

Italian health workers stage 24-hour national strike against Meloni government's austerity budget; mass protests across Israel for ceasefire in Gaza following IDF murder of three Israeli hostages; South African miners at platinum mine in North West Province hold wildcat strike and sit-in

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.

National 24-hour strike by healthcare workers against Italian government's budget

Doctors, hospital specialists and even veterinarians joined a 24-hour strike in Italy on Monday. The protest was called by unions in Rome to defend "the public right to health guaranteed by public personnel, given that the central government chases away from public employment the professionals that public health needs."

There was widespread participation, with a union representing anaesthetists estimating that nine out of 10 operating theatres were closed due to the strike. The strike by veterinarians had a large impact on agriculture and the food supply chain, ADN reported.

Health workers oppose the far-right Meloni government's budget for 2024, which does not make the necessary investments in health to deal with staff shortages and a deteriorating service.

A spokesperson for the health unions told ANSA that local governments were also complicit in the gradual privatisation of healthcare, as they "encourage the diversion of considerable economic resources from public healthcare to private enterprise through the provision of 'services' for which there are no spending ceilings."

The unions said if there was no change in policy, they would call a 48-hour strike in January. There have been numerous walkouts in the public and private sector against the budget and austerity policies, but the unions have kept them limited to short-term mobilisations and protests to place "pressure" on the far-right capitalist government.

Finnish and Norwegian dock workers begin blockade of Tesla cargo in support of Swedish strikers

On Wednesday, dock workers in Finland and Norway began a blockade of Tesla goods, refusing to transport cars for the American auto company during a strike of 500 mechanics at Tesla maintenance workshops in Sweden. Dock workers and lorry drivers in Denmark began a similar blockade two weeks ago.

Swedish Tesla workers, IF Metall union members, have been on strike since October to demand a collective agreement. Postal workers, dock workers, cleaners, electricians and other workers in Sweden refused to provide any services to Tesla to support the striking mechanics.

Tesla continued to import its cars overland after unloading them in neighbouring countries, so dock workers in Denmark, Norway and Finland all announced sympathy strikes. The German IG Metall union, with members in Tesla's large factory near Berlin, ruled out calling sympathy strikes, telling *Dagens Nyheter*, "That would be illegal. You strike for your own business, for your own wages. A political strike would mean violating the duty to work, and then the employer could take action against the employees."

While workers are determined to fight for an agreement covering wages and conditions, the unions are more interested in convincing Tesla of the benefits of the "Nordic model," in which the unions are closely integrated as part of management. Large parts of the political and business establishment are concerned that billionaire Tesla owner Elon Musk's opposition to any form of worker organisation undermines the valuable service provided by the trade unions as a police force over the working class.

The unions have made explicit appeals for Tesla to recognise the financial benefits of working in a corporatist relationship with them, especially in enforcing the mass job losses which will accompany the capitalist management of the transition to electric vehicles. IndustriALL Europe, to which IF Metall is affiliated wrote, "Tesla has much to gain by learning from the European social model and accepting unions as partners in the automotive transformation it has aimed to lead."

The Danish FH union told *FriFagbevegelse* that reversing falling union membership "Not least... will benefit the businesses themselves." The Norwegian Fellesforbundet told *FriFagbevegelse* it planned to invite the CEO of Tesla Norway to "review all the advantages and opportunities a collective agreement has for both employees and the business."

Greek municipal workers hold 24-hour strike

On December 14, municipal workers in Greece held a national strike, demanding permanent contracts for all, and increased safety and pay. The POE-OTA union members stopped work for 24 hours, and the Confederation of Greek Civil Servants' Trade Unions also called a strike and a rally against the government's budget in Athens.

The POE-OTA released a statement after the rally condemning an "unacceptable and unprovoked attack by the MAT [riot police]" with batons and chemicals on protesters. A video posted by ef.syn shows police beating two men who had approached the building of the Interior Ministry, striking one after he had fallen to the ground.

Air traffic controllers in France oppose reorganisation of services and restrictions on right to strike

Air traffic controllers in France held a one-day walkout on Monday, opposing a new bill which restricts their right to strike and a reorganisation of air traffic control. The bill will see the services at ten airports "greatly reduced," according to the General Confederation of Labour (CGT).

Ouest France reported that 30 percent of flights at Paris-Orly airport and 50 percent of flights at Brest airport were pre-emptively cancelled on the day of the strike. A one-day strike against the bill also took place in November.

The bill specifically targets air traffic controllers with similar restrictions to those already in place at the Paris transport authority RATP and national rail network SNCF. Air traffic controllers will have to declare individually whether they will join a strike 48 hours in advance, with a strike notice filed by the unions. Opponents of the bill said that individual declarations of participation could be used to target workers who had joined strikes.

