

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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## Wave of teachers' strikes across Europe over funding, pay and conditions

Teachers and other education workers throughout Europe joined strikes and protests this week, opposing deteriorating pay and working conditions, and demanding investment in education.

In Romania, 150,000 teachers began an indefinite strike on Monday, following a two-hour warning strike last week. Teachers are demanding pay rises and an increase in inflation pay, but in a meeting with teachers' unions the government claimed there was no money available.

Starting monthly salaries for teachers are only 2,500 lei, and the unions have asked for a 60 percent pay rise. *Antena3* calculated that the teachers' pay demands would cost 14 billion lei to meet, around half the money spent on the military every year.

Thousands of teachers and students joined a mass demonstration in Budapest on May 19, opposing the Hungarian government's attack on the right to strike and demanding better working conditions in schools. Teachers in Hungary have been holding warning strikes for more than a year in a dispute over pay and long working hours. Several teachers were fired for defying draconian minimum service requirements imposed on the strikes.

Teachers in Northern Cyprus walked out on Tuesday morning in both primary and secondary schools to oppose the government's new law to "modernise" education, which makes it harder to obtain a permanent contract. The Cyprus Turkish Secondary Education Teachers' Union, in comments reported by *LGC News*, said the reform ignores the real problems of "crowded classrooms, schools waiting for repairs and renovations, adaptation for foreign students, technological infrastructure deficiencies of schools, art and sports equipment" and the government is following "the artificial agenda it created."

More strikes are planned at the start of June. Teachers in Berlin, Germany will hold a three-day strike from June 6 in a long-running dispute over class sizes and Serbian teachers are planning a one-day partial strike on June 2, following a protest on May 8. Portuguese teachers will also join a national strike on June 6, called by the National Federation of Education as part of a long-running campaign over pay and career progression. The Court of Appeal in Portugal ruled last week that the minimum services imposed on teachers' strikes called by the Union of All Education Professionals illegally violated the right to strike.

On Tuesday, workers in Finnish private care homes and day-care centres began strikes over pay. The employers' association offered a 11.2 percent pay rise, spread over two and a half years, the equivalent of 4.3 percent annually. With annual inflation in Finland at 7.9 percent, this amounts to a massive pay cut over the length of the contract. The 70,000 workers in private social care are generally on worse pay than in the public sector, and the Super union said that the pay offer was so low "there will soon be no more employees in the private sector."

More strikes in private social care are planned if no deal is worked out by the national mediator at a meeting which begins Friday.

## Hospital workers in Portugal strike over working conditions

Technicians and assistants at Portuguese hospitals walked out for a one-day strike on May 19, demanding improved working conditions and recognition of their specific expertise in the career progression system. The unions reported that more than 90 percent of 30,000 workers joined the strike, not counting those on whom minimum service requirements were imposed.

## Airport and airline workers walk out in Portugal

Security staff at airports across Portugal walked out this week, after announcement of a "restructuring" which left many border inspectors unsure whether their current pay and conditions would be maintained.

More than 90 percent of workers who were eligible to join the strike did so, between Saturday and Tuesday morning in Lisbon, and only on Tuesday elsewhere. Minimum services were imposed, according to *The Portugal News*, which meant a quarter of inspectors were forced to work.

The Union of Investigation, Inspection and Borders Inspectors said it had only called five-hour stoppages instead of a 24-hour strike because the "initial intention on our part is to demonstrate our indignation, causing some embarrassment, of course, but also minimising the impact." Further strikes are planned from Saturday.

Portuguese cabin crew at the airline EasyJet begin a series of stoppages from May 26, and will also walk out on May 28 and 30, then June 1 and 3. The National Union of Civil Aviation Flight Personnel said the airline hired Portuguese crew on more insecure contracts than in other countries, and demanded equal treatment, *The Portugal News* reported.

**Finnish private social care sector workers strike over pay**

**Ground handling workers in Italy hold 24-hour strike over precarious**

## **contracts and poor working conditions**

Ground handling workers at Italian airports walked out on a 24-hour strike called by the “grassroots” unions CUB and USB on May 19, against “exploitation, starvation wages, precariousness and layoffs.” The unions reported “high adherence” to the strike, with 111 flights being cancelled by state-owned airline ITA Airways alone, ANSA reported, and other airlines also cancelling or rescheduling flights.

The CGIL, CISL, Ultrasporti and UGL TA unions also scheduled a four-hour strike for the same day but accepted a request from the Minister of Transport and Infrastructure to postpone the stoppage due to flooding in the Emilia-Romagna region, and rescheduled the action to June 4. The CUB and USB pointed out they had already excluded airports in the region from the strike, and there was no need to postpone the strike in the rest of Italy.

