

Finnish workers continue struggle begun in September against austerity and attacks on right to strike involving tens of thousands; strikes and protests by Iranian workers continue into the New Year; protests by Libyan oil workers at two oilfields shut down production over lack of infrastructure

## 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 struggle against austerity and attacks on right to strike

Workers in Finland continue to oppose the austerity programme and attacks on the right to strike pushed by the ruling coalition of the right-wing Coalition Party and far-right Finns Party. Since September, tens of thousands have joined warning strikes and protests.

On Wednesday, Industrial Union members began an overtime ban, which will last until February 4, in many manufacturing sectors as well as mining and forestry.

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

A December survey by the newspaper *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus* showed 61 percent opposed new restrictions on political strikes and weakening of the legal protection against dismissal. Only 31 percent were in favour, while 55 percent supported strikes against the reforms.

At the start of February, the Industrial Union also plans a two-day strike to shut down oil refining at Neste, one of Finland's largest companies. Despite widespread hostility to the government's measures, the unions have called just a few isolated days of strikes in five months.

The Industrial Union's chief steward at Neste made clear in a statement that the motivation of the unions was "the government's refusal to negotiate on its harmful changes to working life" and that in the current recession, "Finns must be able to pull together in difficult times. No one benefits from quarrelling and confrontation."

In fact, the Finnish unions made clear they are prepared to negotiate over the cuts but ask that they be "balanced" and respect the "Nordic model" of corporatist integration between the unions, employers and the

state.

### Turkish metal workers protest and prepare to strike over sectoral agreement

This week, the two unions Türk Metal and Birle?ik Metal-??, representing Turkish metal and other heavy industrial workers, announced they would call strikes after rejecting an offer from the Turkish Employers' Association of Metal Industries (MESS) in negotiations over a new sectoral agreement for 163,000 workers.

According to *BirGün*, MESS offered a 60 percent wage increase, below the official inflation rate, while Türk Metal is demanding increases totalling 119.05 percent, and Birle?ik Metal-?? called for 140.5 percent. The independent Inflation Research Group estimates prices rose by 127.2 percent over the last 12 months.

Türk Metal called for protests before and after shifts on Thursday but has not yet named a date for any strikes. Birle?ik Metal-?? said it will call "gradual strikes," echoing the "stand-up strikes" called by the American United Auto Workers which strangled the mass struggle against the big auto companies voted for by workers. Birle?ik Metal-?? will call for its members at 26 factories to walk out on January 19, and for more to join them the week after, with only 7,000 of its 12,000 members taking part in the initial walkouts.

### Striking journalists at Sputnik Turkey summoned to police interview

Journalists at Sputnik Turkey, on strike since last August, were summoned to a police interview last week, in a blatant act of intimidation.

According to a statement from the Turkish Journalists' Union, the management of the Turkish branch of the Russian state-owned news agency reported eight workers to the police for allegedly violating the "freedom to work" based on "letters addressed to the employer by scabs."

The journalists initially walked out over pay, but after they received the strike notice Sputnik Turkey announced it would begin “restructuring” involving job losses. Journalists denounced this as illegal retaliation and continued to demand the reinstatement of 24 Turkish Journalists’ Union members.

### **Belgian prison staff hold 24-hour strike against overcrowding**

Prison staff throughout Belgium will begin a 24-hour strike on Thursday, opposing the overcrowded and inhumane conditions.

The unions say there were also many recent cases of violence against prison staff and staff shortages remain a problem. The government’s proposals to solve the problem were “still not sufficient after two years.”

According to *Het Laatste Nieuws*, there are currently around 12,000 people in Belgian prisons, which is 1,400 more than the official capacity. A representative of the General Union of Public Services said, “Many detainees are still lying on a mattress on the floor in a cell that is much too small.”

### **Ground handling workers at Spanish airline Iberia strike against transfer to other companies**

Ground handling workers employed by the airline Iberia held a four-day strike at airports across Spain to demand employment guarantees from Spain’s largest airline.

According to *EFE*, in September Iberia lost the concession to provide luggage handling at eight airports, and workers’ contracts will be transferred to the new operators. Ahead of the strike, 444 flights were preemptively cancelled, and thousands of suitcases for other flights were not loaded.

The unions called for Iberia to use its own handling services rather than the airports’ for its flights, and thus keep its employees on its own books. The airline refuses, claiming that jobs, pay and working conditions will be guaranteed in the transfer.

Iberia is owned by the International Airlines Group (IAG), which also owns British Airways and Aer Lingus. In the first nine months of 2023, IAG reported profits after tax of more than 2.15 billion euros.

### **Some nurses and healthcare technicians on indefinite strike over sectoral agreement in Catalonia, Spain pushed through by unions**

Striking nurses and healthcare technicians in the Spanish autonomous community of Catalonia protested this week against the sectoral agreement signed by the Catalan Institute of Health and the largest unions representing these workers.

