

Widespread wave of strikes in education and healthcare across Europe; protests continue in Iran; Nigeria: union federation calls off national strike against fuel hike

## Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

8 June 2023

*The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.*

### Widespread strikes by education workers throughout Europe

Widespread strikes continue this week in schools, universities and other education establishments. Education workers are determined to fight against real-terms pay cuts, de-skilling and underfunding of schools.

More than 150,000 Romanian teachers continue a national strike begun May 22. Teachers in Romania face the erosion of their wages by inflation and are demanding significant increases in pay and funding for schools. The union leaders attempted to end the strike for a one-off bonus of 500 euros, but this was rejected by teachers.

Teachers in Portugal held a one-day national strike and large demonstrations in Lisbon and Porto to demand the recognition of more than six and a half years' seniority which they should have accrued. The national one-day strike called by nine unions is in addition to the week-long strike called by the Union of All Education Professionals, which began on Monday. Further national strikes are planned on June 15 and 20, during upcoming exams.

Portugal's minister of education cynically told *Lusa* the strikes should be called off because "those who are being most harmed are those who really depend on public schooling, those who don't have money to pay for tutoring... it is the essence of the public school that is being called into question by these successive strikes." The National Federation of Teachers responded that the strikes were due to "disinvestment" in schools by the government.

In Berlin, teachers began a three-day strike on Tuesday to demand smaller class sizes. Members of the Education and Science Union (GEW) have joined numerous limited walkouts since 2021 over this demand. The CDU-SPD Berlin city government claimed class sizes could not be reduced "because of the nationwide shortage of teachers," *rbb24* reported. The GEW's managing director told *taz* "We've heard the refrain, 'We'd like to make the classes smaller, but we don't have the staff,' for years now," and said they were demanding a commitment to train more teachers.

Members of the Greek Teachers' Federation began holding three-hour partial strikes on June 1, set to last until June 15, against the individual evaluation of teachers. Teachers in Greece have held numerous boycotts

and strikes against the implementation of the evaluations, which they say will create a multi-tier system of schools without improving those in need of extra resources.

Extracurricular educators in Austria continue their stoppages against a new law which would, according to a works council member interviewed in *Junge Welt*, "completely eliminate" their role and lead to 19 percent pay cuts. *Junge Welt* reported that more than 2,000 educators gathered for a protest against the new law on Vienna last week.

Workers at nurseries in Brussels walked out for a day last week to demand improved staffing levels and conditions in the sector. One childcare worker told *bx1* "We don't have adequate equipment. Toys, we hardly get any. We have to collect the salvage from the other nurseries that are closing. We have a building where the ceiling is almost falling on our heads." Another said there were seven children to every worker, making it impossible to care for them properly.

The Minister for Children of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation told *bx1* that her answer to the staff shortages was a "shortage attractiveness task force" which brought together the government and unions, but she did not mention concrete measures.

In France, the National Union of Early Childhood Professionals also called a one-day strike on Tuesday in nurseries over the lack of adequate staff. This took place on the same day as the national strike against the pension reforms, on which hundreds of thousands of workers mobilised.

Also in France, workers accompanying students with disabilities (AESH) plan a national strike on June 13. AESH workers help students with disabilities to attend mainstream schools, and the unions say that their job role is "clearly threatened with disappearance," *Ouest France* reported. A press release from the Solidaires union denounced "poverty wages,... lack of professional recognition, embodied by the refusal to grant civil service status, the lack of training."

Workers at the three public universities in Slovenia were on strike on May 30, demanding that their pay be linked to inflation, improved working conditions, and opposing the new Higher Education Act, *Slovenia Times* reported.

### Healthcare workers across Europe fight over workloads and pay

Healthcare workers across Europe are opposing constant increases to their workload and the erosion of their pay by inflation.

Members of the Sanitas healthcare workers' union in Romania began a week-long symbolic strike on Wednesday, turning up to work but wearing protest armbands and badges. The president of Sanitas told *Agerpres* that if their demands, including a pay rise for all workers, were not met by June 15, then further stoppages would be called. Around 4,000 healthcare workers joined a protest outside the parliament building in Bucharest on Thursday.

Personal care assistants began a week-long national strike on Monday, as part of a collective bargaining dispute. Workers who help those with disabilities are calling for pay increases, as well as overtime payment. The JHL union told *YLE* that many personal assistants work flexible hours but in practice are not paid overtime.