## **Wildcat strike at VDL Nedcar in the Netherlands while unions negotiate potential job losses behind closed doors**

Workers at the VDL Nedcar auto factory in Born, the Netherlands, held a wildcat strike on Tuesday which, according to *De Telegraaf*, brought production to a standstill. Workers at the factory held previous wildcat strikes at the start of May, and the trade unions called a four-day strike the week after, which they quickly called off when management agreed to new talks.

There is the potential for job losses at the factory as VDL Nedcar’s contract with BMW will expire soon. Workers voted down a previous “social plan” governing how many jobs will be saved and terms of redundancies.

The unions and VDL Nedcar refused to comment to the press on what they were discussing in negotiations, and both the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions and Christian National Trade Union Federation attacked the wildcat strike as “very unwise.”

## **Wildberries couriers continue stoppages in Russia against fines**

Couriers for Wildberries, Russia’s largest online retailer, held another stoppage and around 70 protested in Moscow against the deduction of 2.5 billion rubles for alleged fraud. *Lenta* reported that the protesting couriers said their accounts were frozen after the company accused them of exploiting its advertising system and deducted money.

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.

## **Cleaners at clinic in Liège, Belgium, hold wildcat strike over staffing levels**

On Tuesday, fourteen of the twenty cleaners in the morning shift at the Alexiens Brothers clinic in Henri-Chapelle, a village in the Liège province of Belgium, walked out on a wildcat strike, officially calling in sick.

One of the striking workers told *Sud Info* there was a “crying lack of

staffing in this sector” and that their pay was “at the level of the daisies,” i.e., very low. They also had a petition signed by 150 workers at the clinic demanding higher staffing levels and pay.

## **Spanish justice officials begin all-out strike over pay**

Justice officials in Spanish courts began an indefinite all-out strike from Monday, following weeks of partial strikes.

*La Nueva España* reported that 1,500 officials demonstrated in Madrid on Monday, and the strike has had a large impact, with hundreds of thousands of hearings nationwide being suspended. Participation in the strike has been widespread, between 70 and 90 percent across the regions of Spain, according to union figures.

The justice officials are demanding a pay rise in line with that offered to public lawyers, who have also been on strike over pay, and judges and prosecutors. A threatened strike by judges and prosecutors was called off this week after six of the seven unions, excluding the largest, signed an agreement for a 450-euro monthly salary increase.

## **Strikes continue at London’s Heathrow airport over pay**

Workers are continuing walkouts at Heathrow airport in the UK capital on May 25-27. The Unite union members last walked out May 4-10, and took 10 days of strikes over Easter causing hundreds of flights to be cancelled.

The more than 1,400 security officers want a pay rise to offset the current 13.5 percent RPI inflation rate. Low pay is leading to one in three staff contemplating finding alternative employment. They also demand pay parity with staff at other London airports.

## **College lecturers strike in Manchester and Bradford, England over pay offer**

College lecturers at Manchester College and UCEN Manchester and Bradford College, England walked out over derisory pay offers.

At the Manchester College, which has 10 campuses and is the largest further education college in the UK, workers walked out for 12 days from May 15, with further strikes planned June 5 and 7. A rally Thursday was addressed by University and College Union (UCU) Vice President Maxine Looby and local UCU representatives.

The UCU members rejected a 2.7 percent pay offer with a one-off 1.55 percent payment. The strike vote was 94 percent in favour, on a 59 percent turnout.

According to a UCU report, most college staff are “financially insecure, impacting the mental health of more than eight in 10, with many being forced to skip meals and restrict hot water use to save money. Seven in 10 said they would leave the sector unless pay and working conditions improve.”

At Bradford College, lecturers rejected a 3.2 percent offer by a 90 percent vote on a 58 percent turnout, with strike days including May 24, 25, June 12-14 and June 19-22. Appealing to the college, the UCU stated, “The college has time to make an improved offer on pay and working conditions so that strikes can be called off before exams are disrupted.”

Pickets told WSWS reporters that management are using agency staff to invigilate exams. One picket said, "I don't have a mortgage, I pay rent and have nothing at all spare to cut back on. The workload is terrible, my wages are falling, and staff are overworked."

The UCU, which demobilised last year's pay strikes in England's colleges by accepting pay deals as low as six percent, has overseen pay falling by 33 percent since 2009, casualisation and unsustainable workloads.

