

National one-day strike in Belgium opposing draconian laws against right to protest; Iranian aluminium workers strike over pay as protests against authoritarian regime continue; pay strike at Richards Bay Coal Terminal South Africa in week three

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

5 October 2023

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

National one-day strike in Belgium against anti-protest law

Belgian workers on Thursday joined protests and strikes against a new law restricting the right to protest. The law would allow judges to ban “rioters” from joining any protests for up to three years, or six years if they rule it a second offence, *L’Echo* reported.

The trade unions, as well as Amnesty International and other groups, criticised the law as a “danger to our democracy.” It is so broadly worded that normal demonstrations could be targeted. Its enforcement would mean violating privacy by identifying every participant in a protest to see if they are subject to a ban, according to *The Brussels Times*.

While the unions called strikes in local public transport across Belgium, with reportedly high participation, they exempted the national rail company SNCB, limiting the national impact.

Finnish workers continue strikes against austerity and attacks on workers’ rights

Workers in Finland are continuing a series of strikes called last week by the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions against the government’s austerity and anti-worker programme. Students also held protests and occupations against the plans.

Many workers across the public and private sector joined walkouts and protests, but the unions deliberately called only one-hour stoppages. At Helsinki Airport, the JHL union called just a 30-minute walkout in the early afternoon. Near Helsinki, one shop steward told *YLE* their company had given its blessing to the protest. Another said they had arranged their walkout between shifts to minimise its impact.

The coalition government, led by the right-wing National Coalition Party and far-right Finns Party, announced sweeping attacks on housing benefits, unemployment support, migrants’ rights, and the introduction of

unpaid sick leave.

It will also restrict the right to strike, including restricting sympathy and political strikes to one day, with fines of 10,000-15,000 euros for a union and 200 euros for individual workers if a court rules a strike “illegal.” A poll by media network *Uutisuomalainen* reported 50 percent against the restrictions on political and sympathy strikes, and only 35 percent in favour.

Thousands of doctors and pharmacists stop work to protest German government’s austerity measures

On Monday, thousands of GPs and pharmacists in Germany closed their practices and pharmacies to protest the austerity policies of the “traffic light” coalition government of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Greens and Free Democratic Party.

The federal budget for health spending was slashed from 24.5 billion euros in 2023 to 16.2 billion in 2024, on top of the inflation and energy costs borne by GPs and pharmacists.

Pharmacists also criticised plans for lighter regulation in the sector. Under new plans from SPD Minister of Health Karl Lauterbach, a pharmacist would no longer need to be present in the pharmacy if there was a digital connection, the *Sächsische Zeitung* reported. Lauterbach claimed this would allow more pharmacies to be built, but independent pharmacists said it would mainly benefit commercial chains.

Lorry drivers end wildcat strike in Germany after Mazur group agrees to pay withheld wages

Around 80 lorry drivers who have been parked in the Gräfenhausen service station in Germany for more than two months have ended their wildcat strike, after they were told this weekend they would receive the more than 500,000 euros they were owed.

The drivers, mainly from Georgia, Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries, were employed on temporary “service contracts” by Polish

companies owned by ?ukasz Mazur. Other drivers employed by Mazur held a stoppage in Gräfenhausen in April to demand their own withheld wages.

During the April strike Mazur hired private thugs in an attempt to escort strikebreakers to the parked lorries, but this was stopped by the local police.

On Saturday, Dutch union official Edwin Atema, negotiator for the drivers, announced that an agreement had been reached, the drivers paid, and that Mazur had also agreed to drop extortion charges he was trying to bring against the striking drivers.

How far the demands were actually met remains unclear, with Atom not saying how much money had been paid or by whom. The company has since denied reaching any agreement or making any payment, although it has admitted dropping embezzlement claims against the drivers.

School support workers hold national pay strike in France

On Tuesday, support workers in French schools joined a national strike to demand a “real and significant increase in remuneration” and an option to work full-time. Support workers can generally only work part-time for low wages.

The strike covered two categories of workers: AESH workers, who support children with disabilities in attending mainstream schools, and classroom teaching assistants.

One-day strike to demand protection of jobs at Acciaierie d’Italia in Genoa, Italy

Metal workers at Acciaierie d’Italia in the Italian city of Genoa held a 24-hour strike on Monday and protested again on Tuesday to demand the protection of production and jobs.

Acciaierie d’Italia was formerly the state-owned company Ilva, now more than 60 percent-owned by multinational ArcelorMittal.

At a demonstration on Monday, *Genova24* reported, one speaker condemned every government since privatisation who had approved layoffs by Acciaierie d’Italia, calling for “no more layoffs, we’re fed up.”

There have been years of strikes and protests against under-investment and layoffs at Acciaierie d’Italia, but these were limited by the nationalist, pro-capitalist perspective of the unions. During a national strike to demand an industrial policy in July, the FIM union refused to call for nationalisation even if ArcelorMittal would not invest in Acciaierie d’Italia, because “In the steel industry you need competent entrepreneurs, the state is not enough.”

