

Belgium: national strike against attacks on wages and conditions; Iran: strikes and protests continue over cost of living, pay and conditions; Nigeria: doctors striking for five days over pay

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.

National strike in Belgium against “social dumping” by Delhaize and other companies to drive down wages and conditions

Workers throughout Belgium will join a one-day strike on Monday against “social dumping,” where companies force workers’ wages and conditions down in a race to the bottom.

This is epitomised by the supermarket chain Delhaize, whose plan to convert all of its 128 directly operated supermarkets to franchises provoked strikes which have continued since March. Delhaize workers will join the demonstration in Brussels, which unions predict will be attended by 10,000 to 15,000 people.

Delhaize obtained a court injunction allowing it to send bailiffs to break picket lines outside its shops and warehouses. What the newspaper *HLN* referred to as an “army of police officers and bailiffs” and police dogs were sent again to the company’s warehouse in Zellik, where picketing workers were threatened with a fine of 500 euros each. Opposition to the franchising plan remains widespread despite the strikebreaking. Media report that in some Delhaize shops, more than half of workers had a doctors’ note and there was a “higher than normal” rate of absence.

Workers at the energy company TotalEnergies will also be joining the strike and demonstrating outside the company’s headquarters in Brussels. According to *Belga*, TotalEnergies plans to sell off 619 petrol stations in Belgium and Luxembourg to a joint venture in which it holds a 40 percent stake. The same pay and conditions at the stations will only be maintained for one year, and the unions say that they suspect this is also a case of social dumping.

Striking workers will face minimum service requirements due to a law introduced in 2021. On Wednesday, the Constitutional Court ruled against a legal challenge to the law filed by Belgium’s three largest union federations and two workers at state-owned transport company De Lijn.

Students in Belgium protest against restrictive new visa requirements

More than 200 international students in Belgium, mainly from African countries, protested in Brussels on May 11 against restrictive new visa requirements which may lead to them leaving the country.

Students from outside the EU require a guarantor to study in Belgium, whose income after tax must meet a minimum threshold. For the 2023-24 academic year, the required income is set to rise to 2,758 euros per month, *BXI* reported. The students themselves must also have an income of 789 euros, while they are not allowed to work more than 20 hours per week.

The guarantor’s required income is higher than the median net salary in Belgium, estimated at 2,238 euros after taxes by HR company SD Worx. The Federation of Francophone Students said some students risked losing their residence permit during their studies, and others would be more vulnerable to scams as they were desperate for new sponsors.

Wildberries workers hold new strike in Russia after new fines applied for alleged fraud

Couriers at Wildberries, Russia’s largest online retailer, held a strike last week after the company applied fines of around 2 billion rubles for alleged fraud, *Lenta* reported.

Wildberries alleges that 300 couriers used a bot to advertise through its services without paying the advertising fee per person, which it claims cost it 650 million rubles. The couriers who came to its office in Moscow to protest said that money was simply deducted from their accounts in the middle of the night.

After the Telegram channel *Mash* reported the stoppage, Wildberries denied any strike had taken place, and said that couriers had simply come to its office for a meeting. However, it subsequently suspended the fines.

In March, Wildberries couriers also held strikes throughout Russia against the company’s policies of fining the worker the full cost of an item if the customer returns it. The company also alleged this was necessary to protect against “fraud” until forced to withdraw the fines. Wildberries is known for poor working conditions. Footage leaked to the media showed managers forcing workers to strip to their underwear for searches between shifts.

Union calls off Swedish rail strike at last minute for widely denounced

deal

Only five hours before the beginning of a national rail strike, the Swedish Union for Service and Communications Employees (SEKO) announced it had signed an agreement following all-night negotiations with the employers.

The deal was denounced by many rail workers as a sell-out, especially on driver only operation of trains without guards or conductors. Workers held a wildcat strike over this issue in April.

The agreement, also signed by other unions, contains an enormous cut to real pay. Salaries will increase by only 7.4 percent over two years, while at the current rate of inflation prices would increase by 22.1 percent over the same period. SEKO lauded the deal as “so good that a strike would not give a better agreement.” *Proletären* reported that SEKO negotiators who were unhappy with the deal were replaced by the union.

Nothing was done about driver only operation beyond the appointment of a working group to investigate the issues. *Dagens Nyheter* reported SEKO’s reasoning for ignoring the key demand of rail workers: this would require “political decisions,” which Sweden’s right-wing government will not make. The attitude of the leading Moderate Party to workers’ demands was shown by the response of its youth organisation to the wildcat strike, when it suggested striking drivers should be replaced by self-driving trains.

One driver told *DN*, “SEKO has not got through any demands at all,” and that he and many others were considering leaving the union.

