

Italian airport workers hold national strike over pay and conditions; UK refuse workers at Cumberland and Sandwell councils on indefinite pay strike joined by workers in Hertfordshire; unrest continues in Iran as government attempts to limit access to grave of Mahsa Amini, murdered by morality police; Nigerian unions suspend national fuel subsidy strike to negotiate palliatives

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

22 June 2023

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

Italian airport workers hold national strike over pay and conditions

Workers at Italian airports, including ground handling workers and air traffic controllers, held a 24-hour national strike on Tuesday.

The Union Sindical di Base, one of the three unions which called the strike, called for a 300 euro increase in monthly salaries to compensate for inflation, a return of the 37.5 hour working week, and improvement in shifts and holidays. According to *The Local*, a “large number” of the 3,000 flights in Italy on that day were cancelled or delayed.

National strike by French hospital workers

Workers in French hospitals, both medical and non-medical staff, joined a national one-day strike on Tuesday against the “catastrophic situation” of the health system.

Ouest France reported that the four unions which called the strike called for pay rises, improved working conditions and asked the government to begin a campaign of recruitment to prevent bed closures.

Teachers in Portugal strike during primary school exams

Teachers in Portugal were on strike on Tuesday, refusing to carry out primary school “benchmarking” tests.

Teachers also walked out during the previous exam on June 15. The National Federation of Teachers estimated that 15,000 tests were prevented by the strikes. Teachers are calling for more than six and a half years of seniority to be counted towards their salary and career progression, which was frozen.

The Union of All Education Professionals (STOP), another of the nine unions which called the strikes, criticised some schools for preventing teachers from teaching their class during the exam boycott. STOP also told the media that many parents supported the strikes against the exams, which children sit aged around seven, as they did not believe it was appropriate to test them at this age.

Georgian miners walk out and hold hunger strike to protest working conditions and pay

Miners in Georgia walked out on strike on June 7, demanding a pay rise and the reversal of changes to their working conditions by Georgian Manganese, which introduced longer working hours. At a rally in Chiatura, miners told *First Channel* that work had stopped in most of the mines.

Georgian Manganese, owned by the British multinational Stemcor, offered only a five percent pay rise and a return to 12-hour days, which the miners rejected and demanded a 20 percent wage rise. While inflation in Georgia has recently fallen to 1.5 percent, it averaged 8.7 percent over the past 12 months.

According to the *Caucasian Knot*, ten miners began a hunger strike in Chiatura on June 13. Another joined on June 15 and sewed his mouth shut. The Trade Union of Metallurgy, Mining and Chemical Industry Workers of Georgia told the miners to stop their hunger strike, but they refused. On June 18, another sewed his eyes closed in protest. One hunger striker has already been hospitalised.

Workers at H&M in Spain strike over pay

Most of the 4,000 workers in H&M shops in Spain joined a 24-hour strike on Thursday, following partial strikes on Tuesday, at the start of the summer sales, *Europa Press* reported.

The Workers' Commissions (CCOO) and General Workers' Union (UGT) reported that more than 80 percent of the workforce joined the stoppages, closing around 100 shops. Another strike is planned for Monday.

H&M workers are calling for pay rises and improved staffing levels. The company offered "greater remuneration," but based this on productivity targets, and its "solution" to staffing levels was to "reduce absenteeism." The unions say workloads have been too high since the company laid off 340 workers in 2021.

Doctors in La Rioja, Spain, demand improved staff-patient ratios

Doctors and paediatricians in La Rioja, Spain, held a strike and demonstration in Logroño on Monday, demanding improved staffing ratios. A spokesman for the strike committee told *Europa Press* that doctors could treat as many as 60 or 70 patients per day and said this should come down to between 30 and 35, as well as calling for bureaucracy to be reduced.

The strike committee reported that 80 percent of doctors and paediatricians stopped work, and 150 joined the demonstration. The La Rioja government claimed that 52 percent of doctors joined the strikes, after it imposed a minimum service requirement.

Construction workers strike over unpaid salaries in Izmir, Turkey

Workers on the construction site of the Izmir City Hospital, in Turkey's third-most populous city, stopped work on Saturday after their wages were not paid on June 5, *BirGün* reported.

The Construction and Building Workers' Union said the dormitories workers were staying in were in poor condition, the food provided was of low quality, and many workers could not sleep because of a bedbug infestation. It also accused subcontractors on the site of pressuring workers into resigning in order to avoid paying them severance.

Construction on the hospital began in 2013 and was supposed to last 30 months, but its opening has been repeatedly pushed back.

