

National transport strike in Portugal over pay and conditions; strikes and protests continue in Iran against increasing poverty; bus workers in Johannesburg, South Africa in walk out over restructuring following takeover

## 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 rail strike in Portugal over working conditions and pay

On Tuesday and Thursday, workers at Infraestruturas de Portugal (IP), the state-owned company responsible for the national rail and road infrastructure, stopped work in a dispute over pay and working conditions.

The strikes had a major impact on the railways, with 798 of 1,086 national rail services suspended between midnight and 7pm on Tuesday, *Lusa* reported, and a similar participation on Thursday.

The president of the Association of Railway Command and Control Professionals told *Lusa* IP workers held strikes over the same demands since September 2022, and accused IP of renegeing on its commitment to negotiate.

Workers at the on-board refreshment service on long-distance trains also held a stoppage on December 28. The Union of Workers in the Hospitality, Tourism, Restaurants and Similar Industries of the North said that NewRail, the company which holds the concession from state rail company Comboios de Portugal (CP), promised to pay workers what was owed by the previous concessionaire, which had stopped paying salaries in February 2023.

Although NewRail paid the regular salaries which were owed, the union says it still owes some workers payments for overtime and holiday pay, and that working conditions worsened after the takeover in June, despite it receiving over three and a half times more money from CP than the previous concessionaire.

The strike was initially planned to last for 48 hours. However, when NewRail proposed increasing salaries by 60 euros, despite considering it “manifestly insufficient,” the union called members’ meetings where the suspension of the second day of the strike was approved. It told *Lusa* this represented the first step, and it expected further negotiations in January.

**Polish farmers and lorry drivers continue blockades at the Ukrainian border**

Farmers and lorry drivers in Poland continue blockades of the country’s border with Ukraine, protesting the impact of policies which the European Union (EU) introduced to facilitate the NATO war with Russia. In June 2022, the EU exempted Ukrainian hauliers from the need to obtain permits and pay many fees.

Polish lorry drivers, many of whom are self-employed or small business owners, say this has led to unfair competition, making it difficult for them to earn a living, and call for permits to be reintroduced for Ukrainian lorries. Drivers also demanded the introduction of a separate queue for empty lorries returning from Ukraine, as they can spend 10-12 days at the border waiting to return home.

Polish farmers, affected by the import of Ukrainian grain and other produce, began a new blockade on Thursday, calling for subsidies for their corn, no changes to tax rates in agriculture, and for the government to make loans available, *Ukrinform* reported.

According to *Ukrinform*, more than 2,000 lorries are waiting at checkpoints to cross the Polish-Ukrainian border, and more than 8,400 lorries were queueing at the western border of Ukraine, as many hauliers have redirected their cargo via Slovakia, Hungary and Romania.

Ukrainian and Polish officials, as well as the European Commission, rejected the lorry drivers’ demands for an end to the permit-free regime, as it would endanger the war aims of the far-right Zelensky regime. The European Commissioner for Transport repeatedly attacked Poland’s previous government, led by the far-right Law and Justice Party, for failing to shut down the protests. Ukraine’s Minister of Infrastructure claimed that “the problems that the protesters are talking about do not really exist,” according to *Korrespondent*.

*Ukrinform* reported newly elected prime minister Donald Tusk saying last week, “I don’t think we will reach the maximum demanded by the protesting Polish carriers. However, what we can achieve seems to allow us to remove emotions and possibly quickly end the blockade at the border.” Zelensky said in an end-of-year press conference, “I believe the new [Polish] government will lift all the blockade, which is artificial” and said he had talked to Tusk about this.

**Kaufland supermarket workers in Poland hold warning strike over wages and conditions**

Workers at the Kaufland chain of supermarkets in Poland held a two-hour warning strike on Saturday, denouncing low wages and difficult working conditions.

One told *Gazeta Wyborcza* that “people come for 2-3 days, see what it is like and leave.” According to *Business Insider*, the Konfederacja Pracy union is calling for 1,200 z?oty more in monthly salaries. Some workers picketed outside their stores during the strike, while another told *G?os Wielkopolski*, “Our strike means that we perform our duties much slower.”

Kaufland is a chain which operates in Germany and many Eastern European countries. It is owned by the Schwarz Group, Europe’s largest retail company, which also owns Lidl. *SuperBiznes* reported comments by Polish Kaufland workers who said, “2024 will be a year of changes. We do not want to be Europe’s cheap labour force. Our colleagues from Germany earn three times more.”

### **Home care nurses hold pay strike in Cantal, France**

“Liberal” nurses in Cantal, France, self-employed nurses who care for patients at home, held a stoppage between Saturday and Tuesday, *La Montagne* reported.