In the Belgian region of Wallonia, GPs held a one-hour warning strike on Wednesday, opposing an increase in their responsibilities. Striking doctors are opposing changes to the all-hours GP telephone service 1733. According to *Le Soir*, the 1733 service is currently understaffed, and has decided to redirect a larger number of calls to GPs at night, which was a "decision taken without consultation" of GPs, the GBO union said.

GPs in France will also stop work on Friday, as part of a strike called by the "Doctors for Tomorrow" group, who work outside the unions. The group called the stoppage to denounce a bill passing through the National Assembly next week, which it says will make GPs "responsible for the state of health of territories without being given the necessary means."

At noon on June 3, doctors in Montenegro held a protest against a pay cut pushed through in January. According to *aktuelno*, doctors lost between 200 and 600 euros per month, and demand wages be raised to at least the pre-January level.

### **Nurses in Wales hold two-day walkout over pay**

Nurses in Wales held two 12-hour strikes this week, with walkouts from 7am on Tuesday and Wednesday. All but one of the health boards in Wales were affected by the stoppage.

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) members are fighting for improved pay. The RCN members rejected the Welsh government offer of 15.7 percent over two years, which has been accepted by other health unions in Wales. Further stoppages are due July 12 and 13. RCN members in Wales will be re-balloted between July 3 and 31 to renew their strike mandate.

### **Further strikes by BBC journalists over proposed local radio cuts**

Around 1,000 journalists working for BBC local radio walked out on Wednesday and Thursday. They were already staging a work to rule.

The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) members are protesting proposed cuts to BBC local radio services, after stoppages in March over the same issue. The NUJ also organised a lobby of parliament on Wednesday on this. The stoppage affected local BBC television news services, with many regions only providing truncated local news provision.

### **UK civil servants continue stoppages while union considers below inflation pay offer**

UK civil servants are continuing their programme of stoppages in their fight for higher pay and against job losses and attacks on conditions.

PCS union members working for the Northern Ireland Office based at Erskine House in Belfast began a three-day stoppage Tuesday. PCS members working for the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) are scheduled to walk out June 15, 16, 19, 22 and 23. The DVSA runs test centres for drivers taking their driving exam.

Those working for the Driver Vehicle Licence Agency (DVLA) based in Wales are due to hold a total of 15 days of stoppages throughout June, beginning on Sunday.

Following talks between the government and civil service unions, the government has put a new pay offer. The Prospect and FDA unions have called off strikes and suspended ballots in response to the UK government's offer of talks.

The PCS, the largest civil service union with 100,000 members, is continuing the action but has welcomed the offer announced June 2 by Cabinet Office Minister Jeremy Quin. The offer includes a non-consolidated £1,500 lump sum for 2022-23 and a two to 4.5 percent pay rise for 2023-24, with the lowest paid getting an extra 0.5 percent. Additionally, proposed changes to the redundancy terms will be put on hold until 2025.

The thin gruel of this offer has been hailed as a "significant concession" by the PCS, with further scheduled talks on it taking place this month. The PCS said its NEC will meet at the end of the month to consider its response.

The union has been involved in months of limited, rolling strikes across 132 government departments over pay and conditions, with only three days of all-out national stoppages.

### **Refuse workers in Sandwell, UK resume strike in pay dispute**

Refuse workers employed by outsourcing company Serco, to provide refuse services to Sandwell Council in the English Midlands began a four-day strike Monday. It will be followed by a five-day strike beginning June 12.

The GMB union members resumed their strike over pay after rejecting a revised offer from the employer which was a real-terms cut. As well as waste collection, they work at waste sites and in street cleaning.

### **Lecturing staff at Further Education colleges in north of England striking over pay**

Lecturers at Manchester College and UCEN were on strike Monday and Wednesday this week, following 12 days of previous strikes. The University and College Union (UCU) members have rejected a 2.7 percent pay offer.

Around 100 lecturers at Tyne Coast College in north east England were on strike Monday and Wednesday over a well-below-inflation pay offer, as well as protesting plans to close Queen Alexandra Sixth Form College, part of the Tyne Coast College group.

Further Education lecturers at Bradford, Harrogate, Kirklees and Leeds City colleges walked out Monday and Wednesday this week, with a further two days of stoppages planned for next week over pay.

## **Strikes by refuse collection workers in Cumberland, UK to continue as talks falter**

Strikes by refuse collection workers employed by Allerdale Waste Services (AWS) are to continue. AWS is wholly owned by Cumberland council, and provides its waste collection services.