### **UK Winchester University lecturers strike over pay docked for marking boycott**

Lecturers at Winchester University, England, began a six-day stoppage after management imposed a 100 percent pay deduction.

The UCU members were taking part in the current marking and assessment boycott, including exam invigilation and processing marks in the national dispute over pay, pensions and conditions. Begun April 19 at 145 universities, staff were teaching as normal, but 22 institutions threatened to dock pay 100 percent, and 24 threatened to cut pay between 20-80 percent.

The UCU organised the boycott as an alternative to strike action, with a view to ending the dispute involving national walkouts in March with a sellout deal.

### **Students at cash-strapped University of East Anglia, England protest cuts to jobs and courses**

On May 22, students greeted new vice chancellor Professor David Maguire at the University of East Anglia, England with protests against cuts to jobs and courses. The university says it must save £45 million over the next three years.

Prof Maguire stated, "If senior staff is guilty of anything it's perhaps seeking to protect staff and not acting sooner rather than later," promising a "period of correction" and a "further headcount reduction."

### **Journalists at BBC Northern Ireland walk out over cuts to services**

On 19 May, 200 BBC Northern Ireland journalists walked out for 48 hours, silencing flagship BBC Radio Ulster's Good Morning Ulster and The Nolan Show. TV and online services were also affected, as well as coverage of local government elections.

The 200 National Union of Journalists members oppose the axing of Radio Foyle's morning show, and the restructuring of services in Northern Ireland, including reallocation of funds to digital services.

### **Council workers in City of London walk out over pay**

Council workers employed in roles including security, police staff, grounds maintenance and administration in the "square mile" of London's financial centre walked out on Thursday.

The GMB and Unite union members are protesting a five percent imposed pay increase, which equates to an 8.5 percent cut in real terms. The workers did not receive a promised rise for 2020/21. The City of London Corporation, according to Unite, has £1.2 billion in reserves, while its employees resort to foodbanks or sleep in their cars to reduce travel costs.

### **Offshore oil workers at Bilfinger UK plan walkout over pay**

Around 1,650 oil workers working for Bilfinger UK at 30 offshore installations plan strike action next month. The Unite union said two 48-hour stoppages would take place June 1-3 and June 8-10. BP, CNRI, Ithaca, Repsol and TAQA will be hit.

Workers including electrical, production and mechanical technicians, deck crew, scaffolders, crane operators, pipefitters and platers rejected a six percent pay offer. Other issues include three weeks on/three weeks off rotas. Riggers at Bilfinger, Stork Technical Services and Sparrows Offshore Services will also strike.

In April, 1,300 North Sea oil workers at Bilfinger UK, Petrofac Facilities Management, Stork Technical Services and Worley Services UK walked out for 48 hours over pay and working conditions.

Last year, the Energy Services Agreement agreed a four percent rise for January 2023, which was not paid, while the energy companies reaped £24 billion profits. BP and Shell made almost £11.7 billion in profits in the first quarter of 2023, according to Unite. The RPI inflation rate is 13.5 percent.

### **Junior doctors in England to walk out over pay and staff shortages**

Junior hospital doctors in England are set for a further stoppage for 72 hours from June 14 over pay and staff shortages.

After strikes in April, the British Medical Association (BMA) entered talks over three weeks, but the government failed to come up with a "credible offer." Doctors demand that their pay, eroded by 26 percent the last 15 years, is restored and staff shortages addressed. After announcing the stoppage, the BMA met Health Secretary Steve Barclay for further negotiations.

Radiographers, nurses and consultants are also balloting for industrial action over similar issues. Previous action by National Health Service workers has been mainly limited to uncoordinated, region-based walkouts.

### **London tube workers vote for further strikes over jobs and conditions**

Workers on London's underground tube service voted by 96 percent in a 56.5 percent turnout for further strikes. Strike dates have not been announced.

The 10,000 RMT union members are in ongoing dispute with Transport for London over pay and attacks on jobs, pensions and working conditions. Workers previously walked out for six days last year, and March 15, Budget Day. According to the RMT, pensions could drop by 30 percent, and 600 station staff posts have gone.

National rail strikes over pay, pensions, jobs and driver only operated trains resume with drivers in Aslef walking out May 31 and June 3 and

RMT members set to strike June 2. The RMT ended the Network Rail strike with a below inflation deal, leaving workers at the train operating companies to fight alone.

### **Workers at Brighton Centre, England in strike ballot over understaffing**

UK workers employed by Labour-run Brighton and Hove City Council at the Brighton Centre are balloting for strike action. The ballot, begun May 22, closes June 2.