Union suspends Irish firefighters' strike after Labour Court appeal

The Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) called off an all-out strike planned for Tuesday by 2,000 retained firefighters over work conditions, at the request of Ireland's Labour Court. The Labour Court has scheduled a hearing on June 26 with SIPTU and the Local Government Management Association.

Retained firefighters are paid an annual retainer of 8,600 euros to be on call 24/7 for 48 weeks per year, and hourly wages when they are called to an emergency. According to *Independent.ie*, the average monthly earnings are only around 700 euros. 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.

One retained firefighter told the news site, "To be a retained firefighter, you have to live and work within 2.5km of the fire station. Your life is built around your pager... We've missed kids' communions and birthdays, had Christmas Days when we're with our families one minute, then not getting home for another 12 hours. There are lads here who haven't had a Christmas off in over 17 years."

German retail workers continue warning strikes while employers threaten lawsuits

Retail workers in several German federal states held warning strikes on June 16 and 17, during collective bargaining between the United Services Union (Verdi) and employers' associations.

Verdi is calling for hourly wages to increase by 2.50 euros, which amounts to an annual pay rise of around 15 percent, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported. Employers in the states of Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia offered a 7.5 percent pay rise spread over two years, far below inflation.

The employers' organisation in Bavaria threatened to take Verdi to court, claiming retail businesses had "suffered millions in damage from what we believe to be illegal warning strikes." It told *dpa* that Verdi's demand for the state-wide collective agreement to be binding on all companies represented by the employers' association was "legally inadmissible... because it interferes with collective bargaining autonomy." Verdi's chief negotiator replied that they had already been to court over the same issue in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, where the court ruled in favour of the union.

University workers in Slovenia hold second strike against wage inequality

On June 13, workers at Slovenia's three public universities held a second strike over pay inequality, following a one-day walkout on May 30. The stoppage continued with a rally on June 14, and the Higher Education Union threatened to call new strikes when the new academic year begins in October.

According to *Politika*, the union considers the government's pay offer for teaching staff in universities to be acceptable, but did not approve the offer for other workers such as librarians and IT specialists.

Pay strike by refuse collection workers in Cumberland, UK continues

The strike by UK refuse collection workers employed by Allerdale Waste Services (AWS) is continuing. AWS is wholly owned by Cumberland council and provides its waste collection services.

The GMB and Unite union members have held 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.

The latest talks between the unions and employer broke down 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.

Unite announced its members will begin to visit households affected by the strike, explaining the dispute and asking residents to put pressure on the council to resolve the dispute. According to Unite, some residents in the Cockermouth area have not had their bins emptied for four weeks and the council has removed the facility allowing residents to report waste collection problems. The union said it will shortly protest outside Cumberland Council offices.

Pay strike of refuse workers in Sandwell, UK, enters third week

The strike of refuse workers employed by outsourcing company Serco to provide refuse services to Sandwell Council in England has entered its third week.

The GMB union members resumed their strikes after rejecting a revised pay offer of 7.5 percent from the employer, a real-terms cut with RPI inflation at 11.3 percent. As well as waste collection, they work at waste sites and in street cleaning. Serco is consulting with Acas to try and begin conciliation talks.

Refuse workers in Hertfordshire, England strike over pay

Around 70 UK refuse workers employed by outsource contractor Urbaser to collect domestic waste on behalf of Hertfordshire Borough Council walked out on strike Monday.

The Unite union members rejected an eight percent pay offer from the company. The areas affected are Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield. The council responded by bringing in other contractors, prioritising non-recyclable waste.

Refuse workers in Selby, UK, to walk out over pay offer

Around 40 UK workers employed by contractor Urbaser in Selby are to strike over pay. Urbaser is contracted to North Yorkshire unitary authority to provide refuse services in the Selby area.

The Unite union members rejected an eight percent pay offer from the company. Bin loader and ground workers are paid only £10.64 an hour, while drivers who must have HGV licences are paid only £12.51 an hour. The strikes, which will hit bin collection and street cleaning services in Selby, are scheduled for June 27, 30, July 4, 7, 11, 14, 18, 21, 25, 28 and August 4, 8, and 11.

Train drivers at two UK rail companies announce industrial action

Train drivers are continuing industrial action in their long-running pay dispute.

ASLEF union members working for the Avanti West Coast train operating company (TOC) are set to strike July 2. They are protesting the company's attempts to unilaterally force through sick pay changes.

Drivers working for London North Eastern Railway (LNER) are to

begin a continuous overtime ban from July 1, citing "the company's failure to adhere to agreed procedures."

Last week, ASLEF announced the result of its third ballot of UK train drivers since last year in their dispute with the rail companies over pay.