The nurses are calling for an increase in payments for their services, as many procedures they carry out are paid at a flat rate, no matter how long they take. One nurse told the paper, “We work 12- to 14-hour days, and since 2009, we have stagnated. Financially, all expenses increase. Psychologically, we are in contact with patients, their families... We manage the administration, the pharmacy, the billing.”

According to *La Montagne*, a collective of liberal and other nurses was created in May to organise protests and strikes, “because our trade unions did not defend us.”

### **Workers close the Eiffel Tower for strike on the centenary of Gustave Eiffel’s death**

On December 27, workers at the Eiffel Tower in Paris closed the landmark to protest against mismanagement.

The General Confederation of Labour (CGT) called a one-day strike for the centenary of the death of Gustave Eiffel, the famed engineer who designed the tower for the centenary of the 1789 French Revolution, many famous railway bridges in France and the Statue of Liberty in the US.

According to *Ouest France*, the CGT accused the management of the Eiffel Tower Operating Company (SETE), owned by the City of Paris and Greater Paris, of “leading the SETE straight into the wall.” It said the SETE had underestimated the costs of required maintenance and restoration work and based their projections of ticket revenue on “annual attendance objectives of 7.4 million visitors,” which are “attendance levels never before reached.”

### **Port workers in Bari, Italy strike after death of colleague**

Workers held a 24-hour strike at the Port of Bari, Italy on Sunday, after one of their colleagues was killed in the latest of the fatal accidents which claim hundreds of workers’ lives every year.

*Ansa*, Angelo Rossini, a 69-year-old father of two many years’ experience, was struck by a machine at the port and died of his injuries not long after paramedics arrived.

The UIL union said it would relaunch its “Zero deaths at work” campaign in 2024, citing data collated by the National Institute for Insurance against Accidents at Work and analysed by Vega Engineering’s Occupational Safety and Environment Observatory, which showed 1,000 workers were killed in the first eleven months of 2023. However, the unions have never waged any serious fight for safe conditions, always diverting workers’ anger via short walkouts of one day or a few hours whenever another avoidable death occurs.

### **Taxi drivers at Brussels Airport stop work to protest new Dutch-language requirements**

Belgian taxi drivers stopped work for two and a half hours on December 29 to protest a new Dutch-language requirement imposed by the Flemish Government, a coalition led by the Flemish-nationalist New Flemish Alliance.

Under the new rules, from July all taxi drivers working at the airport will need to pass a written and spoken level B1 Dutch exam. Cambridge English estimates that to reach level B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages requires 350-400 hours of study.

Brussels Airport is situated in the Dutch-speaking Flemish area of Belgium, but close to the border with French-speaking Wallonia, and the city of Brussels is predominantly French-speaking. The head of the union representing taxi drivers told *RTL* they accepted a basic level of Dutch should be required, but 80 percent of candidates fail the B1 exam and “The bar has been set much too high,” as around 300 of the 400 taxi drivers at the airport would likely lose their jobs.

Others also pointed out that 90 percent of taxi customers are English-speaking, and taxi drivers would likely lose customers to Uber, whose Brussels-based drivers are not covered by the Flemish Government’s regulations.

### **Pay strike by frozen food workers at Swindon, UK distribution centre**

Around 150 workers at two sites in Swindon, England walked out for the day on Saturday as they did previously just before Christmas. The sites are run by logistics contractor GXO to supply Iceland frozen food products in the south west of England.

In November, the Unite union members voted to reject a below-inflation pay offer and strike.

### **UK car parts supplier workers in Hartlepool strike over pay offer**

Around 150 UK workers at car parts supplier TMD Friction in Hartlepool held a 24-hour walkout on Tuesday, with another scheduled for Friday.

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. Additional stoppages are scheduled for January 9, 11 and 15, but more may be announced.

### **Industrial action by Isle of Man steam packet officers impacts sailings**

The industrial action over work conditions by officers employed by the Isle of Man Steam Packet Company, which operates services between the island and Heysham on the English mainland, has led to cuts in sailings.

The Nautilus union members began an overtime ban and a refusal to cover senior absences on December 27. A Nautilus press release notes the ferry the Manxman will only be able to make one sailing a day (rather than the usual two) for the next two weeks, due to an officer taking unexpected leave and Nautilus members refusing to provide cover.

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

It is unclear how many Nautilus International union members were threatened with dismissal, effective from March 15, if they did not accept the new contract. Of 70 officers employed by the government-owned ferry service, 48 are in the union. Nautilus members balloted by 81 percent to support a walkout, and 89 percent to work to rule in a 77 percent turnout.

Around 70 percent of the workforce belong to the RMT union, which agreed to the changes in conditions.