The GMB and Unite union members have been holding stoppages since April, beginning all-out strike action on May 19 in a bid for increased pay. The rates of pay for loaders of £10.90 an hour and £11.89 for drivers, who must hold HGV licences, are among the lowest in the country.

Talks between the unions and employer broke down Tuesday, after the workers refused AWS's latest offer. The workers are angry that the company is using agency staff, paid £14 an hour, to break the strike.

## **Security staff at Heathrow airport, London to strike over pay**

Around 2,000 security staff working at Terminals 3 and 5 at Heathrow Airport, London are to strike for higher pay. The Unite union members are due to begin 31 days of stoppages from June 24.

## **Refuse workers in South Gloucestershire, UK, to strike over pay**

Refuse workers employed by outsourcing company Suez to provide refuse collection for part of South Gloucestershire council are to begin a seven-day strike on June 12, followed by a 14-day stoppage from June 26.

The Unite union members voted by an 89 percent majority to reject an eight percent pay offer from Suez. Refuse collection lorry loaders are currently paid only £11.53 an hour.

## **Parks and cemetery workers in Solihull, UK to walk out over pay**

Park and cemetery workers employed by IDverde under contract to Solihull council in the English Midlands are to begin a two-week strike July 3.

The GMB members voted by a 100 percent majority to walk out after IDverde made a pay offer representing a pay cut in real terms.

## **Bus drivers in two UK cities set to strike over pay**

Bus drivers working for First Bus in Leeds and Arriva in London are set to strike over pay issues. Around 800 Unite members at First Bus in Leeds are due to begin a continuous strike from June 18. They are angry at the company's refusal to move back the pay anniversary date to April.

During the COVID-19 pandemic the Unite union agreed to move the pay anniversary date to October to alleviate the company's financial position. First Bus's refusal to move it back to April means the drivers must forgo any pay increase for six months. Bus drivers were disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, in which two Leeds First Bus drivers died.

In London around 1,700 drivers working for Arriva, which runs services in North and East London, are set for two-day walkouts on June 20 and June 27. The Unite union members have rejected a seven percent pay offer from the company, which represents a cut in real terms.

## **Academic staff at UK universities taking further strike action over pay, pensions and conditions**

Academic staff at 145 UK universities, members of the UCU, are taking part in ongoing industrial action over pay, pensions and working conditions by mounting a marking and assessment boycott (Mab).

Some universities have responded to the Mab by threatening to impose a 100 percent pay cut on staff taking part.

One such is Leeds University, where around 1,800 UCU members are set to begin an indefinite strike on June 15 in response to the threat to stop the pay of those taking part in the Mab.

UCU members at Sheffield Hallam University were on strike Wednesday and Thursday this week over the same issue, following a three-day stoppage last week.

## **Low-paid migrant workers in London to carry out coordinated strike over pay and conditions**

Around 145 low-paid, mainly migrant workers at nine sites across London are to hold a coordinated strike on June 13, 15 and 20.

The United Voices of the World (UVW) members work as carers, cleaners and concierge workers at an Amazon warehouse, a Mercedes-Benz showroom, the London School of Economics, Streatham and Clapham private school, La Retraite state school, Sage Nursing home, the Department for Education, luxury apartments West End Quays and media powerhouse Ogilvy at the Sea Containers' building across London. They are seeking a pay rise, improved conditions and more respect from employers.

## **Material handling workers at Selby, UK power station set to strike over pay**

Around 100 workers employed by Hargreaves for handling materials at Drax power station in Selby are set to begin a 24-hour strike Sunday evening.

The Unite union members are seeking pay parity on shift pay with workers directly employed by Drax power station. The directly employed workers get a £16,000 a year shift payment on top of their basic pay, while the Hargreaves employed workers get only £1,600 a year on top of basic pay, one-tenth of the rate.

They are also seeking an increase in basic pay above the eight percent offered by Hargreaves which, with the current rate of inflation, represents a real-terms pay cut.

## **Strike of soft drinks workers in Wakefield, UK rescheduled**

A 14-day strike of hundreds of workers at Coca-Cola Europacific Partners' (CCEP) in Wakefield, England due to have begun June 8 has been rescheduled. It will now begin on June 14.

The Unite members voted 87 percent to reject a six percent pay offer. CCEP's latest profit figure rose 37 percent to £1.85 billion. The factory is the largest soft drinks factory in Europe. Apart from Coca-Cola the plant also packs other products including Fanta, Sprite and Dr Pepper.