The Nurses of Catalonia union called an indefinite strike from December 12 against the agreement, which was signed by nurses’ union SATSE.

The Federation of Health Technicians and Professionals said that of the money allocated by the Catalanian government, less than 1.5 percent had gone to nursing care technicians and senior health technicians, *El Periódico* reported.

According to *Europa Press*, the most recent figures from the Catalanian

government’s Ministry of Health showed between 0.7 and 1.2 percent of nurses stopped work in a day, with similar figures for the technicians. The minimum service requirements effectively banned any nurse or technician involved in urgent or serious care from stopping work, and also affected many in outpatient care, cleaning and food services.

### **Medical inspectors in Spanish National Social Security Institute strike against new inspection regime**

On Friday, inspectors at the Spanish National Social Security Institute (INSS) will hold a one-day strike to oppose new regulations, introduced last May. The medical inspectors are responsible, among other duties, for evaluating claimants of sick leave or disability support.

According to *Información*, decisions on whether to continue support were previously made by a panel, to which the medical inspector submitted a report. As of May, the General Workers’ Union asked, “Is it now expected that a single doctor will assume that responsibility with all the guarantees in a single consultation with insufficient time and data? Well, according to the INSS, yes.” It added that the decision had been made based on “purely economic criteria.”

### **Strike continues for job guarantees at the Pompidou Centre, Paris, France**

Workers at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, France, which houses Europe’s largest modern art museum and a public library, continue the strike begun in October to demand the protection of jobs and that their jobs not be outsourced after its upcoming closure.

According to *Le Figaro*, the Pompidou Centre will be closed between 2025 and 2030 for restoration and asbestos removal.

### **Further walkouts by health staff over pay grading in Wirral, UK**

Around 600 clinical support workers (CSWs) employed by the Wirral University Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust at its Arrowe Park and Clatterbridge hospital sites began four weeks of strikes on January 3.

The Unison union members already took more than 30 days of stoppages over pay grading since August last year. CSWs work on wards alongside nursing staff, helping to feed and care for patients. Most are paid at the lower end of the band 2 pay scale but routinely carry out tasks such as blood monitoring and inserting cannulas, which count as band 3 pay scale work, for which they should be earning around £2,000 a year more.

An agreement was reached in November that the trust would consider regrading CSWs and grant back pay and strikes were suspended. However, a dispute arose over how many CSWs this would cover, and strikes were resumed later in November. The current stoppage is in response to the trust’s failure to regrade all the CSWs.

Last year, seven other health trusts in the northwest of England agreed to put CSWs on the band 3 pay scale and backdated their pay to April 2018.

## **Further walkouts by refuse workers in South Tyneside, UK over bullying claims**

UK domestic refuse collection workers employed by South Tyneside Council at its South Shield base began a four-day walkout Tuesday.

The GMB members accuse the depot's management of bullying, and already took four days of stoppages in November. According to the GMB, 80 percent of the workforce are or were recently on a formal warning. The dispute was sparked by management disciplining workers for assisting elderly and disabled residents. The GMB described the atmosphere in the South Tyneside refuse department as toxic.

The workers will also walk out January 23-26, when they will be joined by Unite union members striking over the same issue. They are set to lobby a meeting of the full council on January 24.

## **Medical warehouse staff in Bedford, UK strike over union recognition**

Around 85 workers at the Movianto medical warehouse facility in Kempston near Bedford, England began a week-long strike Monday, with a mandate for further action.

The Unite union members voted by a near 80 percent majority for the stoppage over the company's refusal to officially recognise the union for collective bargaining purposes. The warehouse staff pick and load medical supplies for distribution. Picket lines were mounted each day.

## **Around 150,000 public sector workers in Northern Ireland plan strike action over pay**

Public sector unions in Northern Ireland are set to walk out on January 18. It is estimated around 150,000 workers will be involved, making it the biggest strike in Northern Irish history.

Civil servants, teachers, health and transport workers will be among those taking part.

The strike over pay will involve workers in 15 trade unions, including several teaching unions, the Royal College of Nursing and the major public sector unions, GMB, NIPSA, SIPTU, Unison and Unite.

GMB, SIPTU and Unite union members working for Translink will take part in the day of action, impacting heavily on public transport. Translink workers held four days of stoppages in December, bringing public transport to a halt in the lead-up to the Christmas holiday period.

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 for pay as part of a £3.3 billion financial package once an agreement to restore devolved government is finalised.

## **Workers at new UK Amazon site to walk out over pay**

Around 100 workers at Amazon's new flagship fulfilment centre in Birmingham, England are to walk out on January 25.

The GMB members are demanding pay of £15 an hour and improved working conditions. Amazon announced basic pay will rise to £12.30 an hour in April, well below the £15 demand. January 25 will mark the anniversary of the first official strike at UK Amazon's Coventry site. Unofficial walkouts over pay took place prior to that.