The Isle of Man, in the Irish Sea, is a self-governing British Crown dependency.

### **Further strike by UK pension regulator workers announced over pay**

Around 300 workers employed by The Pensions Regulator (TPR), the UK pension regulatory body, based in Brighton, are to hold a further 12 days of stoppages between January 10 and February 1.

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members have held 36 days of strikes since September 5, after rejecting a 3 percent pay offer. They want a 4.5 percent rise with an additional 0.5 percent for the lowest paid. This is the deal accepted by the PCS for other civil service workers.

### **National Museum Liverpool workers ballot over withheld cost of living payment**

Workers at the National Museum Liverpool (NML) in England are balloting for strike action, with the ballot closing at the end of January.

The PCS union members are protesting NML's withholding of a £1,500 cost of living payment made to civil servants as part of a pay agreement. The NML is the only employer out of more than 200 who have withheld the payment.

### **FBU union calls off planned strike by fire control staff on Merseyside, UK over staffing levels and shift system after new offer**

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) called off an eight-day strike of fire control staff on Merseyside, England due to begin December 27.

The FBU members voted 100 percent on a 92 percent turnout in August to strike. It was in opposition to moves by the fire authority to reduce the number of staff on night shift from six to five and the imposition of a new shift system.

A meeting of FBU members on December 21 voted to accept a new offer from the fire authority. An FBU press release of December 22 described the revised offer as improving the "work-life balance of control room staff, as well as introducing an agreed duty shift system with a pay uplift of £6,880 per year. Staff will also be compensated if they agree to change shifts at short notice."

### **Ongoing strikes and protests in Iran over deteriorating social conditions**

Protests and strikes are continuing in Iran as workers fight against deteriorating social conditions and for pay increases.

The year end saw workers at the Offshore Oil Company in the province of Hormozgan hold further protests for improved pay and against poor conditions. Permanent employees and contractors working for the Aghajari Oil and Gas Exploration Company also held further protests to abolish salary caps, against retirement age restrictions and for reimbursement of overpaid tax demands.

Saturday marked the eighth day of stoppages by around 3,000 workers at the National Steel Industrial Group in Ahvaz. According to *free-them-now.com*, management agreed to demands to reinstate dismissed workers, but they were still pressing their other demands.

On December 27, workers marched from the company site to Baghael Square. That day also marked the fifth day of a strike by the guild of gold traders against unfair taxation.

On December 25, Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI) retirees protested outside TCI offices in several cities including Ahvaz, Arak, Isfahan and Zanjan over the erosion of the value of their pensions. They were joined by nurses in Ahvaz, Qazvin and Tehran with their own demands.

According to the Iran International website, 2023 saw over 300 protests by workers and over 110 strikes. Living standards have plummeted, partly due to US sanctions, which are a precursor to war against Iran.

### **West Bank general strike in response to Israeli assassination of Hamas deputy leader**

A general strike was observed across the West Bank on Wednesday in response to Tuesday's assassination of Hamas deputy leader Saleh al-Arouri in Beirut, the Lebanese capital.

Shops, commercial enterprises, public bodies and banks all closed for the day. Transport was disrupted and protest rallies against the assassination took place. The genocide in Gaza is widening into a NATO battlefield against Palestinians in the West Bank, Lebanon, the Yemen, Syria and Iran.

### **South African bus workers in Johannesburg walk out over restructuring following takeover**

Bus workers for the Rea Vaya bus rapid transit system in Johannesburg, South Africa took strike action on Wednesday, blocking the exit of the depot.

PioTrans, which operated the service with the City of Johannesburg, were in a business rescue and taken over by Mahier Tayob. The dispute is over payment of thirteenth cheques and unhappiness over new internal controls that were introduced. PioTrans are looking to the courts to stop the strike.

### **Impoverished civil servants in Nigerian states delay return to work after Christmas holiday**

Nigerian state employees in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) and in Jigawa State refused to return to work at the end of the official Christmas holiday, due to not being paid their entitlements. Most civil servants in the two areas had not returned on December 27.

Gloria Anza, a worker in the FCT, explained she could not go back to work because she did not have money for transport costs. Reporting to work every day was a challenge after the government removed the fuel subsidy, said FCT Ministry of Women Affairs worker Chioma Alex, as it now cost her N1,000 a day for transport instead of N700.

### **Kenyan teachers prepare to strike at start of new term**

Over 21,000 Kenyan intern teachers working in Junior Secondary Schools are due to strike from January 8. The strike is to demand permanent and pensionable (PnP) terms of employment when their current contract ends in February.

Interim Secretary General of the teaching union, Daniel Murithi, claimed that 2023 graduates were employed on PnP terms, while those who graduated 10 years earlier were still on short term contracts.



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