Protest outside Stockholm court as train drivers are sued for wildcat strike in Sweden

Around 100 people protested outside the Labour Court in the Swedish capital of Stockholm on September 29, *Proletären* reported. It was the day of a preliminary hearing in a lawsuit filed by MTR, which operates the Stockholm commuter rail network, against 10 drivers who participated in a wildcat strike in April.

More than 150 drivers stopped work to denounce the plan, approved by

the Social Democrat government, to phase out train guards. The wildcat strike brought large parts of the rail network to a halt and was bitterly opposed by the Seko trade union.

MTR had initially filed a lawsuit against 105 workers, demanding 6,000 kroner (517 euros) compensation from each. However, according to *Mitt i*, the operator decided to drop all but 10 “randomly selected” cases because many drivers announced their intention to participate in-person in the hearings, meaning they could not be at work, which would have paralysed the network again.

Further strike by National Health Service doctors and consultants in England over pay

On Monday, National Health Service (NHS) junior doctors and consultants in England began a 72-hour joint strike.

The British Medical Association members previously held a joint day of strikes in late September. The doctors are involved in a long-running dispute with the Conservative government over pay. On Tuesday, the walkout was joined by radiographers on a one-day stoppage, also over pay. Ninety percent of patients treated in hospital use radiography services.

On Tuesday, consultants, junior doctors and radiographers held a lunchtime rally outside the Tory party annual conference in Manchester.

Junior doctors and consultants in Northern Ireland will ballot for possible strike action over pay.

Strike at London hospital over pay and conditions

Staff working for outsourcing company Barts and Synergy at St Barts hospital in London were on strike Monday to Wednesday over pay and staffing levels.

The Unite union members, who work as nurses, biomedical scientists, porters, cleaners and other roles were joined on Wednesday by around 1,000 directly employed NHS staff at the hospital, who held a one-day stoppage over pay and staffing levels. The two groups of strikers held a rally on Wednesday.

In June, strikes by nurses ended with a below-inflation pay deal. The Royal College of Nursing union prevented unity among the NHS’s million-strong workforce, limiting strikes and preventing coordinated actions with other health workers.

Health administration staff in England set to walk out over new pay structure

Staff working for the NHS Confederation body at its Leeds and London offices were set to walk out on Thursday.

The Unite union members at the administrative body voted by nearly 90 percent to strike after the Confederation brought in a new pay scale, which saw the pay of around 20 percent of workers cut. The new structure also means less opportunities for pay progression.

The NHS Confederation is the membership body for organisations for NHS commissioning bodies and providers. Its staff work as managers, administrators and in policy and communication roles.

Outsourced health care staff in Dudley, UK to ballot over not receiving lump sum payment

Around 70 healthcare staff employed by outsourcer, Mitie at the Dudley group of hospitals in England's West Midlands are to ballot for strike action. The ballot will run October 9-23.

The Unite union members did not receive a £1,600 lump sum COVID payment paid this year to directly employed NHS staff. The Mitie workers at Russell Hall, Corbett and Dudley Guest hospitals were previously employed by the NHS before being transferred. They were promised conditions would remain as when they were under the NHS.

Strikes by ancillary staff at universities across England and Scotland

Around 6,000 university ancillary workers including administrative staff, cleaners and IT technicians at 17 universities across England were on strike Monday and Tuesday.

The Unison union members rejected a pay offer worth between 5 and 8 percent for 2023-24. Universities taking part included City University London, University of Liverpool, SOAS University of London and Leeds University. Unison members at Leeds University also walked out Friday of last week, which marked the fiftieth day of striking this year.

Unison members at Glasgow Caledonian University, Glasgow School of Art, University of Dundee and University of Glasgow held strikes over the same issue in late September.

UK workers at Cepac, Darlington face “fire and rehire” in end to eight-week strike

UK workers at packaging manufacturer Cepac in Darlington, on strike for eight weeks after rejecting a pay rise of between 8 and 17.5 percent, face the threat of “fire and rehire.”

The 90 Unite union members also oppose Cepac's attempt to impose a longer working week, from 37-40 hours. The company wants to implement an inferior sick pay scheme, and lower shift and overtime pay.

Cepac, which makes packaging for Subway, Greggs and Costa, refused arbitration at conciliation service Acas, according to Unite.

Workers at several English and Welsh councils to walk out over pay and conditions

Council workers employed by Cardiff and Wrexham councils in Wales, currently on strike until October 15, announced a further six-week round of stoppages on Tuesday.

The Unite union members oppose the national pay award to local authority workers of £1,925. 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.

Housing repair workers at Southwark council, England plan to walk out over the same issues on October 12, 13, and 18-20. The 130 Unite members have been excluded from the London weighting allowance for two years, worth £860. They want all workers to get the same annual leave entitlement.

Refuse workers at Warrington Borough Council, England will strike October 3-16. The 50 Unite members also rejected the pay offer.