### **Italian telecommunications workers strike over threat to jobs**

Thousands of telecoms workers in Italy joined a one-day strike and protested in Rome on Tuesday. The strike was called by the CGIL, CISL and UIL unions to "defend more than 20,000 jobs and put telecommunications back at the centre of the digital transition of the country," ANSA reported.

Workers at the Rome protest denounced restructuring and layoffs which threaten many jobs. The unions reported that around 80 percent of affected workers joined the strike.

### **Judicial workers in Croatia walk out after government unsuccessfully attempts to ban strike**

Around 5,000 judicial workers in Croatia began a strike on Monday, following an unsuccessful attempt by the government to obtain a court order banning the stoppage. Members of the Union of State and Local Civil Servants and Employees (SDLSN) called for monthly salaries to be increased by 400 euros. The SDLSN told *Hina* that officials in 80 courts nationwide have stopped work.

On June 2, the County Court in Zagreb rejected a government application for a preliminary injunction suspending the strike until a ruling on its legality could be made. The government argued that the SDLSN's demand could only be met by government decree, and so was not a legal demand for a strike. It also argued that, as the Croatian Police Trade Union and one other union had signed a collective agreement containing a strike ban, this applied to workers represented by the SDLSN as well. This Monday, the court rejected both arguments and ruled the strike legal.

Despite the belligerent attitude of the government, and the refusal of the minister of justice to make a pay offer in meetings with the SDLSN, the union lowered its pay demand from 400 to 300 euros, *Hina* reported.

### **Irish firefighters begin work-to-rule over understaffing and pay**

Almost 2,000 retained firefighters in Ireland began a work-to-rule protest on Tuesday, against understaffing and pay which is falling behind inflation.

Retained firefighters are on call 24/7 and cannot travel far from their fire stations, being paid 8,500 euros per year and hourly wages when they are called out, according to *Independent.ie*. Because of understaffing, many retained firefighters are unable to take annual leave, and are campaigning for different working patterns, such as alternating weeks on call.

If their demands are not met, rolling strikes in half of all stations will begin June 13, with an all-out strike from June 20.

### **Continuing protests in Iran**

As Iran's economic position deteriorates, protests continue. Tuesday saw protests by retired telecom workers against their low pensions and deteriorating social conditions. The same day, protests were held in the town of Taft in the province of Yazad against inadequate water supplies.

Workers in the city of Firouzeh went on strike on Tuesday, protesting low pay and poor pension provision.

### **Nigerian Labour Congress suspends national strike against fuel hike in accordance with legal attack**

The announcement of an end to Nigeria's fuel subsidy triggered a call from the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) for members of its 43 affiliated unions to shut down all activity nationwide on Wednesday, 7 June.

President Bola Tinubu axed the subsidy in his inaugural address last week, after the three leading candidates at the election all pledged to remove it if they won. The subsidy cost N4 trillion last year, more than the government spent on education and healthcare.

Opponents of the cut pointed to the increased price of goods and services, and the further impoverishment of millions. Tinubu's statement prompted fuel queues across the country.

Following the announcement, the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPCL) raised its prices by almost 200 percent, to between N480 and N570 per litre. The NLC called for a strike unless NNPCL reversed this decision.

The strike call met a massive response, with teaching, medical and judicial staff unions among those responding. The National Union of Electricity Employees and Nigerian Union of Journalists also called their members out.

The Inspector General of Police called on strategic police managers to develop proactive measures to prevent unrest. The government also obtained an injunction from the National Industrial Court (NIC). NIC ruled against the strike on the grounds that it would cause hardship.

The NLC issued a statement expressing "disgust and disapproval with the ruling of the NIC for its continuous weaponisation of the instrument of Ex parte injunction in favour of government" and "against the interests of Nigerian workers."

However, in the same communiqué after its National Executive Council meeting on Tuesday, the NLC said it was necessary to show government that it was important to comply with laws and court rulings. It therefore announced it was suspending the strike "in compliance with the flawed rulings of the NIC."

The NLC claimed this would also allow negotiations with the government "to flow freely and enable final agreement during or after 19 June." The outgoing government had left subsidy provisions in place only until 30 June.

The "compromise" has been denounced as a "betrayal by NLC" by activist Deji Adeyanju. NLC, he tweeted, "suspended the strike without achieving anything."

### **Union suspends indefinite Nigerian maritime workers' strike for negotiations**

On Monday, members of the Maritime Workers Union of Nigeria

(MWUN) began an indefinite strike in their ongoing dispute with the shipping companies over poor pay and conditions. The union suspended the action within one day, having agreed a timetable for negotiating conditions.