The National Union of Air Traffic Controllers (SNCTA), the largest of the ATC unions, refused to join strikes 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.

Lithuanian teachers resume strike as parliament votes on budget

Teachers in Lithuania resumed their indefinite strike on December 5, during a vote in the parliament on the state budget for 2024, LRT reported.

The Lithuanian Education Workers' Union (LŠDPS) called for a pay rise of 15 percent in January and a further 15 percent from next September, but the government insisted on increases of 10 percent, saying that other demands over pay, workload and class sizes were "unaffordable."

Teachers in Lithuania walked out for a month from the end of September until late November, when the LŠDPS suspended the strike, until after the budget vote, near the end of term.

Wildcat strike for equal pay ends at TotalEnergies in port of Antwerp, Belgium

Chemicals workers employed by TotalEnergies in the Belgian port of Antwerp began a wildcat strike on December 9. It became known that they received a lower bonus than workers at the company's refinery a short distance away, according to *Nieuwsblad*.

Following a meeting between the unions and the French multinational's management, a deal was reportedly reached on the morning of December 14. The details of the agreement were not reported by the media, and it will be voted on by workers in the coming days.

Romanian civil servants in agriculture agency postpone all-out pay strike

Romania's AgroStar Federation union postponed an indefinite all-out strike due to begin on Thursday by workers at the Payments and Intervention Agency for Agriculture (APIA), the agency responsible for distribution of European Union agricultural subsidies.

The union reached a last-minute deal with Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu to place all workers at APIA on the same pay scale, *Agro Inteligen?a* reported.

APIA workers have protested for two weeks against pay inequality at the agency and a pay freeze since 2015, and began daily pickets outside the Ministry of Agriculture this week. According to Cluj 24, pay in the county offices of APIA, where 4,500 workers are assigned, is 10 percent lower than for the 500 workers in the central offices.

Agro Inteligen?a reported video footage showing a protester tell the Minister of Agriculture they were "desperate" because of the low pay. The Minister dismissed this, saying, "I'm also desperate that I haven't paid the subsidies" because they were not at work.

Months-long strike for wages to keep up with inflation ended at Corning Cable factory in Gebze, Turkey

Workers at the Corning Cable factory in the Turkish industrial centre of Gebze, who were on strike for 156 days over pay, returned to work Monday following an agreement between the Lastik-?? union and Corning.

Evrensel reported details of the deal with Corning made public by Lastik-??. Pay will rise by 75 percent in the first six months, a further 30 percent in the next six months, and by inflation plus 2 percent for the six months after that, with modifications based on any changes to the legal minimum wage.

Workers walked out on July 14 after the American manufacturer offered them a pay rise of only 60 percent, rejecting their demand for a 105 percent increase. At the time, even widely distrusted official inflation figures showed prices had risen by 62.6 percent from July 2022 to July 2023.

Corning Cable is a subsidiary of the US-based multinational manufacturer Corning, which produces many electronic components, including the strengthened glass used in most smartphones. It reported \$1.32 billion (US) profits for 2022.

Further strikes by public transport workers in Northern Ireland over pay

Workers employed by the public transport body Translink in Northern Ireland walked out on December 15 for 48 hours, and are due to hold a 24-hour strike Friday. Translink is responsible for train and bus services in the province.

The Unite, GMB and SIPTU members held a 24-hour strike December 1. They voted by majorities of over 90 percent to walk out, after Translink announced it would not be offering a pay rise this year and refused to set a date for negotiations.

The stoppage in the run-up to the Christmas holiday weekend is expected to cause widespread disruption.

Health supplies warehouse staff in Northern Ireland strike over pay

Around 50 staff working for the business services organisation (BSO) in Northern Ireland began a five-day strike Monday, demanding higher pay.

The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (Nipsa) members work in warehouses in Lisbon and Belfast. The warehouses supply food to hospitals and community meal outlets, clinical equipment, stationery supplies and cleaning equipment and materials. Around 75 percent of BSO staff are on £10.92 an hour or less. The stoppage is expected to impact in the run-up to Christmas.

Public sector workers in Northern Ireland to hold co-ordinated strike day of action

Public sector workers in Northern Ireland, including health workers, teachers, civil servants, radiographers and midwives, have announced a simultaneous strike on January 18.

Five teaching unions in Northern Ireland under the umbrella Northern Ireland Teachers' Council (NITC) previously announced their members would be on strike that day.

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), the Ulster Teachers Union (UTU), NASUWT, National Education Union (NEU) and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) members are demanding increased pay.

According to the UTU, starting salaries of newly qualified teachers in Northern Ireland are £8,000 below those in Scotland. Teachers in Northern Ireland have not had a pay rise for nearly three years.

The NITC unions called a one-day stoppage in April, and a half-day stoppage in November as part of the dispute.