A Unite survey found that 48 percent of local authority workers struggle to pay their heating, electricity and water bills, 30 percent cannot afford food and clothing, 23 percent skip meals, 17 percent struggle with rent and mortgages, and 6 percent have resorted to food banks.

Drivers at Irn-Bru in Scotland take action over company profits

Truck and shunter drivers at AG Barr, maker of the Irn-Bru soft drink in Scotland, are on overtime ban to be followed by one-day strikes, after the company announced record profits.

Profits rose 16 percent to £27.8 million in the last six months, while the company imposed a derisory 5 percent rise on the workforce.

The company is using agency workers to break the drivers' action, according to Unite.

Ancillary staff at Imperial College London walk out over pay

Around 200 staff at Imperial College London walked out on Monday and Tuesday this week.

The Unite union members working in maintenance, security and as technicians rejected a 5.5 percent pay offer. They will walk out again on October 18.

Workers at IAC car parts manufacturer in Solihull, UK set to walk out over pay

Around 250 UK workers employed by IAC in Solihull are to walk out after rejecting a 6 percent pay offer.

The Unite union members are due to begin an indefinite strike on October 12. For most of the workers currently on the minimum wage, the rise would mean only being paid £11.11 an hour. Other workers on slightly higher pay rejected staggered offers of 6, 7 and 8 percent.

American-owned IAC had global revenues of £2.4 billion in 2021, £221 million of which was generated in the UK. IAC makes car parts including dashboards, boot and roof interiors for major companies including JLR and BMW.

Iranian aluminium workers strike over pay as protests against police violence continue

Workers at Iranian Aluminium in the city of Arak have been on strike since mid-September.

They are demanding a pay increase and protesting rising prices. The

strike expanded on Saturday to include all 4,000 employees, when the morning shift joined the stoppage.

Iran has been convulsed by strikes against the cost-of-living crisis exacerbated by US sanctions, and mass protests against the authoritarian regime after the police murder of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini a year ago for improperly wearing the hijab.

Strikes took place in Zahedan, Saravan, Chabahar, and Nimruz on Saturday to commemorate the death of around 100 protestors in September by Iranian security forces and the anniversary of Mahsa Amini's murder.

Teachers in Kurdistan province of Iraq walk out over non-payment of wages

Teachers working in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) area of Iraq walked out this week, as the new school year began.

The KRG has not paid teachers their salaries for July, August and September. The teachers vowed to boycott classes until they receive their wage arrears.

General strike in West Bank provinces of Ramallah and Al-Bireh

A general strike hit the provinces of Ramallah and Al-Bireh on Saturday.

The strike, which hit commercial and public sector areas, was in response to the killing of a young Palestinian the previous day by Israeli forces who shot at a car he was travelling in.

Third week of pay strike at Richards Bay Coal Terminal, South Africa

South African workers at Richards Bay Coal Terminal (RBCT), on strike for three weeks, rejected the latest pay offer by the company.

The terminal situated in KwaZulu-Natal province, on the Indian Ocean coast is among the largest coal export terminals in the world. Its consortium of owners includes Glencore, Seriti, Thungela and Exxaro Resources.

The Association of Mine Workers and Construction Union members are demanding a 7 percent pay increase and allowances for standby, shifts and housing. The company offered 6 percent over three years, calling this the final offer, conditional on a three-year wage agreement being accepted.

South African telecoms workers continue their strike for pay increase

Telecom workers at the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa are continuing strike action for an above-inflation pay increase.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU) members rejected the 4.4 percent increment for the 2023/24 financial year. They are demanding 8 percent across the board.

Nearly 100 strikers handed in a memorandum of demands on Monday to management at the head office in Centurion, Gauteng Province.

Nigeria Labour Congress calls off planned pay strike

The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) suspended the "indefinite strike" over pay it claimed to be organising for 30 days, claiming this would allow for talks, but paving the way for a sellout.

A joint statement issued October 2 by senior government officials and leaders of the labour unions unveiled several resolutions. One claimed a monthly wage increase of 35,000 naira, although previous increases in the minimum wage were never implemented for many Nigerians.

Several unions, including in oil production, power, aviation and maritime, are falling into line with NLC.

Nigerian civil servants protest after being locked out for being late

On September 29, around 300 employees at the Federal Ministry of Works in the Nigerian capital of Abuja protested outside their workplace after being locked out for arriving late.

The affected workers live on the outskirts of Abuja in satellite towns such as Gwagwalada, Abaji, Kuje, Kwali and Kaduna Road. With the sudden rise in the price of fuel, their means of getting to work are limited.

A senior member of staff was reported as saying anonymously, "Some of them [members of staff] are on a N100,000 salary a month, some are on N80,000 salary a month and they are married people. So, by the time you subtract both transport and everything, you are left with nothing. So, they have to rely on one way or the other to come to office."

When David Umahi, the minister who ordered the lockout, gave way and ordered the gates to be reopened, the demonstrators refused to enter and continued their demonstration. The minister had to persuade the protestors to return to work.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact