

Further workers' strikes in Finland against anti-strike laws and austerity; protests continue in Iran over pay and social conditions; health workers picket outside the Red Cross Children's Hospital in Cape Town, South Africa against Gaza genocide

## 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.*

### **Finnish workers continue strikes against anti-strike laws and austerity**

Finnish workers this week continued a series of strikes against the government's plans to cut social support and restrict the right to strike. They have held a series of walkouts and protests since the end of September, but the unions have limited these to short stoppages of one day or a few hours.

*YLE* reported that transport workers in the city of Tampere, at both public and private operators, walked out on Thursday. Thousands of workers in factories, food production and energy companies also stopped work this week. Around a thousand people demonstrated against the labour reforms in Helsinki on Saturday.

The government, led by the Coalition Party and far-right Finns Party, plans sweeping cuts to housing benefits, unemployment support, migrants' rights, and the introduction of unpaid sick leave. It will also restrict to one day the right to strike, including sympathy and political strikes, imposing fines for both unions and individual workers if a court rules a strike "illegal."

### **National rail strike in Spain to demand guarantees over working conditions in Catalan rail reorganisation**

On Friday, rail workers at Renfe, the Spanish state-owned rail company, will hold a 24-hour strike to demand guarantees during the transfer of rail operations in Catalonia from Renfe to the Generalitat (Catalan's autonomous government body).

Rail services in Catalonia are run by Rodalies, an organisation administered by the Generalitat but whose rail operations are still run by the national Renfe. In return for the support of the Republican Left of Catalonia party in forming a government after the election, the ruling

Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) agreed to transfer Rodalies's operations to the Generalitat.

The Workers' Commissions and General Workers' Union called a strike to demand guarantees that working conditions would be protected during the transfer. The rail strike coincides with a one-day "general strike" called by the Solidaridad union, founded by the neo-fascist Vox party, to oppose the amnesty granted by the PSOE-Sumar government to Catalan nationalists for the 2017 independence referendum.

*Europa Press* reported that the Ministry of Transport imposed very high minimum service requirements on the Renfe strike, effectively banning many workers from stopping work. Rail workers are forced to ensure that 72 percent of long-distance and high-speed trains run as normal and that 75 percent of commuter services run during peak hours.

Further 24-hour strikes are planned for November 30 and December 1, 4 and 5.

### **Serbian postal workers end wildcat strike after company and government campaign of threats and intimidation**

Thousands of postal workers in Serbia, on a wildcat strike for a month, began returning to work on Wednesday, reluctantly accepting a deal worked out between the trade unions and state-owned Pošta Srbije.

Around half of the employees of Pošta Srbije joined the walkouts, demanding a 30 percent pay increase as many earn less than half the national average salary, a share of profits, and an end to management bullying. They repeatedly insisted their demands were non-negotiable and distanced themselves from the trade unions which claimed to be negotiating on their behalf.

The deal, which was eventually accepted, involved pay rises of 10 percent in November and a further 10 percent in January, and a one-off payment of 20,000 dinars, which one of the organisers of the wildcat strike described to *Nova* as "humiliating."

He said in an interview with the station that they were returning to work because of the threats of dismissal by Pošta Srbije and intended to monitor any possible victimisations in retaliation for the strike.

Striking workers informed the media they were notified that Pošta Srbije was advertising to hire thousands of new workers, indicating it

would carry out mass sackings if they did not return to work. In a particularly menacing development, they told *Nova* that Prime Minister Ana Brnabić informed them that if they did not return to work by Monday night, “institutions dealing with state security” would become involved.

### **French air traffic controllers’ stoppage against restrictions on right to strike**

On Monday, air traffic controllers in France walked out against a new law, passed by the National Assembly last week, which specifically targeted their profession with new restrictions on strikes.

The bill, according to *La Montagne*, requires air traffic controllers to individually declare they will join a strike 48 hours in advance, as well as a strike notice filed by the unions. This restriction, already in place at the Paris transport authority RATP and national rail network SNCF, was applied to air traffic controllers following a campaign led by Ryanair and other airlines.