Around 12,500 ASLEF members across 15 TOCs voted by mostly over 90 percent majorities to continue their dispute. The train drivers have taken 11 days of action since the dispute began. They will hold an overtime ban at 16 rail companies, not working on rest days July 3-8. It is expected the action will affect train passengers travelling to the Wimbledon tennis championship, which begins July 3.

UK train drivers' union calls off overtime ban at train operating company

UK train drivers at the TransPennine Express (TPE) rail company have ended an overtime ban. The ban by ASLEF members was implemented in response to TPE's attack on terms and conditions and its failure to recruit sufficient drivers. The ban meant drivers refused to work rest days, which led to train cancellations as there was no cover for drivers sick or otherwise absent.

TPE had earned a reputation of failing to run an adequate service. In January, it cancelled around half its scheduled services, leading to chaos for passengers. Because of TPE's abysmal record, in May it came under government control and is run by the so-called Operator of Last Resort.

A recent BBC report on the lifting of the overtime ban said, "dozens of drivers have left TPE in recent weeks," and the company could still have problems running a full service.

UK homeless charity workers to extend strike over pay

Around 550 workers employed by homeless charity St Mungo's in London are currently on strike after rejecting a 2.25 percent pay offer.

The current stoppage of Unite union members ends June 26, and they have voted by a 71 percent majority to begin an indefinite strike on June 27. After tax and other deductions, St Mungo's workers take home less than £20,000 a year. In talks, the charity refused to improve its original offer, despite having £16 million in cash as well as large reserves.

In contrast to the poverty pay of the workers, the Unite union press release announcing the indefinite stoppage noted: "Since 2013, St Mungo's chief executives have seen their average pay at the charity spiral by 77 percent—up from £107,000 to more than £189,000 (according to the latest published accounts). St Mungo's won't reveal the salary of the newly appointed CEO, Emma Haddad.

"In the last ten years, the pay of senior management at St Mungo's has increased by 350 percent. In stark contrast, over a similar time frame, the real value of the wages of St Mungo's workers, many of whom work on the streets helping the homeless, has plummeted by 25 percent. A frontline worker earns around £26,000."

Rail infrastructure workers based in Crewe, UK to strike over pay

UK workers employed by Unipart Rail at their depot in Crewe are set to strike on July 5 and 12, as well as mounting an overtime ban July 3-16.

The Unite union members rejected a 4.5 percent pay offer. Unipart Rail makes and refurbishes signalling equipment. The strike could lead to disruption to rail services.

Bus drivers in Manchester, UK to strike over pay

Around 360 UK bus drivers employed by First Bus Manchester are to strike in July, after voting by a 96 percent majority for the action.

The Unite union members rejected a 7.4 percent pay offer with an additional 3.4 percent in October. They are paid less than drivers at other bus companies operating in Manchester, where drivers at Go North West earn £14.37 an hour, at Diamond Bus £14.30 an hour and at Stagecoach £14 an hour.

The scheduled dates for stoppages are July 3, 4, 7, 10, 11 and 13.

Unite union suspends strike by bus drivers in Leeds, UK after substandard offer from employer

Around 800 drivers working for First Bus in Leeds walked out on Sunday, but their strike was suspended on Monday after talks between First Bus management and Unite officials, during which the company made a new offer.

The Unite union members were angry at the company's refusal to move back the pay anniversary date to April. During the pandemic, Unite 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 affected by COVID-19, in which two Leeds First Bus drivers died.

On Sunday and Monday before the strike was suspended, lively well attended picket lines took place at the two First Bus depots in Bramley and Hunslet. On Monday, WSWS reporters spoke to drivers on the Bramley picket line.

Pickets explained there was a more than an 80 percent majority for the stoppage. While refusing to move back the pay anniversary date until 2025, the company had come up with a 12 percent offer over two years, a cut in real terms rejected by the drivers. One driver told WSWS reporters that even the 12 percent offer was conditional on them giving up two weeks' leave and an end to the company's sick pay scheme, which would leave sick drivers dependent on the miserly government Statutory Sick Pay payments.

Leeds First Bus operates a two-tier pay scale. New recruits are paid on a lower pay scale for two years. Drivers spoke of the low pay they receive for a job which involves responsibility for passenger safety. They said low pay has led to a high turnover of staff and that because a pool of standby drivers is no longer maintained to cover for absences, drivers are under pressure. One driver thought they should be asking for £20 an hour.

Agency drivers drafted in to try and break the strike were paid £22 an hour plus a £50-a-day bonus.

BBC news reported Unite had suspended the strike as an act of good faith and that it recommended the offer, to be balloted on June 29. Should it be rejected, Unite say the stoppage would be resumed.