GMB union branch secretary Mark Turner said the centre was “so understaffed that they are struggling to maintain safe working practices.” The workers clean, set up and repair sets and seating at music events, conferences and graduation ceremonies, which would be affected by a walkout into July.

### **Iran: cost-of-living protests continue**

Protests continue to escalate across Iran against the cost-of-living crisis and an increasingly hostile government reaction. To date, there have been protests in 282 cities, with more than 30,000 protestors arrested and more than 750 killed by security forces.

On Sunday, pensioners again took to the streets in numerous cities to demand improvements in their economic conditions and a rise in pensions to meet the spiralling cost of goods. Retirees are among the worst hit economically and have seen their conditions deteriorate sharply because the government refuses to adjust pensions in line with inflation. The latest official figures put inflation at 47.7 percent.

The government has repeatedly promised to increase pensions and settle unpaid pensions from previous years but has not delivered. The government itself reported that the SHASTA, the social security investment company intended to fund retirees, increased its profits in recent years, but this has not translated into pensions.

Pensioners and retirees of the Social Security Organisation held protests in Shush, Kermanshah, Rasht, Ahvaz and other cities on Sunday. Pensioners and retirees of the telecom industry held similar protests on Monday, including in many of the same cities. Special educators and employees of the Municipality University in Ahvaz also held a rally outside the governor’s office on Sunday, demanding wage increases and respect for their rights. The following day, authorities forcefully broke up a protest at Tehran University against the suspension of a student.

In Arak, where pensioners had also protested, truck drivers began a strike Monday against their conditions and repressive government rule. Truck drivers in Bandar Abbas began a strike on Sunday, with drivers across the country planning nationwide action from Monday.

Rail workers in Qom also began a stoppage on Monday over unpaid wages. In southwest Iran, petrochemical workers at the Jahan Pars Company returned to work Monday, following a pledge by officials to raise their salaries by 50 percent. When no raise materialised, they resumed their strike.

In response, the government is increasing its repression of the protests, further fuelling the anger. In the village of Gojag, police opened fire on protesters opposed to the demolition of two local residential homes, injuring many. Villagers in Mehrabad held a protest Monday against the use of anti-riot squads to break up the local flower market on Sunday night without notice.

More arrested protesters are being executed. At least seven protesters were hanged since December, with dozens more reportedly sentenced to death or charged with capital offences. It is reported that prisoners in the Qezel Hesar prison, Karaj have begun a hunger strike in protest.

### **Strikes over pay at Israel’s high schools and universities**

On Monday, Israel’s Teachers’ Union announced its latest strike action against the Finance Ministry’s continued failure to reach a new wage agreement. The Union announced a nationwide strike Tuesday, affecting tenth and eleventh grade high school classes.

The shutdown is the latest in a series of intermittent strikes over the last two months, although what the Union calls “fruitless negotiations” have been ongoing for more than a year. The latest budget proposals by Benjamin Netanyahu’s far-right coalition government would see education funding channelled into ultra-Orthodox schooling, which does not require the teaching of core subjects like maths and science.

Union chairman Ran Erez said, “Hours of hearings held in bad faith prove that the state does not even respect the National Labour Court. This week it was proven that there is money for every subject, except for the future of Israeli students.” Erez said that the wage negotiations were “conducted without any real desire on [the Finance Ministry’s] part to bring about an agreement.”

Educators wrote to Education Minister Yoav Kisch at the weekend, calling on him to “prevent the disaster that will befall” if the plan goes ahead. Parents also wrote to Kisch, accusing him of not doing enough to resolve the ongoing crisis.

A teaching strike has also begun at Israel’s universities over pay. Teaching staff at the Hebrew Universities, Tel Aviv, Ben-Gurion, Haifa, the Technion, Bar Ilan and the Weizmann Institute walked out. They said there had been no substantive response from employers’ body the Committee of University Heads and the Ministry of Finance to the demand to improve wages to offset their relative fall since the end of the previous wage agreement.

The strike, called by the Coordinating Council of Senior Academic Staff Organisations, does not include colleges.

### **Israeli municipalities hold four-day strike over tax proposal**

More than 70 cities across Israel held a four-day strike last week, against government plans to reallocate their tax income. Schools were closed and garbage was not collected.

The government is proposing to use municipal commercial property tax revenue for a nationwide fund to support residential property building. The government says this fund, known as an “Arnona Fund,” will alleviate a housing shortage, and lower costs that soared in the last 15 years because demand outstripped supply.

Cities that pay more heavily into the property tax fund, like commercial centres Tel Aviv and Haifa, were involved. Jerusalem, which receives higher state funding because of a relatively poorer population, did not join the action.