The strike reportedly had a large impact, with delays at Charles De Gaulle Airport, a quarter of flights cancelled at Paris-Orly, and several smaller airports closing entirely.

The General Confederation of Labour criticised the bill because its provisions were not worked out through dialogue with the unions, cutting them out of their usual corporatist role in restricting strikes and diverting workers’ anger at degraded working conditions. The National Union of Air Traffic Controllers (SNCTA), the largest of the ATC unions, refused to join the strike, endorsed the law, and denounced other unions for “unreasonable use” of the right to strike.

In September, the SNCTA agreed an “Olympic truce” with the Minister for Transport, pledging not to call any strikes until after the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Paris in September 2024.

### **Taxi drivers and other self-employed workers protest in Athens against Greek government’s new tax law**

On Wednesday, taxi drivers in Athens held a 24-hour strike, and thousands of other freelancers and self-employed workers protested in the Greek capital.

They oppose the new tax bill introduced by the right-wing New Democracy government, which it claims will tackle tax evasion by replacing self-reported net profits with a “presumption” that can theoretically be challenged.

According to *ef.syn*, a statement from several professional organisations denounced the law, which “pigeon-holes freelancers as tax thieves and turns a blind eye to big capital.”

According to calculations from the Attica Taxi Drivers’ Union, if a taxi driver who has been working since 2012 took in fares of 45,000 euros in a year, they would pay around 1,900 euros in taxes and fees under the current system, but more than 7,000 euros under the new law. The union said the bill favoured large companies such as Uber while attacking self-employer drivers, *Kathimerini* reported.

### **Polish and Slovakian lorry drivers block Ukrainian border over delays and unfair competition**

Polish lorry drivers continue their blockade, now in its third week, of three crossing points between Poland and Ukraine.

On Tuesday, Slovakian lorry drivers also briefly protested, blocking Slovakia’s border with Ukraine until Wednesday morning. There are now around 3,000 lorries queuing at the border waiting to cross.

The protestors, many of them self-employed or owners of small businesses, are demanding the end of a permit-free regime introduced by the EU in June 2022 to facilitate the NATO war in Ukraine against Russia. This exempted Ukrainian hauliers from needing to obtain permits and pay many fees. Protestors say this has impacted local drivers through unfair competition. They also demand a separate queue for empty lorries returning from Ukraine, as drivers can spend 10-12 days at the border waiting to return home.

Protesting drivers have faced increasing threats of lawsuits and economic sanctions for their blockade. A spokesperson from the European Commission told *RMF FM* that “under EU law” Poland was “obliged to ensure the free movement of Ukrainian trucks,” but did not elaborate on how it would enforce this.

The Association of International Road Carriers, representing Ukrainian hauliers, said it had already engaged lawyers in Poland to begin preparing lawsuits, according to *Ukrinform*. It also said it was investigating who gave permits for the blockade to go ahead, echoing calls from Ukrainian officials for the protests to be banned. It emphasised that large haulage companies in Poland have not supported the blockade.

The Ukrainian media repeatedly alleged that “humanitarian” supplies were being held up at the border, although the protestors said they were letting through food and other supplies. Examples given of supposedly “humanitarian aid” were medicines for the military and fuel. A reactionary protest of about 30 people called by the Association of International Road Carriers, with banners in Ukrainian and English, called for the blockade to end to support Ukraine in its war with Russia.

### **Romanian civil servants hold warning strike against low pay and staffing levels**

Civil servants working under the Romanian Ministry of Labour held a two-hour warning strike on Wednesday, protesting outside their offices to demand increased staffing levels and that their pay be raised to the same level as civil servants in other parts of the government.

For the past two weeks, civil servants in local offices serving the public under the Ministry, such as pensions offices, labour inspectors, and social security offices, have been holding short strikes and protests. The Federation of Trade Unions in the Ministry of Labour said that if their demands are not addressed, they will call an all-out strike from Monday.

### **Car parts workers in Stoke-on-Trent, England continue strikes over sick pay scheme**

Workers at Klarius Products Ltd in Stoke-on-Trent, England are continuing their strike begun November 6 and due to last until December 1.