The strike closed ports across the country, and had a major impact on the companies. Comet Shipping's chief accountant said the strike cost the industry N10billion.

When he announced the strike last week, MWUN President-General Adewale Adeyanju said the shipping companies had been ignoring their calls for minimum welfare conditions for six years. He described the conditions of shipping workers as nothing short of modern-day slavery. "Because of the sensitivity of the ports," he said, "We always weigh the options. But the way it is now, there is no way we are going to continue issuing ultimatums."

MWUN then called off the strike, after agreeing with the employers "to establish an acceptable Minimum Standards on the Condition of Service in the Shipping Industry." Negotiations, begun Monday, are scheduled to last for one month.

### **Nigerian union group suspends health workers' strike**

The Joint Health Sector Unions (JOHESU) federation of unions representing all Nigerian health workers but doctors and dentists has suspended an indefinite strike over pay structures after 12 days.

The strike was called to demand the immediate payment of shortfalls and omissions in COVID-19 hazard allowances in federal health institutions, as well as recognition of health workers in non-core hospital facilities in payment of these allowances.

JOHESU was demanding immediate implementation of adjustments to the national pay structure. Other demands included the immediate and unconditional payment of withheld and unpaid salaries.

JOHESU Vice President Obinna Ogbonna said Nigeria's new President Bola Tinubu had "pleaded with the striking health workers to give him the benefit of the doubt that he will resolve the matters amicably to our own benefit and positive results." On this basis, JOHESU called off the strike, offering the government "a 21-day timeline to assess progress and commitment of state actors in resolving the issues."

### **Kenyan police fire tear gas on protesters**

Police have attacked protesters against Kenya's proposed new finance bill, firing tear gas and arresting 11.

More than 100 protesters marched through the capital Nairobi on Tuesday. They oppose legislation that will apply new or increased taxes to a wide range of items, including fuel and food, increasing the burden on the poorest. The government of William Ruto expects to raise 289 billion shillings from new taxes.

Protesters carried placards reading "Will more taxation lead to low cost of living," and "Poverty is man-made." Chants included "They want to kill us with hunger." Unemployed protester Rodgers Obogi told press "We are demonstrating to express our frustrations, people need money, that money is being taxed twice."

The police action has been widely criticised. Human rights activist Boniface Mwangi called it "dictatorial behaviour." Amnesty Kenya called for the unconditional release of the arrested protesters, saying the right to protest is "sacred under our Constitution and international law."

A senior civil servant at the foreign ministry, Korir Sing'oei, has also spoken out against the police attack, saying "No peaceful protest, particularly one focused on an ongoing national economic conversation, should be disrupted nor should any arrests be carried out."

There have been many recent attacks on demonstrations. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reported last week that 12 demonstrators were killed by police during protests in March. The government say there were only three deaths, including a policeman.

### **Cleaners at Durban Transnet in South Africa take unofficial strike action against unpaid wages**

Cleaners outsourced by Transnet logistics company in Durban, South Africa, took strike action last week over unpaid wages. The cleaners who work for Masihloniphaneni Trading told press that this happens regularly.

Justice Duma said, "This is the second month in a row that this has happened to us in this company. Contractually we have to be paid on the 25th, but last month we were paid on the 30th. This time it's been over a week, but nothing has been communicated to us."

Other workers said they had received April's wages three weeks after they were due.

### **Local municipality workers in Mohokare, South Africa, strike against unpaid wages**

Local municipality workers in Mohokare are on strike against unpaid salaries. The workers, members of the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU), will not return to work until they are paid.

The municipality has said they are unlikely to be paid due to financial constraints. SAMWU told sabc news that workers in several municipalities, including Ditsobotla, Lekwa-Teema, Emfuleni and Kareeberg in North West, Gauteng and Northern Cape provinces, will receive their salaries late for the month of May.

### **EPWP workers demand permanent jobs in KwaZulu-Natal**

Expanded public works programme (EPWP) workers in KwaZulu-Natal are demanding their jobs become permanent posts. These posts include security guards, clerks and cleaners.

They marched to the Department of Education offices in Pietermaritzburg on Monday, to demand permanent posts as well as shelter rooms for school safety officers and facilities to store their personal belongings.

The workers, who are members of National Public Services and Allied Workers Union (Nupsaw) have threatened strike action if their demands are not addressed. Some of these workers have been working for the department for over ten years only earning R2,300, way below minimum wage.



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