unite and SIPTU unions without consultation with their members. SIPTU, which is now balloting for action, remains committed to the transfer. The union's Karan O Loughlin called the protection of conditions "a key part of enabling the successful transfer to Uisce Éireann and without it, the transfer just won't happen."

SIPTU are blaming local authorities for "putting their own interpretation on a Ministerial directive," according to one local Limerick official. Despite the agreement's retention of terms and conditions, said O Loughlin, "the commitment on the retention of the value of earnings was not there." While she claims that "core terms and conditions" are still being protected, conditions like rostered on-call overtime are under attack.

The final ballot closes May 4, when the union will meet to decide on action.

### **Engineers at UK theme park to walk out over pay**

Engineers working for Chessington theme park in the Greater London area are to walk out over a below-inflation pay offer.

The Unite union members will take four blocks of strike action, April 28 to May 1, May 5-8, May 12-15 and May 26-29. The dates of the walkouts coincide with the May Day, coronation and spring bank holidays, when the theme park is likely to be very busy. According to Unite, Chessington theme park returned profits of £87 million in 2021, the latest figures available.

### **Scottish local government staff overwhelmingly reject below-inflation pay offer**

Around 20,000 Scottish local government workers, including home carers, refuse collection staff and school cleaners, have overwhelmingly rejected a below-inflation pay offer.

The GMB members voted by a 94 percent majority to reject the 5.5 percent offer made by the Scottish local authority umbrella body, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA). The results of ballots of Unison and Unite union members are still awaited.

### **London underground rail workers re-balloted over attacks on jobs and conditions**

Around 10,000 London Underground rail workers are currently being re-balloted in an ongoing dispute over Transport for London's (TfL) plans to cut jobs and conditions.

The RMT union members have been in dispute for a year, and the mandate for the current action expires in June. TfL, which is under the remit of Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, is seeking to cut around 600 station jobs and cut pension provision by around a third. The ballot closes May 23.

### **Scottish lighthouse staff vote to strike over pay offer**

Around 30 workers employed by the Northern Lighthouse Board (NLB) in Scotland voted by more than 90 percent to strike over a pay offer.

The Unite union members work as assistants, cooks, seamen and technicians for the NLB, maintaining lighthouses, beacons and buoys around the Scottish coast to provide safe passage for seagoing vessels navigating around Scotland. They rejected a two percent pay offer which followed a pay freeze last year.

The NLB, which is based in Edinburgh, maintains over 200 lighthouses and two seagoing vessels, with bases in Inverness, Shetland and the Orkneys. Unite has yet to announce dates for any stoppages. A strike by the lighthouse workers would be an historic first.

### **Spreading strike wave in Iran over pay and working conditions**

Since April 21, strikes have been spreading across Iran in oil and gas plants as well as refineries, power plants and steel companies.

Thousands of oil workers are taking part. Among their demands are a 79 percent pay increase and a working rota of 20 days on/10 days off. The Iranian government recently increased the minimum wage by 27 percent, but the official inflation rate is 53 percent, with some economists claiming the actual rate is over 100 percent.

By Wednesday, there were strikes and protests at over 100 sites in 37 cities across 13 provinces. Those joining the strike movement included administrative workers at the Oil Design and Construction Company in Isfahan pushing for a pay increase, and nurses in Shiraz protesting over the way they are paid. Pensioners in the city of Ahvaz also held a protest over lack of money and poor living conditions.

### **Palestinian teachers continue long-running dispute over promised pay increase**

The strike by Palestinian teachers on the West Bank, begun February 5 to demand a pay increase, is continuing. The teachers ignored previous Administrative Court rulings suspending the action. Last week, Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh threatened the teachers with punitive measures if they continued their strike. He said their action had "gone beyond the limits of a union protest."

The strike is led by an unofficial body, the "Teachers Independent Movement," whose recent survey of teachers showed 70 percent support for a full general strike.

Shtayyeh previously promised teachers would get a 15 percent pay rise plus a 10 percent retroactive payment. As this has so far failed to materialise, the teachers continue their walkouts.

### **School teachers resume strike in Akwa Ibom, Nigeria**

Teachers at primary and secondary schools in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria resumed their strike from April 25.

A letter sent to the Commissioner for Education and Commissioner for Labour and Manpower Planning stated the "Executive Council of Nigeria Union of Teachers... has approved the resumption of strike, which was started in March 2022, but suspended due to the intervention by Governor Udom Emmanuel."

The union blamed the "government's refusal to implement the agreements reached with the Nigeria Union of Teachers on the outstanding indebtedness in the state" for its decision to restart the strike. Grievances include "[n]on-refund of 75 per cent contributory pension to primary and some secondary school teachers," as well as a lack of promotions.

### **Nigerian aviation strike over work conditions ended by union**

Nigerian aviation workers protested at the Murtala Mohammed International Airport in Lagos last week, causing gridlock in the area around the commercial capital's main airport, on the first day of their "warning" strike, which lasted April 17-19. No further action has been called.

The Secretary-General of the Association of Nigerian Aviation Professionals, Abdul Saidu, voiced his disappointment that the working conditions in aviation had not been improved, eight years after the unions signed an agreement with the government. Saidu also accused the Ministry of Aviation of planning to close a number of departments. The unions claimed they would begin full-scale strike action unless their demands were addressed.

### **Kenyan doctors and health workers in four counties walk out over lack of pay**

Healthcare workers in Kenya are taking strike action in four counties: Nyamira, Kisumu, Vihiga and Bomet. Throughout the country, payment of salaries is delayed, there is a staff shortage, and equipment and medicines are in short supply. The Kenya Medical Practitioners Pharmacists Dentists' Union has called strikes only in counties where the local governments neglected to pay staff salaries by March 19. There are 47 counties.

"I'm striking because I think enough is enough... We're underpaid, we are not valued," said Zuwena Sifuna who works as a nurse at Jaramogi Oginga Odinga Teaching and Referral Hospital. She added, "How do you expect people to work without pay?"

The Kenyan health service continues in a state of crisis as the government is close to financial collapse.

### **Car part workers in third week of strike at Tenneco Gqeberha, South Africa threatened with dismissal**

Over two hundred car part workers at Tenneco in Gqeberha in Eastern Cape Province, South Africa are into their third week of strike action. The workers make catalytic converters.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) members are striking against pay cuts of 42 percent, from R114 to R67. According to Numsa shop steward Sakhumzi Mawisa, the workers have been served with letters of dismissal.



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