Other public sector workers taking part include NIPSA members in the civil service, and Unison, GMB, Unite, Society of Radiographers, Royal College of Midwives and the Chartered Society of Physiotherapists members.

Public sector workers have been in a long-running dispute over pay, suffering real-terms losses in pay as inflation soared. The situation was exacerbated by the stalemate over the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont.

The assembly was suspended after the Democratic Unionist Party pulled its support over Brexit arrangements for the export of goods into the province from the rest of the UK. One result of the suspension has been the withholding of funds that could be available to fund public sector pay.

Around £0.6 billion is earmarked as part of £3.3 billion financial package once an agreement to restore devolved government is finalised.

Renewed strike by housing repair staff at Scottish local authority over money owed

Around 300 craft workers employed by West Lothian council in Scotland began a three-day stoppage Tuesday.

The Unite union members, bricklayers, electricians, joiners, plasterers and other tradesmen walked out after the council reneged on a longstanding collective agreement to pay workers extra for carrying out additional tasks. The strike vote was more than 96 percent. They also plan stoppages on January 3-4.

The workers, responsible for carrying out repairs in council houses and buildings as well as refitting houses, previously held a three-day stoppage in October over the same issue.

Junior doctors in Wales to walk out over pay offer

Junior doctors in Wales are to walk out after rejecting a 5 percent pay offer.

The British Medical Association (BMA) members will begin a three-day stoppage on January 15. They voted by a 98 percent majority on a 65 percent turnout for the action. The doctors are seeking a restoration of the value of their pay, which has fallen by nearly 30 percent in real terms over the last 15 years.

Junior doctors in England began a four-day stoppage Wednesday, to be followed by a strike January 3-8, also over 35 percent pay restoration. Their strike faces isolation, since the other health sector unions pushed through below-inflation deals for nurses, ambulance and other health workers. The BMA is also putting a sellout deal to specialist doctors and consultants.

Health workers from three English hospital trusts hold protest in London over pay

Health workers in dispute at three hospital trusts held a protest outside the Department of Health in London on Monday.

Taking part were Unite members at Barts Health NHS trust in East London, members working for Together Support Solutions, a wholly owned subsidiary of East Kent Hospital University NHS Foundation Trust and those employed by contractor Mitie at the Dudley Group NHS Foundation Trust.

All three groups of workers are taking action over pay and staffing levels and in particular the refusal of their employers to pay the so-called COVID bonus of £1,650 paid to most NHS workers in June as part of their pay settlement.

London underground rail staff vote to strike over pay

Workers on the London underground rail system voted to strike after rejecting a 5 percent pay offer from the employer, Transport for London (TfL).

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members voted by over 90 percent to walk out. TfL is trying to impose cuts of around £230 million as part of a government funding deal. TfL lost revenues during the pandemic. London receives much-limited government funding for its underground rail system compared to many European and other major cities.

RMT officials were due to meet Wednesday to set dates for stoppages in the New Year. The drivers' union Aslef accepted the TfL pay offer for its members.

Vigil in London for construction worker who died after roof collapsed

A vigil with a minute's silence was due to be held Thursday in Leytonstone in London at a building site where a construction worker was killed when the roof collapsed.

The worker died on December 12, when the roof of a house being converted collapsed. Emergency service workers attended but were unable to save the man who died at the scene. A second worker who suffered minor injuries was taken to hospital.

The vigil is to be organised by the Waltham Forest Trades Council. The construction worker has yet to be named, and it is understood his family are abroad.

Strike vote by engineering construction workers at four UK plants over pay

Engineering construction workers at Exxon Mobil's Mossmorran plant and GSK's pharmaceuticals site at Montrose, Altrad engineering's Torness power plant, all in Scotland, and Wilton International's Redcar chemicals plant in England have voted to walk out over pay.

The Unite union members, covered by the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry (NAECI) rejected a two-year pay deal of 10 percent for 2024 and 5 percent for 2025. Pay for construction engineering workers fell in real terms over recent years, including a pay freeze during the pandemic.

The workers are responsible for repair and maintenance at the sites. Other construction workers at plants covered by the NAECI are balloting over the same issue.

Refuse workers in Cardiff, Wales to strike over bullying claims

Refuse workers employed by Cardiff council in Wales announced a four-week strike to begin December 28.

The Unite union members in the council's refuse and recycling department accuse the department of tolerating a widespread bullying culture.

The refuse workers already held 12 weeks of strikes over the autumn. These walkouts were 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.

UK car parts supplier workers in Hartlepool to strike over pay offer

Around 150 UK workers at car parts supplier TMD Friction in Hartlepool will stage a series of 24-hour strikes in the new year.