The Federation of Local Authorities, which coordinated the strike, calls the proposed fund an intrusion of federal authority. Haim Bibas, mayor of Modiin and head of the Federation, said “It’s not our role to come up with budget funding to solve national crises.”

Opposition to the Arnona Fund Law is being used as a lever against the

government's budget negotiations, as new elections would be necessary if a budget cannot be agreed. The budget has been agreed by parliament's finance committee, but not yet ratified.

The dispute reflects the factional struggle within the Israeli ruling class. The Federation says the law "changes the fundamental rules of the relationship between central and local government," while Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich has called the dispute "a wild, illegal strike that represents abuse of power."

The dispute comes amid ongoing mass protests at worsening conditions and the judicial reforms proposed by the Netanyahu government, and the Federation has moved to prevent it getting out of their control. Calling off the strike, the Federation announced they would continue their challenge through the courts, saying they wanted to "hurt the government, not the residents."

The proposed legislation has now been softened slightly, but Smotrich insists it will go ahead.

### **Kuwait Airways workers strike over pay and conditions**

Workers at Kuwait Airways held an initial two-hour strike Monday. The Workers' Union of Kuwait Airways and Subsidiaries members are protesting low salaries, non-disbursement of rewards to frontline workers, attacks on their rights and mismanagement of earnings. They warn that if their demands are not met or they are prevented from holding another sit-in, they will escalate the action, including stopping air traffic.

The union says management have repeatedly ignored their previous claims but called for a "civilised" strike.

Kuwaiti workers are paid barely a quarter of the salaries offered to foreign employees. Kuwaitis are paid no more than KD800, while foreign workers earn up to KD4,000 and receive road allowances of KD250. The union said it wants to avoid disputes between Kuwaiti and foreign workers. It accuses the company of deliberately provoking Kuwaiti workers to force mistakes and divide them from foreign employees so they can be held legally accountable.

There is deliberate confusion as to whether workers at the national carrier fall under the private or government sector. The strike was triggered after an extraordinary general assembly meeting decided to increase pay to senior department officials but not the rest of the workforce. When workers objected, they were told to go back to government employment.

Union secretary Fahd Mansour Ajmi appealed to the government to restore the strikers' rights, saying this was not a private airline but a government carrier. Chief Instructor of Pilots, Captain Mowaffaq Al-Maoud told press, "If we belong to the private sector, labour support must be disbursed. If we belong to the government sector, we demand equitable salaries and rights with other government sectors."

### **Seven-week strike by Tenneco autoworkers workers in South Africa over pay and sackings**

The indefinite strike by auto workers in South Africa at global company Tenneco Automotive, which makes motor vehicle parts, is continuing.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) members walked out on April 5 to demand equal pay for equal work, R114 an hour, and the reinstatement of 87 sacked strikers out of a South African workforce of 270.

NUMSA is calling for the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration to intervene, and for solidarity messages from four sister companies and unions, like IG-Metall in Germany, to "bring Tenneco Automotive back to the negotiating table".

### **Protest in Liberia over lack of local jobs attacked by police**

A protest held May 22, after a week-long go-slow at transnational Arcelor Mittal in Liberia, was attacked by police.

Dozens of protestors went to Arcelor Mittal premises and blocked the entrance of the ArcelorMittal Concession, the train track and other strategic locations. The police went in to break up the protest. Protest leader Abraham King Jones said a member of the Emergency Response Unit hit him on the head with the back of his gun, causing head injuries.

Secretary General of the United Workers Union of Liberia (UWUL) Dave Seneh said the worker's action was the result of management's refusal to remove disparities in salaries or to implement a five percent increase agreed by the union after government-sanctioned arbitration. "ArcelorMittal is a highly profitable multinational company that can afford fair wages in Liberia," he said. "In recent public reports, ArcelorMittal has boasted of strong full-year financial performance in 2022, including operating income in the excess of 10bn USD."

### **Kenyan tea pickers protest after being sent home without pay**

After more than 15,000 tea workers were sent home without pay at Ekaterra Tea in Kericho and Bomet counties, Kenya, workers destroyed tea-plucking machines and trucks.

A group of protestors overran one of the estates on May 22 and damaged three machines, taking the total number of reported damaged machines to 13.

Local people demanding jobs also held other demonstrations for a second day against the company's use of tea plucking machines. Attempts to take over the headquarters of Ketepa and Ekaterra estates were thwarted by Kenyan police who engaged in running battles with protestors, firing teargas.



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