

# Teachers and healthcare workers join Portugal's ongoing strike-wave

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3 September 2023

Workers in different sectors across Portugal have taken industrial action throughout the summer to fight the assault on their wages and intolerable working conditions. Now, teachers and healthcare workers are set to resume strikes after the holiday break.

For the past two years, the class struggle has ebbed and flowed at a high level ever since the Socialist Party (PS) was forced to call snap elections in November 2021 amid mass strikes involving tens of thousands of workers across multiple industries including, rail workers, teachers, pharmacists, subway workers, pre-hospital emergency technicians, tax office workers and prison guards.

Since then, strikes have engulfed the entire country. According to the Ministry of Labor, the first half of this year saw 1,499 strike notices, an increase of more than 92 percent compared to last year. In public administration, strikes have risen by a massive 288 percent, driven by education and healthcare workers, and local administration and justice civil servants.

August has been particularly intense despite being a traditionally low period for strike action given the summer break.

- A one-day strike by judiciary civil servants called by the Union of Judicial Officers (SOJ) saw many courts completely closed last week. Workers are demanding the recovery supplement in their salaries, backdated to January 2021 and the opening up of promotions and new posts. The unions are seeking to weaken the next round of strikes by employing rotating strikes in different regions across the country and hourly strikes.

- A two-day walkout by doctors at the National Health Service (NHS) called by the Independent Doctors' Union (SIM) in Azores, Alentejo, and Algarve regions, following a previous stoppage in July

over conditions in hospitals, doctors' pay and overtime ban.

- A two-day strike of medical interns (young doctors, technically still working under supervision) over pay, the first ever in this country, called by SIM. Medical interns represent a third of NHS doctors, work full-time and earn low salaries of around €7.66 per hour net.

- A two-hour walkout by NHS family doctors and pharmacists called by the National Union of Pharmacists over pay and career advancement. To dissipate the struggle, two further days have been called on September 5 and 12 by district, and another national strike on the 19th.

- A one-day strike by 3,250 workers from the Common Use Service of Hospitals, a private non-profit organisation which provides food, laundry and other services, demanding improvements in wages and working conditions, staffing levels and hazard pay.

- A four-day stoppage by members of the National Union of Local and Regional Administration Workers at the Parques de Sintra, which manages historic palaces and parks in the popular tourist destination of Sintra near Lisbon. Workers are fighting against a new collective agreement which will see deregulation of working hours.

- A three-day strike by flight operations officers and aircraft maintenance technicians at SATA Air Açores over pay and excessive workload.

- A two-day walkout by airport workers over holiday pay, the second round of the strikes organised by four unions.

- A one-day stoppage by bus drivers over pay from EVA Transportes and Vizur operating in the Algarve called by the Union of Road and Urban Transport Workers.

· A week-long strike by workers at the Portuguese electricity company EDP over pay called by the Fiequimetal union.

· A one-day stoppage by weather forecasters from Portuguese Institute for the Sea and Atmosphere (IPMA) demanding workers are paid for working on public holidays, career progression and proper regulations over shift work. The unions ensured the strike, which could have brought “aeronautical observation” of the country to a standstill, affecting services which require information on weather anomalies such as the air industry, was as weak as possible. It was confined to meteorologists employed at the country’s airports and took place on a bank holiday.

September will see mounting struggles of educators and healthcare workers. The Union of All Education Professionals (STOP) has announced the holding of a week-long strike between September 18 and 22, when classes are set to start in most of the country’s public schools. Teachers have been fighting against low salaries enforced by the PS government for over a year.

The National Federation of Doctors (FNAM) has called for a national strike for November 14 and 15, demanding higher wages. The Independent Union of Doctors (SIM), has called strikes in various regions, including family doctors that will last until September 22. Both FNAM and SIM are continuing their sabotaging tactics of August, calling regional strikes on different dates.

Besides these major strikes, workers at the NOBRE Alimentos, Portugal’s largest processed meat company, are going on their fifth strike this year on September 11 to demand wage increases.

Autoworkers’ anger is mounting at the Volkswagen plant in Palmela and its sub-contractors after the plant announced it would stop production for nine weeks because of the “impossibility” of Slovenia providing parts as a result of the devastating floods the country recently experienced. The plant employs around 5,000 autoworkers, and another 5,000 indirectly, which last year produced 231,100 cars, around 71 percent of the vehicles produced in Portugal in 2022.

The companies are now working with the unions to impose a temporary layoff regime for nine weeks that will see workers lose a third of their pay and the firing of temporary workers.

The increasing number of strikes reflects the growing determination of workers to fight deepening attacks on their wages, jobs and workplace rights. The ruling class is extremely nervous over these struggles, which have the potential of developing into an uncontrollable movement of the working class if it unites and intersects with the broad European upsurge of the working class.

However, the strikes testify that the will to fight is not enough. The lessons over the past two years are clear: it’s not a question of how many unions call a strike, their historical origin, whether they are tied to the PS or the Stalinist Communist Party of Portugal. The unions have ceased to function even as defensive organisations of the working class, instead acting as labour police tasked with suppressing struggles to allow the ruling class to impose austerity at home and wage war abroad.

When forced to call strikes, the trade unions try to shut them down as soon as possible, usually claiming at best one paltry concession which does not compensate for the cost-of-living hikes. Where it is hard to shut down a strike, they will dissipate it in different “rounds” or “phases” of strikes, called on different dates and regions within the same sector. Above all, they refuse to unite workers across different industries and sectors and call for an offensive to bring down the pro-austerity PS government.

This poses the need for workers to take matters into their own hands, and form rank-and-file committees across every industry, democratically led by workers themselves. Through these committees, workers can link up across industries and prepare and coordinate a united counter-offensive against the PS government, the unions and the assault on their jobs, wages and conditions.



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