The Unite union members oppose the company’s attempts to impose an inferior sick pay scheme. They have held 16 days of stoppages since September over this issue.

Klarius manufactures exhaust systems and other car parts for the auto industry. Its latest profit figures were nearly £8 million.

### **Refuse collectors in Warrington, UK begin fourth round of strikes over pay deal**

UK refuse collectors at Warrington Borough Council began a fourth round of stoppages Tuesday, due to last until December 4.

The Unite members ended their third round of stoppages, which began November 8, on Monday. They began their walkouts in October in opposition to the nationally negotiated pay increase for local government workers.

Unite nationally rejected the offer of a £1,925 increase for 2023/24, which applies to local authority staff in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The GMB and Unison unions accepted the offer.

Unite called strikes in several local authorities. Warrington Borough Council announced it is seeking a court injunction at a cost of £50,000 to try to end the dispute.

### **North Sea helicopter services workers at three UK airports begin rolling strikes over pay**

Around 60 UK workers employed by CHC Scotia helicopter services began a rolling programme of stoppages Wednesday.

The Unite members are based at CHC depots at Aberdeen, Humberside and Norwich airports. The stoppages began with the workers at Aberdeen walking out Wednesday, while those at Humberside and Norwich were set to walk out Thursday. They also began an overtime ban, to last until November 29.

The workers voted by over 80 percent to reject CHC's pay offer of 2.5 percent backdated to April plus 5 percent backdated to November 1, followed by 3.5 percent in 2024.

The workers are employed as aircraft engineers, mechanics and other skilled trades. CHC provides helicopters to the offshore oil and windfarm facilities.

### **Teachers in Northern Ireland to strike over pay**

Teachers in Northern Ireland who are in a long-running dispute over pay will strike on November 29.

The National Education Union, NASUWT, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, the Ulster Teachers' Union and the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) members will walk out. NAHT members went on strike for the first time in February.

The planned stoppage is expected to close all schools in the province. Further coordinated action by the five unions under the umbrella of the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council is also expected to take place in the New Year.

### **Support staff at special needs school in Leicester, UK end long-running dispute over pay as they accept new offer**

Around 90 UK support staff at the Ash Field Academy, Leicester, for children aged 4-19 with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), have voted to end their long-running dispute over pay parity with comparable workers at council-run schools.

The Unison members in dispute with their employer since April 23 held 43 days of strikes before voting to accept a new pay offer pushed by the union. The staff at the government-funded but privately run academy school include teaching assistants, administration workers and residential staff. Academy schools can set their own rates of pay.

The workers' demands were 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.

According to a Unison press release of November 20, the new offer backdated to September 2022 brings the workers into line with local-authority-run SEND schools and includes an agreement to comply with all future nationally agreed pay awards. It claimed the deal for the significantly underpaid, classroom-based support staff at Ashfield represents an increase of between 18 and 25 percent. Local authority support staff, however, are notoriously underpaid.

The deal includes an unconsolidated £2,000 one-off payment but does not compensate workers for wages lost in the past decade, with no supplement for medical duties.

### **Amazon staff at Coventry UK to strike over pay**

Around 1,000 workers at Amazon's UK BHX4 fulfilment centre in Coventry are to walk out on Friday as part of their ongoing fight for increased pay.

For the GMB members it will be 28th day of action in the dispute. They want £15 an hour. Currently their minimum pay is £11.80 an hour. The stoppage in Coventry will be part of action taking place by Amazon workers in Germany, Italy and the US.

### **Bus drivers in Luton, UK to strike over pay parity**

UK bus drivers working for Centrebus in Luton will walk out November 28-29.

The Unite members are seeking pay parity with drivers at Arriva in Luton, who are paid £1.91 an hour more. Further action could take place if there is no resolution.

### **Bus manufacturer workers in Falkirk, Scotland to strike over pay**

Around 400 coach builders and paint sprayers working for coachbuilder Alexander Dennis Limited (ADL) in Falkirk, Scotland are to strike after rejecting a 4 percent pay offer.