Manchester, UK Metrolink tram dispute over pay ends as union

pushes through below-inflation pay deal

The Unite union has declared the pay dispute by around 600 Manchester Metrolink (light rail system) over, after putting a below-inflation pay deal to members.

The tram workers had rejected a five percent pay increase offer over 15 months. A planned stoppage June 10-11 was called off after intervention by Greater Manchester's Labour mayor. The new deal comprises a 6.5 percent pay rise and a £1,000 one-off payment.

While unions suspend marking boycott in FE colleges in Northern Ireland, employers after government intervention withdraw one-off payment

After the unions suspended the marking and assessment boycott (MAB) in Northern Ireland, the six Further Education (FE) colleges withdrew a promised one-off payment of £3,000.

Employers said the Department for Economy declined to approve the one-off payment unless the 1,700 lecturers agreed the wider substandard pay deal.

The University and College Union (UCU) and NASUWT members had rejected an offer of one percent for 2021-22 and the same for 2022-23. The UCU, expecting the one-off payment in June, said industrial relations had suffered "immeasurable" damage. FE lecturers, starting salary £24,000, are engaged in an ongoing dispute over pay, casualisation, workload and pensions.

Around 15,000 UK academics at 145 universities are in a long-running dispute over pay, pensions and conditions, also taking part in a MAB. Many universities are docking salaries by up to 100 percent. The UCU bureaucracy organised the boycott to demobilise its members in universities. It has made no attempt to unite its members across all education settings in coordinated strike action.

General strike in Iranian city of Saqqez protesting attempts to limit access to grave of Mahsa Amini

A general strike took place in the Iranian city of Saqqez in Kurdistan on June 13. The strike was precipitated when Iranian authorities tried to obscure the grave of Mahsa Amini and limit access to it.

Mahsa Amini, 22, died on September 13 last year in the custody of the regime's morality police. They had accused her of wearing her hijab "improperly." Her murder sparked mass protests against Iran's authoritarian regime and reignited ongoing protests by pensioners and farmers and strikes by factory workers against the regression in social conditions.

Around 50 percent of Iran's population live beneath the poverty line due to punishing US economic sanctions, and Iran's removal of price subsidies.

Further protests in Beirut, Lebanon as economic situation deteriorates

Last week saw protests outside Bank Audi, Bank of Beirut and Byblos Bank in the outskirts of Beirut, Lebanon. The protesters have savings in the banks but are being denied access to them. There have been recent instances where desperate people have used armed threats to get access to their own money.

Over the last year, the Lebanese pound has been in freefall. The current economic crisis, beginning in 2019, led to the impoverishment of the vast majority of the Lebanese population. Last week the Lebanese parliament met and yet again failed to elect a president, prolonging the country's political deadlock.

Israeli screenwriters demonstrate in support of striking Writers Guild of America workers

Around 15 members of the Screenwriters Guild of Israel (SGI) held a demonstration in Tel Aviv on June 14, to support the 11,000 American striking screenwriters. They have been on strike for nearly seven weeks demanding a new collective agreement.

The demonstration in Israel was part of an international day of support by screenwriters' unions in 35 countries around the world.

Nigerian unions suspend national fuel subsidy strike for negotiation of palliatives

After the recent suspension of an indefinite national strike in response to the axing of Nigeria's fuel subsidy, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress on Monday joined a Presidential Steering Committee with the federal government. They have agreed an eight-week time frame for the implementation of palliative measures.

The unions suspended their planned strike following a court injunction ruling it illegal. Last week, the courts insisted the injunction remained in place. Ahead of Monday's talks, the NLC repeated that it would not hesitate to take strike action unless the government took measures to alleviate the unbearable hardship caused by high fuel prices.

New president Bola Tinubu axed the subsidy in his inaugural address last month. The subsidy cost N4 trillion last year, more than the government spent on education and healthcare.

Opponents of the cut pointed to increased prices of goods and services, and the further impoverishment of millions. Tinubu's announcement triggered fuel queues nationally. Pump prices have roughly trebled, from around N195 to between N560 and N660 per litre.

Given this threefold increase, NLC National Treasurer Hakeem Ambali said the unions expected the minimum wage to be raised from N30,000 to between N150,000 and N200,000.

Conscious of the growing social crisis in the face of rocketing prices of goods, the unions are seeking to play a greater role in government while deflecting criticism of their suspension of the strike. Their meeting Monday lasted only an hour.

NLC Vice President Adewale Adeyanju said, "[T]he government should know that things are becoming difficult, and they should not decide to do anything funny." He said that "we only suspended our strike as a result of the need to meet on this."