The Unite members, many on as little as £12.88 an hour, rejected a 4 percent pay offer. TMD supplies brakes and brake parts to outlets across the UK. The dates for stoppages are January 2, 5, 9, 11 and 15, but more may be announced.

Isle of Man ferry officers' strike vote over changes to working conditions

Senior officers including captains and engineers working for the government-owned Isle of Man Steam Packet ferry company have voted by an 81 percent majority to strike.

The Nautilus International union members are responding to threats by the company to fire and rehire staff to impose changes to working conditions. The company wants staff to live aboard the ferry when working on shifts for journeys between Douglas, the Isle of Man capital, and Heysham on the English mainland. Currently, the officers return home between shifts. According to Nautilus, it would mean them being on board for around 76 days a year.

The union has not set dates for any industrial action. Around 70 percent of the workforce belong to the RMT union, which agreed to the changes in conditions.

Equal pay protest in Sheffield, UK

Workers demanding equal pay for women protested on Wednesday outside Sheffield Town Hall, England.

The protest was organised by the GMB union against Sheffield City Council's job allocation scheme, which means some women council employees are underpaid by up to £11,000. Women signed a giant Christmas card calling on the council to implement equal pay.

Large anti-war protests in Israel follow killing of three hostages by Israel Defence Forces

Tens of thousands of Israelis demonstrated on Saturday against the war in Gaza and to demand the Netanyahu government negotiate a ceasefire and prisoner exchange.

Rallies took place in Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities, including Jerusalem, Haifa and Hedera. The protests were given impetus by the shooting dead of three Israeli hostages by the Israel Defence Forces. The three were shot despite being naked from the waist up, waving white flags and shouting out in Hebrew.

In the rally in Tel Aviv, in the recently renamed Hostage square, the

stage was turned to face the nearby Kirya military headquarters to direct the protest at the role of the military. Families of hostages camped out after the rally opposite the entrance to the headquarters.

Iranian retirees plan protests against poverty incomes

Retirees from various sectors including military, social security and public sector bodies plan to hold a joint rally outside the Planning and Budget Organisation headquarters in Tehran on December 25. The day before, steel retirees will protest at the same site. Among their demands are increases in pensions and free medical treatment.

Tuesday saw protests against poverty-level pensions by public sector workers, such as teachers, in cities across Iran, including Ahvaz, Kermanshah and Shiraz.

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, exacerbated by US sanctions. Iran is in the sights of the US's expanding wars in the Middle East and Ukraine.

South African miners hold wildcat strike and sit-in at platinum mine in North West Province

Over 2,000 miners at Impala Bafokeng Rasimone Platinum Mine in North West province, South Africa began an underground sit-in in the North and South shafts on Monday for three days.

The strike was not supported by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the majority union at the mine, and so was declared illegal.

According to SABC News, the dispute started following a disagreement over dividends in a R104 million profit-sharing agreement and also over pension funds. The mine's ownership recently changed from Royal Bafokeng Platinum to Impala Platinum Holdings. Miners were also protesting tax deductions on bonus payments.

Impala suspended mine operations and sent NUM representatives underground to persuade the miners to end the sit-in. The union claimed miners were held underground against their will, creating a "hostage situation," but this was disputed by workers.

Miners at both Impala Platinum and Sibanye Stillwater face job losses due to the low price of platinum.

Energy workers in Malawi hold protest and sit-in to demand pay increase

Over a thousand energy workers at the Electricity Supply Corporation of Malawi (ESCOM) marched and held a sit-in to demand a substantial pay increase to make up for a massive reduction in the value of their wages. The Malawian currency, the Kwacha, was devalued by 44 percent in November alone, causing the price of many basic items, including fuel and food to soar.

More than 2,400 workers are employed by ESCOM, with 85 percent of them belonging to the ESCOM Staff Union (ESU). At least 14 ESU members and leaders were suspended when the strike began.

Media workers strike over pay and allowances in Kwara State, Nigeria

Workers employed by state-owned media in Kwara State, Nigeria held a two-day stoppage on December 19-20, to demand they are recognised as essential workers and paid the 100 percent allowances that would then apply.

Strikers included workers at Herald Newspapers, Radio Kwara and Kwara TV, and Kwara State Arts and Culture.

The unions—including National Union of Paper Products, Printing, and Publishing Workers and the Nigeria Union of Journalists—called for an upward revision of the allowance in line with the minimum wage of N30,000, and a 27 percent increase based on grading. The unions said they had been negotiating for an extensive period.

Ugandan students at nursing school strike over hike in tuition fees

Students at the Soroti School of Comprehensive Nursing in Uganda held a strike and protest at the hike in their tuition fees on December 14. The students stormed the administration building, demanding an explanation for the sudden increase in fees without prior notification.

Those most affected are students enrolled in the Diploma of Nursing and Midwifery. One student complained about the wide variation in how much students were charged.



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