Dutch employers boast of “no question of a strike wave” after round of collective agreements with unions

Multiple major strikes in the Netherlands were shut down or averted by the unions this week, with the signing of pay agreements barely above the current rate of inflation, and mostly below the average increase in prices for the past year.

In response, *NU* published figures showing fewer strikes in 2022 than 2021, despite a huge spike in inflation. A comment from employers’ association AWWN attributed this to the Dutch “culture of negotiation,” in which the unions “look at what is possible per sector or company.”

The unions agree with and repeat the companies’ claims that workers have to bear the brunt of the economic crisis. Thanks to this collusion between the unions and employers, “There is no question of a strike wave.”

At the electronics company Philips, the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV) signed a collective agreement last week shortly before a planned strike, raising wages between seven and 10 percent over 18 months. The current inflation rate of 5.2 percent would lead to price increases of 7.9 percent over the length of the contract, leaving many workers worse off. The union also agreed to expand an early retirement scheme, helping Philips with its plans to cut 1,100 jobs in the Netherlands and 6,000 worldwide, *De Telegraaf* reported.

De Telegraaf also reported on a sectoral collective agreement for cleaning workers, with a 12 percent pay rise over two years, barely above current inflation. Being among the lowest-paid workers, cleaners are disproportionately affected by the increase in food prices, which are rising at 15.6 percent year-on-year.

The 17 percent pay rise spread over three years in the public transport sector is also only just above current inflation, after workers held numerous strikes since the start of the year. The strike at the warehouses of supermarket Albert Heijn was ended for a pay rise of 10 percent this

year. Workers at auto manufacturer VDL Nedcar, who held a wildcat strike two weeks ago against potential job losses, were told by the FNV to return to work as the company had agreed to new talks over compensation for redundancies when its contract with BMW expires.

Doctors in both parts of Cyprus hold strikes

Doctors in both Cyprus and Northern Cyprus held strikes in the past two weeks. The strikes were over separate issues, but both denounced the indifference of the island’s separate governments to the needs of healthcare workers.

In Cyprus, doctors at public hospitals walked out for 24 hours on May 11, against the uncertain condition many doctors have been placed in by the malpractice insurance system. Doctors employed directly by the state are covered by a government insurance scheme, but those working in public hospitals under contract or on secondment have no clear status.

The PASYKI doctors’ union, which called the strike, said it was still unclear whether the solution the government claimed to have provided covered the 260 doctors temporarily working in public hospitals, and other issues also needed to be clarified.

On May 8, doctors, nurses, midwives and pharmacists in Northern Cyprus held a one-day stoppage and protest march in Nicosia after a doctor was stabbed by a patient. The urologist was hospitalised after being stabbed five times on May 7. According to *Dialogos*, protestors held signs including “Today us, tomorrow you,” and “The health workers are here, where are the MPs?” and denounced an increasing rate of violence against healthcare workers.

Danish lorry drivers defy police injunction and protest road tax

Danish lorry drivers held nationwide protests on Monday, and parked outside the parliament building in Copenhagen, against a new road tax imposed on diesel and petrol-fuelled lorries.

The Road Tax Committee, an organisation set up to oppose the tax, initially received permission to carry out protests, but the police reversed the decision and ruled the demonstrations illegal.

CPH Post reported that police had fined around 50 drivers and issued 100 injunctions. A representative of the DTL lorry drivers’ organisation told *Transportmagasinet* that the introduction of the road tax, effective from 2025, “has nothing to do with green conversion... This is about the state earning some extra cash.”

Workers at French weapons factory strike over pay

Workers at the ArianeGroup site in Brest have been holding regular one-day walkouts, including on Wednesday this week, demanding a pay increase of 170 euros.

According to *Le Télégramme*, around 40 of the 50 workers, who are General Confederation of Labour and French Democratic Confederation of Labour members, reject the collective agreement signed by the Force Ouvrière union. They have been holding protests since February, and have held five stoppages in recent weeks.

The ArianeGroup workers handle the final stage in the assembly and

maintenance of the M51 nuclear missiles used by the French navy.

As regional Portuguese teachers' strikes end, new stoppage called during exams

May 12 was the final day of the regional teachers' strikes in Portugal, in which around 80 percent of teachers stopped work on different days.

Teachers have been on strike since the start of the year, demanding salary increases and improvements to the promotion system. The National Federation of Teachers called a demonstration in Lisbon for the same day and said it would call further protests from next Monday ahead of a national strike on June 6.

The Union of All Education Professionals (STOP) members also began strikes this Tuesday, targeting national exams. STOP denounced the unequal application of the career progression system and demanded that teachers in mainland Portugal have their full-service time counted towards the career progression system, as has happened in Madeira and the Azores islands.