The unions have urged Tinubu to ensure borders are open to allow smooth import and export of food and farm produce. They are encouraging the licensing of modular oil refineries and promotion of alternative power supplies and have called for a metro rail line connecting

all the country's state capitals.

Senator Bala Mohammed, Bauchi State governor, told press, "Government and organised labour understood that the move has brought about benefit and challenges, that was why right steps are being taken in that direction," in the form of palliatives. He said steps were being taken to ensure their effective distribution, and mentioned salary increases, procurement of shuttle buses, and the introduction of intervention programmes using revenue saved by the subsidy removal.

University workers barricade Ondo State university over dismissed colleagues

Workers barricaded the main entrance of Olusegun Agagu University of Science and Technology (OAUSTECH), Okitipupa, Ondo State, Nigeria yesterday, protesting the sacking of 35 colleagues. All OAUSTECH's activity was affected, as no staff or students could enter.

The strike covers all university staff, with members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Non-Academic Staff Union, National Association of Academic Technologists, Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities and the National Association of Nigeria Students involved.

OAUSTECH inaugurated a university council in August last year. This council has now issued dismissal notices to 35 recently appointed lecturers and non-teaching staff. The sacked workers were appointed in March 2022. They were employed, issued appointment letters, received documentation and had worked at OAUSTECH for more than six months.

The unions appealed to the university council but had no response, so a Joint Action Congress of the unions decided to protest. ASUU chairman Rotimi Olorunisola said, "The protest will continue until the council reverses its decision."

Gusau university students, Nigeria, block road protesting kidnap of fellow students

Hundreds of students at the Federal University Gusau in Zamfara State, Nigeria, blocked the Gusau-Kaduna road last weekend, protesting the abduction of five students on Friday night. The protest left motorists stranded for hours. The students protested inadequate security at the university, and the failure of authorities to rescue kidnapped students.

University Vice Chancellor Professor Muazu Abubakar appealed to the students to allow motorists to pass, assuring them that the institution would make efforts to ensure proper security, but the students remained in the road. Security agents were unable to remove the protesters.

Student Musa Shehu told media that many students had been kidnapped previously, with no effort made to rescue them.

Threat of further strikes in Zimbabwe as inflation collapses wages

Diamond miners in Zimbabwe are threatening to walk out as wages are eroded by inflation.

The wages of Zimbabwe Diamond and Allied Mineral Workers Union members are paid 60 percent in local currency and 40 percent in US dollars. *New Zimbabwe* reported the week to June 13 saw a 23 percent fall

in the Zimbabwe dollar, to an exchange rate of US 1 \$: ZWL 5,978. This followed a 43 percent crash the previous week.

Many mining communities are located in rural areas, which lack large supermarkets prepared to accept the local currency.

Stoppages were reported in Alpha Media and the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority among others in the public and private sector as workers cannot afford food including bread, travel to work, or tools for their trades.

The Marange district could be the site of some of the world's biggest deposits of diamonds, leading the government to forcibly relocate many rural communities. Mining is controlled by state-owned ZDCD and Anjin, a joint venture between a Chinese and a military-owned company.

The Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe says hyperinflation is due to economic sanctions inflicted by the US, IMF and European Union.

Train workers threaten strike action at Gautrain in Gauteng, South Africa

Train drivers and other workers at Gautrain, part of Bombela Operating Company in Gauteng, South Africa are threatening strike action after wage negotiations broke down.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) members were threatened with the withdrawal of the continuation of the staff cards that allow them to ride the Gautrain free to and from work. According to NUMSA secretary Irvin Jim, this benefit has been in place since 2013.

Workers are demanding an eight percent increase across the board, from July 1, a Key Performance Indicator bonus of R15, 000, a housing allowance increase to R1,750, a transport allowance increase to R125 from R100, and no retrenchment for the period of the agreement.

While Gautrain agreed to the wage increase, the rest remains in dispute.

South African EPWP workers picket in Kuruman, Northern Cape, demanding permanent jobs

Expanded public works programme (EPWP) workers in the John Taolo Gaetsewe and Joe Morolong districts in Kuruman, South Africa staged protests last week against unfair labour practices. They demand to be made permanent.

The National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers (NUPSAW) members received pay slips stating they earn salaries of R9,000 when they are only paid R2,400. Due to this discrepancy, they do not qualify for the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS).

NUPSAW representative Thapelo Thole told *DFA* the workers were not paid for working on public holidays and were not entitled to sick or family responsibility leave.

All EPWP workers are in ongoing struggle against the discredited African National Congress government scheme in which unemployed people do temporary work in the public sector without the salary or benefits afforded to direct employees.



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