The Unite members voted by over 81 percent to walk out, from December 4 to 17. The Unite press release announcing the stoppage noted ADL has a full order book and called on the company to come back with an improved offer and avoid a strike.

## **Distillery workers at Scottish firm vote to strike over rejected pay offer**

Around 800 distillery workers employed by French-owned Chivas Brothers in Scotland have voted to strike over a 6.4 percent pay offer that was rejected by the workers.

GMB members voted by an 89 percent majority while Unite union members voted by over 91 percent. Chivas produces Chivas Regal whisky and other brands, employing around 1,600 at sites across Scotland, including the Kilmalid bottling plant in Dumbarton and the Strathclyde Grain Distillery among others.

Strikes would take place in December in the busy run-up to Christmas. No dates were announced, however, and the unions are calling on Chivas to make an improved offer.

## **Public transport workers in Northern Ireland vote to strike over pay freeze**

Workers employed by the public transport body Translink in Northern Ireland voted to strike, after Translink announced it would not be offering a pay rise this year and refused to set a date for negotiations.

Translink provides bus and rail services in the province. Unite and GMB members voted by over 95 percent, while those in SIPTU voted by more than 93 percent for the action. The three union bodies are due to convene a joint meeting to agree a timetable for stoppages.

## **Shipyard workers in Birkenhead, UK vote to strike over pay, bullying and discrimination**

Around 400 UK workers at the Cammell Laird shipyard in Birkenhead voted by a 96 percent majority to strike.

The Unite and GMB union members are seeking improved pay and protesting bullying and discrimination by management. No dates have yet been set for industrial action. The workers are employed as electricians, pipe fitters and welders among other trades in building and maintaining ships and submarines for the Royal Navy.

The strike could delay the Royal Navy's new Dreadnought-class submarines, due to replace the Vanguard-class vessels that provide the UK's nuclear deterrent at sea.

## **Council building maintenance workers in Manchester, UK balloting over pay**

Around 120 UK workers employed by outsource company Equans in Manchester, England are balloting for strike action. Equans maintains the council housing stock and public buildings in the north of the city.

While the council increased its funding of the Equans contract by 9.7 percent, the company offered its workforce a 7 percent increase. Negotiations have been ongoing since April. The ballot closes November 28.

## **Unite calls off week-long strike by bus drivers in Glasgow, Scotland after new offer**

The week-long strike by around 1,200 bus drivers working for First Glasgow bus company in Scotland due to begin Friday has been cancelled by Unite.

The drivers voted by a big majority to walk out for pay parity with other drivers in the First Group. First Glasgow has now come back with a new pay offer after talks at government conciliation service Acas. Unite suspended the proposed action to ballot its members on the new offer. According to an *STV* news article, Unite is recommending the drivers accept the new offer.

Unite industrial officer Willie Thomson said the offer had "significantly improved," but details have not been made public.

## **Ongoing protests in Iran over pay and social conditions**

Sunday saw big protests by employed and retired oil workers in the city of Ahvaz in Iran. They were protesting poverty and deteriorating living conditions.

The same day saw protests on Siri Island in the Persian Gulf by permanent oil workers employed by the Aghajari Oil and Gas Exploitation Company and the Falat E Ghareh Company. Their demands included the elimination of the government-imposed salary cap and limitation of pension benefits to 30 years, whereby workers working longer than 30 years and paying more contributions do not get an increased pension and reimbursement of excess tax deductions.

Also on Sunday, retired steel workers marched in the cities of Isfahan and Tehran to protest the low levels of their pensions, while Social Security retirees marched in the cities of Kermanshah, Shush, Arak and Ahvaz over the same issue.

Iran has been convulsed by workers' strikes and pensioners' protests over the rising cost of living, as well as the suppression of democratic rights and state violence. Around 60 percent of the population live in poverty, partly due to US sanctions. Iran is in the firing line of US expanding wars in the Middle East and Ukraine.

## **Lebanese road authority workers strike over pensions**

On November 19, Lebanese LBC television reported that permanent employees at the Road and Transport Authority (RTA) were due to begin an indefinite strike to demand improvements to their pensions. Around 50 percent of the RTA's employees are permanent.