Romanian teachers hold warning strike over pay

Teachers in Romania held a two-hour warning strike on Wednesday and voted by more than 71 percent in favour of a one-day walkout next Monday. Teachers demand an increase in salaries and funding for schools, and thousands joined a rally in Bucharest last week.

The Minister of Education called for teachers to stay in school to supervise children without teaching during the strikes, so as "not to bring trouble to the families," i.e., to ensure parents turn up to work and there is no broader economic impact.

Potential strikes in Czech Republic over austerity budget

The Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions (?MKOS) filed a "strike alert" on Monday, against the Czech government's introduction of an austerity package. No dates have yet been announced for walkouts, and ?MKOS described the alert as the "mildest" response it could make.

The government intends to cut spending and increase revenues by a total of 94.1 billion koruna this year (around 4 billion euros) by cutting price subsidies, increasing VAT and health insurance, and raising the retirement age as life expectancy increases.

The government said it was open to changes to the austerity measures, but only if they left the total volume of cuts unchanged.

CT24 reported that rather than the cuts themselves, ?MKOS "considers the main problem to be the government's lack of dialogue with the trade unions," clearly indicating its willingness to be a partner in imposing austerity in return for a seat at the table.

The government claimed that the cuts would impact all areas of society, and the Chamber of Commerce said everybody had to "tighten their belts." However, the Chamber of Commerce president went on to say that they expected every measure which impacted businesses to be offset by other government reforms.

Senior UK civil servants strike over pay offer

Senior UK civil servants held a one-day stoppage on May 10.

The Prospect union members work in specialist scientific and managerial roles within the civil service for agencies such as the Met Office, Health and Safety Executive and Natural England.

They are opposed to the government's well below-inflation pay offer of 4.5 percent. They previously walked out on March 15, and have been holding a work to rule and overtime ban since then.

Around 130,000 workers in the wider civil service, and members of the Public and Commercial Services union, have been taking partial strike action since November last year over pay.

Lecturers at Manchester and Bradford colleges in England walk out over derisory pay offer

Lecturing staff at Manchester College and UCEN Manchester, England were on strike this week after rejecting a 2.7 percent pay offer.

The University and College Union (UCU) members, who have taken previous strike action, are out on strike this week and next week, as well as holding stoppages on June 5 and 7.

Lecturing staff at Bradford College followed up a previous stoppage when they walked out Tuesday, with another stoppage planned for Friday. The UCU members voted by a 90 percent majority to strike in opposition to a pay offer for 2022-23 worth around three percent for most lecturers.

Further strike dates planned are May 24, 25, June 5 and 7, with a three-day strike June 12-14, and a four-day strike June 19-22.

Strike of support staff at school in Leicester, England over pay

Around 20 support staff at the Ash Field Academy special school Leicester, England were on strike Tuesday and Wednesday.

The Unison union members were protesting a below-inflation pay rise of just under £2,000 a year.

Drivers at UK logistic firm set to strike over sacking of union representative

HGV drivers working at logistics company GXO at its Lockheed Road depot in Warrington plan to walk out over the sacking by the company of a union representative.

The Unite union members are due to begin their indefinite stoppage on May 22. Unite alleges the union representative, Paul Roberts, was sacked on trumped-up charges. The drivers work on contracts to supply City Plumbing and PTS (Plumbing Trade Supplies) outlets and Unite predict the walkouts will quickly lead to a shortage of supplies at the outlets.

Logistics workers at UK auto engine plant to strike over pay

Around 120 logistics workers employed by Lineside Logistics in Hornchurch, England plan to hold nine days of stoppage beginning this month.

The Unite union members, responsible for distributing engine and car parts for the Ford Motor company's factory at Dagenham in east London, rejected a 7.5 percent pay offer from Lineside. The current rate of RPI inflation is 13.5 percent. The dates announced for the walkouts are May 19, 20, 22, 26, 27, 30, 31, and June 1 and 2.

Traffic wardens in London borough to strike over pay offer

Traffic wardens in the London Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea are to begin a six-day strike Monday.

The GMB union members rejected a pay rise which would have taken their pay up to £12.17 an hour. The wardens are employed by contractor NSL to provide traffic enforcement. The strike will coincide with the famous Chelsea Flower Show taking place in the borough that week.

Further strikes by British Broadcasting Corporation journalists over reorganisation plans

Journalists working at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) are to walk out on June 7 and 8. 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."

In addition to the walkout, they will work to rule and refuse to act up to more senior roles. They held previous stoppages which led to the disruption of local TV and radio programmes.

Local government workers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to ballot over pay offer

Around 370,000 local government and school staff in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are going to ballot over the pay offer for 2023-24 from the employers' body.