Since January 25, 2023 there have been 28 days of stoppages at the Coventry site in the dispute over pay. The last was in November, on so-called Black Friday, coinciding with action at Amazon sites in the US, Italy and Germany.

The GMB applied for formal recognition at the Coventry site after it claimed to represent more than half the workforce. It withdrew its recognition claim after Amazon drafted in more staff to cut the number of union members to less than 50 percent.

## **Junior doctors in England plan further ballot in long-running pay dispute**

Junior doctors in England, who ended their historic six-day strike on Tuesday, are likely to ballot for further stoppages.

The British Medical Association (BMA) members held 34 days of stoppages since March last year in their fight for a 35 percent pay rise to restore the loss in pay over the last several years. Their current mandate runs out on February 29.

The *Guardian* reports that the BMA's Junior Doctors Committee has "well-advanced" plans for a third ballot. Junior doctors have previously voted twice with 98 percent majorities on turnouts of over 70 percent to walk out in their pay dispute.

Junior doctors in Northern Ireland, also BMA members, are taking part in their first-ever strike ballot. The results will be announced February 19. Should the vote be in favour, they will hold a 24-hour strike on March 6. They are protesting over pay, with junior doctors in the province having the worst pay compared to the other UK nations. A BMA survey last summer of junior doctors in Northern Ireland showed 75 percent considering going abroad for better pay and conditions, while 72 percent said they were considering leaving training completely because of the pay.

## **Academics at Aberdeen University, Scotland balloting over job losses**

Academic staff at Aberdeen University, Scotland are balloting for strike action over plans to cut 30 jobs in the department of modern languages.

The ballot of University and College Union members closes February 7. A petition opposing the job cuts has garnered over 15,000 signatures so far.

## **Middle East**

### **Strikes and protests by Iranian workers continue into the New Year**

Strikes and protests by workers and pensioners in Iran over the cost-of-

living crisis and lack of rights under the authoritarian regime are ongoing.

On Sunday, workers held a protest blocking roads outside an Iranian oil plant in the port city of Assaluyeh over pay and wider social issues. Eleven protesters were reportedly arrested by security forces.

A major factor in many of the strikes and protests is the Job Classification Act (JCA). Passed into law nearly 50 years ago, the JCA was meant to provide job security and consistency of conditions, but most workers in Iran are not covered by it. Without its protection workers are plagued by job insecurity and employed essentially as temporary workers.

An eight-day strike in December by workers at the Iran National Steel Industrial Group in Ahvaz in southern Iran ended when the employer promised to apply JCA protection to their jobs.

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.

### **Protests by Libyan oil workers at two oilfields shut down production over social demands**

Oil production by the Libyan state-owned energy firm, the National Oil Corporation (NOC), was brought to a halt at the start of the year by protests at the Al-Sharara and el-Feel oilfields.

Workers and residents are demanding a hospital be built in Oubari, that young people are employed and trained and the setting up of a refinery in Fezzan to address the shortages of gas and petrol locally.

The NOC said in a statement January 8, “negotiations are ongoing [with the union] to resume production as soon as possible” after “the closure of the site by protesters.” The company announced it was unable to fulfil its contracts.

Libya has the largest oil reserves in Africa. The economy and government are dependent on oil sales to keep afloat.

### **Almost half miners at Impala Bafokeng Platinum mine, South Africa continue wildcat strike**

Last month, over 2,000 South African miners held a three-day sit-in at Impala Bafokeng Platinum mine in Rustenburg, North West province. The strike, which was not supported by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), was declared illegal. Only 60 percent of workers have returned after Christmas.

The miners remaining on strike work in the shafts where the sit-in took place. Last weekend, there was a protest demanding management drop the suspension notice for those who took part.

The ongoing dispute follows the mine's recent ownership change from Royal Bafokeng Platinum to Impala Platinum Holdings. Workers claim the pension funds were changed and they have not been paid the correct amounts. They are also disputing the tax deductions on bonus payments.

According to *sabcnews*, the workers say the NUM are selling them out. One worker said, “We cannot go back to work before we can get our money... That’s why we are staying here now. NUM and management are both one thing. We tried to stay underground, but we failed. Now we are doing the strike, far from the shaft. From 2017, when we got a problem, NUM can’t stand with you, it stands with management.”

Gold One Mine recently sacked over 400 workers for a similar strike and are threatening to sack a further 150.

### **Workers walk out at Akwa Ibom University, Nigeria, over funding**

Non-academic workers at Akwa Ibom State University in Ikot Akpaden walked out on an indefinite strike on January 11 to demand an increase in funding.

The Non-Academic Staff Union had previously given a 14-day warning that a strike would follow if the union’s demands were not acted upon.

### **Teachers in Rivers State, Nigeria protest over lack of bonus**

Around one hundred primary and secondary school teachers in Rivers State, Nigeria protested inside the Government House in Port Harcourt on January 6 to demand payment of their Christmas bonus in line with payments made to other civil servants.

The teachers occupied the building to demand promises made by the state governor are fulfilled.



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