The RTA is responsible for issuing driving licences in Lebanon.

## **South African health workers picket outside the Red Cross Children's Hospital in Cape Town for Palestine**

Over 300 South African health workers held a picket outside Red Cross Children's Hospital in Cape Town on Tuesday, calling for immediate ceasefire in Gaza, unrestricted access to humanitarian aid and for hospitals and clinics to be allowed to operate without fear of being bombed.

Holding banners declaring “Hospitals are not Battlefields” and “Stand for Children,” the workers gathered a lot of support, including from ambulance staff and taxi drivers in the morning rush hour.

One of the organisers, Professor Gregory Hussey, who used to work at Red Cross Children's Hospital, told *GroundUp* that this was the biggest children's hospital in sub-Saharan Africa, which is why the protest gathered there. “We wanted to use it as a symbol for our struggle for Palestine, especially for children and healthcare workers,” he said.

### **South African miners' sit-in at Blyvoor Gold Mine, Gauteng in pay dispute**

Around 800 mineworkers held a 36-hour sit-in at Blyvoor Gold Mine, Gauteng in South Africa last week over pay.

The workers are demanding the R6,000 payout previously promised—a 13th cheque for Christmas—and termination of the closed shop agreement with the company Blyvoor Workers Union, which has exclusive bargaining rights. The protest was halted when the labour court declared it illegal. The workers were told the company is unable to pay any of the pay awards due to financial difficulties.

Eyewitness News reported that the company threatened to sack 240 of the miners, who are not being allowed to return to work. Workers are demanding their reinstatement.

### **Hundreds of retrenched public service workers march to Durban City Hall, South Africa to demand jobs back**

Hundreds of retrenched Public Employment Programme (PEP) workers marched to Durban City Hall in South Africa last week to demand reinstatement by the eThekweni Municipality. This follows an announcement by the Mayor Mxolisi Kaunda that the Municipality had received a R1.6 billion grant from the National Treasury.

The PEP workers, who carry out several community projects, were taken on as part of a government programme in October 2022. According to *GroundUp*, the eThekweni municipality announced in early October they had run out of funds due to government cuts and sacked the workers on 29 October. During the march in early November workers stormed the town hall.

Busi Mngadi, who was working as a supervisor under the PEP, told *GroundUp* they had been waiting for the city to respond for weeks. “We want the eThekweni municipality to renew our contracts permanently,” he said.

### **Workers at Productivity South Africa strike over pay**

Workers at Productivity South Africa (SA) began indefinite strike action last week to demand a 9.5 percent pay increase for 2023/24. The company are saying that they can only afford 4 percent and would face insolvency if it went above this.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) members are protesting at all the Productivity SA Offices in Durban, Cape Town and Midrand.

### **Police use teargas against striking court workers in Osun State, Nigeria**

Police fired teargas at striking court workers who were protesting outside the High Court in Osun State, Nigeria on November 22.

The protesters have brought the State High Court to a standstill since November 20 to oppose abuses and high-handedness by the Chief Judge, Adepele Ojo. After the police action, the chairperson of Judiciary Staff Union of Nigeria (JUSUN) in Osun declared an indefinite strike.

### **Nigerian unions call off national strike over state violence, pay and conditions**

The indefinite national strike called by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress, which began on November 14, was called off after just two days, following a meeting between union leaders and the national security adviser, Malam Nuhu Ribadu, along with other high-level government representatives.

Workers in 19 unions walked out to demand the arrest and prosecution of the perpetrators responsible for the state-organised beating of NLC president Joe Ajaero and other labour leaders in Imo State, the sacking of officials, including the Imo commissioner of police and area commissioner as well as longstanding grievances such as the lack of implementation of the minimum wage.

Ajaero was assaulted in Imo State capital Owerri on November 4, when he led a march to demand payment of unpaid salaries, allowances, pensions and gratuities, as well as pay levels in line with the minimum wage.

On November 15, Ribadu announced that the suspects in the attack were arrested, calling on the union leaders to end the strike. None of the demands on pay and conditions has been addressed.



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