The Unison union members were offered a flat rate of £1,925, representing a nine percent rise for the lowest paid but less for workers higher up the pay scale. Unison along with the Unite and GMB unions representing local government staff put in a claim for a 12.7 percent rise to reflect the rising rate of inflation and the need to catch up on previous below inflation pay rises. The ballot begins on May 23 and closes July 4.

Senior UK doctors' ballot over pay

Consultants working for the National Health Service in England are balloting for walkouts after they rejected the latest pay offer from the government.

The British Medical Association (BMA) held talks with the government, whose final offer represented a cut in real terms. The BMA members say their pay has been eroded by around 35 percent in real terms since 2008-9 and that in effect they are working a third of the year for free. The ballot runs until June 27.

Junior doctors represented by the BMA are also in dispute over pay and held a four-day strike in April. BMA junior doctor representatives are currently holding talks with the government over their pay dispute.

Manchester, UK light railway workers ballot over pay

Around 600 UK workers employed by Manchester Metrolink, which runs the city's light railway (tram) system, are balloting for strikes over pay.

The Unite union members rejected a five percent pay offer over 15 months. The ballot closes on May 25. Any walkouts could begin in June. Starting pay for engineers is £26,000, £22,000 for drivers and for customer service relation workers £20,000.

Continuing strikes and protests in Iran over cost of living, pay and conditions

Sunday saw protests by pensioners in the cities of Ahvaz, Isfahan, Kerman, Kermanshah, Shiraz, Shush and Shushtar over high prices and inadequate pensions. The protestors held marches to push their demands.

On May 13, workers at the Haft Tappeh sugarcane facility protested for the fifth day in a row against low pay and lack of pay parity with workers at other companies. The same day, firefighters in Mashhad went on strike protesting low pay and poor working conditions.

Local media reports published Sunday reported that eight workers were arrested for their role in leading strikes at the South Pars offshore gas field. Employing 40,000 workers, it is the world's biggest known gas reserve.

Palestinian teachers resume strike action

Following the recent ending of a two-month strike by Palestinian teachers in the occupied West Bank, teachers last week began a two-week strike.

The teachers accused the PA government of failing to reverse deductions made to teachers' salaries while they were on strike. The two-month strike was led by the Independent Teachers Movement. The PA government has yet to recognise the newly formed teachers' union.

Under the agreement to end the two-month strike the PA government promised a 15 percent pay increase and the right to form independent trade unions, committing to do so by January next year. However, the failure to reimburse the deductions was the stumbling block leading to a relaunch of the strike. The PA government said its failure to repay the deductions was down to a technical error and that it would be paid in the coming weeks.

dying, “Golden Arrows violated COVID-19 protocols by stuffing their buses full of passengers and refusing to adhere to social distancing rules.”

Nigerian doctors to strike for five days over pay

Doctors in Nigeria began a five-day “warning” strike from May 17 to May 22. The Nigerian Association of Resident Doctors president, Dr. Emeka Innocent Orji, said that “our members all over the country have given us the mandate to declare a total strike,” but their response was to call a five-day strike and then “review the situation.”

The doctors demand a 200 percent salary increase, new allowances and implementation of the Consolidated Medical Salary Scale.

The Nigerian government has already declared any strike by doctors “illegal,” and threatened to respond by invoking the “no work, no pay” principle.

Liberian mineworkers on go-slow over salary disparities

Liberian workers began industrial action at ArcelorMittal Liberia (AML) on May 10 in Yekepa and Buchanan. In Yekepa, workers commandeered heavy vehicles to prevent them being used for production and to block access roads to the mines.

AML managers said they were in contact with the Ministry of Labour and union leaders to call a meeting with them to bring the action to an end.

AML is one of four companies responsible for 92 percent of the mining sector revenue, on which the Liberian government depends. The Labour Court of Liberia ruled the strike illegal, despite the strike being aimed at stopping the company’s illegal disparities in pay.

Ebonyi State University workers begin strike over unpaid wages

University workers at the Ebonyi State University in Isieke, Nigeria walked out on strike on May 11, barricading the main entrance and displaying a placard declaring “EBSU On Strike.” The workers also locked the other entrances.

The Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities, the Non-Academic Staff Union of Educational and other Associated Institutions, and the National Association of Academic Technologists members have not been paid for three months.

Bus workers at Golden Arrows picket in Cape Town, South Africa for wage increase

Bus workers in Cape Town, South Africa have been picketing Golden Arrows bus company in their break time against the non-payment of a negotiated wage increase of seven per cent.

The company, which resigned from the bargaining council in 2021, refuses to pay the increase. They receive subsidies from the government and according to the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa have a long track record of mistreating workers.

Polity reported that at the height of the pandemic when people were



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