

Teachers across Europe protest resources and conditions; protests over closing of Gaza pedestrian crossing point; Nigerian union bodies call for further action over fuel subsidies but set no date

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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

Teachers throughout Europe protest lack of resources and poor working conditions

Teachers and other school workers in Europe are fighting against the disastrous conditions in schools as the new academic year begins, with a series of protests and strikes across the continent.

Lithuanian teachers began a month-long strike this Friday, *LRT* reported, following a short warning strike on September 15. The Lithuanian Trade Union of Educational Workers is calling for an immediate pay rise of 20 percent, and a further 30 percent in January, as well as smaller class sizes and a reduction in workload.

The government said it would not consider a pay rise this year, and proposed a 21 percent increase next year. Current inflation is 6.2 percent, but price rises have averaged 16.2 percent over the past year. The proposal for increasing education funding is only €300 million euros, a fraction of the €715 million in military commitments to Ukraine by the Lithuanian government, according to figures from the Kiel Institute for the World Economy.

Teachers in Estonia may also strike soon, as the government proposed only a 1.7 percent pay rise next year, and a pay freeze for all other public sector workers, *ERR* reported. The teachers' unions said this would betray promises to raise teachers' salaries to 120 percent of the national average, and that they would call a strike if the promise is not implemented.

While finding no money for education and other public services, Estonia and Lithuania give more military resources to Ukraine than any other European countries as a percentage of their GDP, according to the Kiel Institute data.

On Friday last week, Portuguese teachers protested in Lisbon on the last day of their five-day strike. The Union of All Education Professionals called the strike to demand the implementation of six and a half years' seniority benefits which were frozen.

According to *Lusa*, hundreds of teachers joined the protest, speaking of deteriorating conditions in schools and demanding the resignation of the Minister of Education. One teacher said, "students spend hours in the library because there are many teachers missing."

Thousands of teachers protested in Belgrade, Serbia on Tuesday, ahead

of a national school strike planned for October. The education unions are calling for pay in schools to reach the national average, and for schools to be given the funding for pay rises.

In Italy, the CSLE union called a national school strike on Monday. It called for a pay rise to the "European standard," as well as increased staffing levels and other improvements to pay and conditions.

As term begins, Greek teachers renewed their boycott of a new individual and school assessment system. The Federation of Secondary School Staff (OLME), in a press release on the continuation of the boycott reported by *Alfavita*, opposed "the categorisation of schools and teachers, the extension of our working hours and the intensification of working conditions."

The OLME also called for each of its local branches to call short strikes, of between one and three hours, in the second half of September.

Around 7,000 people joined a protest over education in Berlin on Saturday, and a further 8,000 joined protests across the rest of Germany, the *Hamburger Abendblatt* reported. The organisers of the protests wrote "Germany is in one of the most serious educational crises since the founding of the Federal Republic," and warned of an increasing shortage of teachers and underfunding.

In Vienna, around 1,500 extracurricular educators joined a demonstration on September 20, according to *Junge Welt*. They have held protests and warning strikes against a new law which would eliminate their job role and lead to 19 percent pay cuts.

Workers' strikes and student protests against austerity and attacks on workers' rights in Finland

Workers and students in Finland this week began a series of strikes and protests against the austerity and anti-worker programme of the government, a coalition led by the right-wing National Coalition Party and the far-right Finns Party.

The Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions called a campaign of three days of protests and walkouts per week for three weeks, *YLE* reported. But the unions deliberately kept the actions limited, telling the press they "do not rule out such action, but there is no talk of a general strike. We will start with these demonstrations, but if there is no result, we will see what happens next."

Students at universities and high schools also launched a wave of

protests and occupations against the austerity budget announced last week. This includes a cut to housing benefit, and a measure which would force those receiving support to move if their rent is above a certain limit, estimated to affect 56,000 people.

Other economic changes opposed by workers and students include an opt-out from national bargaining for companies, unpaid sick leave, cuts to unemployment support, and the removal of residence permits for immigrants who are unemployed for three months.

Sweeping attacks on the right to strike are also planned, including a restriction of sympathy and political strikes to one day and only using “reasonable” means. According to *YLE*, unions will be fined between 10,000 and 150,000 euros if a court rules a strike “illegal,” and individual workers can be fined 200 euros for participating.

The government also plans to prevent the national mediator from proposing pay rises above the “general line,” i.e., above the pay rise agreed that year between export-oriented industries and the unions. This is a key part of the “Finnish model” of labour relations, already near-universally agreed to by the unions despite the “general line” being far below inflation this year.

Court workers in Portugal continue strikes

Judicial officials in Portugal continue their indefinite strike, stopping work every afternoon since January. The court workers are demanding the payment of a supplement in their salary retroactively to January 2021, as well as new promotions and job posts.

A court ruled earlier this month that the government’s imposition of a minimum service requirement on the court strike was illegal. According to *Publico*, the Directorate-General for the Administration of Justice decided on the minimum services in March, more than two months after the deadline for doing so.

New protests against austerity measures in Romania

On September 21, workers in Romania gathered in front of the Minister of Finance to protest austerity measures which would cut jobs and pay in the civil service, and abolish whole departments. The protest was called by the Federation of Trade Unions of Public Administration (PUBLISIND), which said that 3,000 people attended.

As many as 15,000 employees of the finance ministry held wildcat strikes in August against the austerity plans, which will cost each worker around 700 lei per month. The National Union of Public Finance acknowledged that it could not control the walkouts, and its calls for limited warning strikes were aimed at bringing workers’ anger back under its control.

Strike in Belgian prisons against inhumane and overcrowded conditions

Prison staff in Belgium began a 48-hour national strike on Monday, to denounce “inhumane” and overcrowded conditions which affect prisoners and staff.

While the Belgian prison system is already over capacity, the right-wing

Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD) recently announced that those sentenced to less than two years must serve them in prison, which was not previously the case.

Participation in the strike was very high. In 20 prisons minimum service requirements were not met due to a lack of staff, *Het Laatste Nieuws* reported, and the police were called to cover in half of Flemish prisons.

Prisoners also protested during the strike, in both linguistic communities of Belgium. On Monday afternoon, 74 prisoners refused to return to their cells at a prison in East Flanders, and 27 prisoners did the same on Tuesday morning in Namur, the capital of Wallonia.

Ahead of talks with the unions, the Secretary of State for Building Management promised that overcrowding would be solved “by 2030” through the building of new prisons, *Le Soir* reported.

School ancillary staff across Scotland walk out over pay

Over 20,000 school ancillary staff across Scotland began a three-day walkout on Tuesday. They include caterers, cleaners, janitors and support workers.

The Unison members rejected the latest offer from the employers’ body. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) had upped its 5 percent offer by just 0.5 percent just prior to the strike being launched. The stoppages impacted 2,000 schools across 24 local authority areas, around three quarters of all Scottish schools.

Unison recommended rejection of COSLA’s latest offer. However, a ballot of its membership on the new offer is being held as the strike goes ahead.

The strike of Unite and GMB members working as ancillary school staff was pulled. Unite recommended the deal to its members, while the GMB made no recommendation to accept or reject the latest offer from COSLA. The two unions are balloting their members, who would be faced with crossing Unison picket lines.

The stoppages led to the closure of hundreds of schools, with thousands of pupils unable to attend.

Local authority workers in Cardiff and Wrexham, Wales resume walkouts over pay offer

Council workers employed by Cardiff and Wrexham councils resumed their stoppage on Monday. It is due to last until October 15.

The Unite union members oppose the national pay award to local authority workers of £1,925, a real-terms pay cut. Unite reports many of its members having to resort to foodbanks to get by. The stoppages will have a major impact on refuse and recycling services in the two authorities.

The strikes are part of a programme of strikes by around 3,000 Unite union members across 23 local authorities in England and Wales.

Strike by law court security staff across England and Wales over pay

Security staff employed by outsourcer OCS at 149 law courts across England and Wales walked out Monday and Wednesday, and are due to

walk out Friday.

The stoppage by Public and Commercial Services (PCS) members follows a strike on Friday last week. They are protesting a pay offer which would mean them being paid just 38 pence above the National Living Wage of £10.42 for workers aged over 23.

Last week's action led to some courts being closed and others severely disrupted. Picket lines were mounted or planned at courts including Brighton Law Courts, Bradford Magistrates, Leeds Magistrates, Liverpool Queen Elizabeth II Courts and Manchester Crown Court among others.

Support staff at special needs school in Leicester, UK vote to continue strikes over pay

Around 90 UK support staff at the Ash Field Academy, Leicester for children aged 4 to 19 with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) have voted by an 85 percent majority to continue their series of strikes over pay.

They walked out on September 20, and have a further six days of stoppages planned up to October 11.

The Unison members have held 27 days of stoppages since beginning their dispute in May 2023. The staff at the government-funded but privately run academy school include teaching assistants, administration workers and residential staff.

Their demands are for a £3,000 pay increase to bring them into line with other SEND schools run by Leicester local authority, introduction of a pay scale to align them with workers performing comparable roles and a pay supplement for staff taking on additional medical responsibilities.

Further stoppages by commercial kitchen manufacturing workers in Lincoln, UK over inadequate pay offer

Around 100 workers employed by commercial kitchen manufacturer Lincat, based in Lincoln, England began a four-week strike Monday. It follows a week-long stoppage at the beginning of September.

The Unite union members rejected a pay offer from the company comprising a 5.5 percent pay rise from January of this year to June and an eight percent rise from June to the end of the year. Higher-paid workers were offered below eight percent, in tiered pay rises. The RPI inflation rate is currently 10.7 percent. Although skilled, most of the workers earn only £12.03 an hour. Lincat recorded operating profits of £8.9 million for the last financial year.

Strike by journalists at UK publisher over pay

Around 300 journalists working for publisher National World were on strike Monday. National World publishes over 100 local papers, including the Belfast Newsletter, Lancashire Post, Sheffield Star and Yorkshire Post.

The National Union of Journalist (NUJ) members voted by a 78 percent majority to strike after the company imposed a 4.5 percent pay rise. Picket lines were mounted in various cities, including Belfast, Derry, Kettering, Leeds, Portsmouth, Preston, Sheffield and Sunderland. The NUJ members are also working to rule. The stoppage follows previous walkouts on

September 18 and 22.

Strikes of steel coil manufacturing workers in Willenhall, UK over low pay

Workers at the ArcelorMittal factory in Willenhall, near Wolverhampton were on strike Tuesday, their fourth day of strike action. Further stoppages are planned for October 5, 6, 9 and 10.

The Unite union members rejected a below-inflation pay offer of seven percent. The workers are poorly paid, with average pay £11.24 an hour and some on the national minimum wage.

The factory produces steel coils for the automotive and construction industries. Among its customers are JLR, Nissan and Toyota. In 2021, the company had a turnover of nearly £270 million and an operating profit of over £33 million.

Train drivers in England set to walk out over pay

Train drivers at 16 train operating companies (TOCs) across England are to walk out this Saturday and Wednesday October 4.

The Aslef members are continuing their long-running campaign for a pay rise, which they have not had since 2019. The strike days coincide with the beginning and end of the conference of the ruling Conservative Party being held in Manchester. The stoppages are likely to impact delegates travelling to and from the conference. The Aslef members will also impose an overtime ban on Friday, and October 2-6.

Gravediggers in Rotherham, UK to strike over pay

Gravediggers in Rotherham, South Yorkshire have voted to walk out for nine days after rejecting a pay offer from their employer.

The Unison union members are employed by grounds maintenance contractor Glendale, sub-contracted by funeral services company Dignity plc to dig graves.

The Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council tendered its cemetery services to Dignity over 10 years ago. In that time, gravediggers' wages have not kept up with staff directly employed by the council.

The workers are demanding to be paid £11.10 an hour, plus increases in standby rates for weekends and bank holidays.

Council staff in London Borough of Haringey strike over pay

Housing repair staff working for the London Borough of Haringey held a one-day stoppage Monday. Further one-day walkouts are planned on October 2, 9 and 16.

The Unite union members in north London rejected a £1,925 pay offer, a real-terms cut. Unite members working as housing repair workers for Southwark council in south London were due to strike on the same dates, but Monday's stoppage was postponed. It is not clear at this point whether their remaining proposed walkouts will go ahead.

Around 105 Unite members working as refuse workers for Newham council in east London were due to strike Monday and October 22 over the same issue. However, their strikes were called off after the council agreed to pay lower-paid staff across the council an additional £750.

Unite union calls off strike of refuse workers in London borough as employer makes new offer

Unite has called off the strike of around 200 refuse workers employed by Tower Hamlets council in London. The strike began September 18.

The Unite union members walked out after rejecting the national pay award made to local authority workers of £1,925, a real-terms pay cut. Under the deal to settle the stoppage, workers will receive a one-off £750 payment, and around 50 agency workers in the refuse service will be brought in-house by December.

Tram workers in Greater Manchester, UK to strike over terms and conditions

Dozens of workers on the Greater Manchester tram Metro network are set to walk out on Friday, and again on October 6, 13 and 20.

The GMB union members voted by 100 percent for the stoppages. They are protesting the erosion of their terms and conditions since the service was outsourced to operator Bidvest Noonan. They are demanding restoration of their sickness benefit scheme and rates of pay for bank holidays.

Bus drivers at north east England bus company to walk out over pay

Around 1,300 bus drivers working for Go North East are to walk out from Saturday to October 6, and again October 14-20. Go North East serves the north east area of England.

The Unite union members rejected a below-inflation pay offer. The depots affected are Consett, Gateshead, Hexham, Percy Main (North Shields), Sunderland and Washington. Parent company Go-Ahead Group reported profits of £85 million last year.

School support staff across England and Wales balloting on pay offer

Around 50,000 school support staff and council workers are currently being balloted over pay.

The GMB members at around 3,000 schools and local authorities in England and Wales are balloting for strike action after rejecting the employers' pay offer for 2023/24. With the ballot closing October 24, any strikes could take place from November 9.

Protests over closing of Gaza pedestrian crossing point by Israelis

Daily protests have been taking place at the Gaza border after the Israeli authorities closed the Erez Crossing, the only pedestrian crossing for Palestinians crossing from Gaza into Israel. Around 18,500 Gazans have permits allowing them to work in Israel.

The closure was condemned as collective punishment by the NGO Gisha. Gisha seeks to protect the freedom of Palestinians, especially Gazans. According to the Wafa News Agency, 10 demonstrating Palestinians have been injured by Israeli forces' gunfire. Dozens have been affected by tear gas grenades.

On Tuesday, Wafa reported that protests at the Gaza border were continuing for an eleventh day, with Israeli forces injuring 11 protestors with live ammunition, while others were suffocated as a result of the firing of tear gas rounds.

Nigerian umbrella union bodies call for further action on fuel subsidies without setting date

With an indefinite strike looming, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) is presenting itself as continuing to lead a fight against the removal of fuel subsidies even as it drags its heels.

The NLC waited until September 27 to set the October 3 strike date, and is still hoping for a backdoor deal with the government.

The government has approved N5 billion for each state, a total of N180 billion. The NLC wants this increased, while claiming publicly that it wants the fuel subsidy to be restored to what it was.

Unions representing banking maritime and aviation workers have also pledged to join the indefinite strike to demand wage increases, relief measures, tax exemptions, improved allowances for public sector workers and a review of the minimum wage.

The National Association of Aircraft Pilots and Engineers (NAAPE) pledged to join the strike, which is causing planes across Nigeria to be grounded.

Health workers in Nyamira County, Kenya on strike

Doctors and other health workers in Nyamira County walked out on strike from midnight on Sunday. They are demanding job promotions, more drugs and equipment, more staff, a smaller workload and improved conditions.

Doctors in Nakuru County also began a strike at the same time, although the effect on patient care is smaller due to nurses and others filling the gaps.

Kenya Medical Practitioners and Dentist Union (KMPDU) chairman, Dr Onyango Ndong'a said "This is a strike the Government itself has started because we have been waiting for its communication with regard to our grievances but to our dismay, there hasn't come any communication from the Governor or his people."

Coal miners from Seriti Klipspruit Colliery, South Africa protest job losses

Around one hundred coal miners from Seriti Klipspruit Colliery in Mpumalanga, South Africa marched to the Sandton offices of the colliery

against proposed job losses.

The company issued a Section 189 notice of retrenchment to the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). A section 189 permits employers to dismiss employees for operational requirements, which means over 600 jobs at the colliery.

The miners who are NUM members handed over a memorandum of demands, including withdrawal of the retrenchment order within seven days and negotiations.

According to SABC News, the company wants to replace permanent workers with contractors. Bizzah Motubatse, NUM regional chairman confirmed that, "Setiti Klipspruit Colliery is not the first mine to have followed a similar process."

Forestry workers in Mpumalanga, South Africa strike for above-inflation pay increase

Forestry workers employed by the SA Forestry Company Limited (Safcol) in Mpumalanga, South Africa began strike action last Wednesday, following the breakdown of talks. The Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) members are demanding an above-inflation pay increase (more than eight percent). They are also demanding a standby allowance of R150 per standby, acting and danger allowances of R100 respectively, a sleep-out allowance of R135 and support for medical aid.

According to *BusinessLive*, Safcol is South Africa's third largest state-owned enterprise involved in the forestry industry, with operations in Limpopo, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal, and in the Manica and Sofala provinces of Mozambique.

Telecoms workers in South Africa strike for pay increase

Telecom workers at the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa) began strike action on Wednesday for an above-inflation pay increase.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU) members have rejected the 4.4 percent increment for the 2023/24 financial year, and are demanding eight percent.

NEHAWU spokesperson Lwazi Nkolonzi told *Businesslive* that the workers had had below-inflation increases for the past three years.



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