

Teachers in Estonia, Greece and France in walkouts over pay and conditions; teachers continue strike in Kurdistan, Iraq over unpaid wages; residents near Durban, South Africa protest over water shortages

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.

Estonian teachers begin strike over pay

Thousands of teachers in Estonia began a potentially indefinite strike on Monday, demanding the government implement its promise to increase teachers' salaries to 120 percent of the national average by 2027.

According to the Estonian Union of Education Workers (EHL), 9,471 teachers joined the stoppage on Monday. Including kindergarten workers and others holding partial strikes, there were 18,000 strikers.

Although many teachers returned to work after Wednesday, the head of the EHL told *ERR* he was hearing reports that many teachers intended to strike for much longer.

There is widespread public support for the teachers. A poll conducted by Norstat found that 72 percent of the population said they either "approve" or "somewhat approve" of the strikes, and 73 percent of parents. Actors at the Estonian Drama Theatre read out a statement of support before a performance on Monday.

Polls also showed that 60 percent "approved" or "somewhat approved" the suggestion that government coalition partners, the Social Democrats and Estonia 200, call a vote of no confidence in Prime Minister Kaja Kallas if her Reform Party does not concede to teachers' demands, *ERR* reported. However, the parties themselves have not suggested any plans to grant concessions to the teachers.

The dispute within the ruling coalition over the strikes has largely been over how best to push through education "reforms," which would meet the pay rises promised while cutting overall spending. Minister of Education Kristina Kallas (Estonia 200, no relation to the prime minister) said, "Compared to other European countries, we have too many high schools per student" and suggested saving money by closing schools.

The Social Democrats suggested tax rises, while Kaja Kallas pointed to Estonia's high education spending (more than any other European country except Iceland as a percentage of GDP in 2020, according to Macrotrends) as a problem. She said meeting teachers' salary demands "requires reforms to find where the money is. Perhaps the places where we spend more than the average European country."

In a televised debate with Kristina Kallas, Tõnis Lukas of the right-wing Fatherland party, seeking to capitalise on the crisis caused by the strikes, pointed to the cynical manner in which Estonia 200 claimed to support teachers. "Kristina Kallas acts as if it's the [other coalition parties] which interfere," he said. "There's a bit of a martyr's aura. The three of you bluffed together—those promises about teachers' salaries. And the three of you actually also agreed on the current budget."

Teachers' strikes and student protests across Greece against private universities

Thousands of teachers and students have taken to the streets in Greece over the past two weeks to oppose government plans to permit private universities.

Article 16 of the Greek Constitution begins: "Art and science, research and teaching shall be free and their development and promotion shall be an obligation of the State," and includes the clause, "The establishment of university level institutions by private persons is prohibited."

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis called this an "unbearable insanity" which "outrages the whole of society" and intends to change Article 16, according to *Kathimerini*. The bill will be voted on by the end of February.

ef.syn reported that large rallies took place on January 18 and again this Thursday against the plans. Student protesters also occupied more than half of university faculties and departments. The Federation of Secondary School Staff called three-hour work stoppages so schoolteachers could join the protests, and the Unified Association of Teaching and Research Staff at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece's largest university, called a 48-hour strike.

Educators at two French schools strike for resources for disabled students

Educators at two schools in France walked out on Thursday to demand

increased resources to enable students with disabilities to attend their schools.

Students with certain disabilities have the right to an “AESH” assistant to help them attend mainstream schools. However, the head of one of the two striking schools, the Chevré primary school in the town of Acigné in Brittany, told *Ouest France*, “[W]e find students whose rights are not covered,” and he wanted the government to “strengthen the attractiveness of the professions of AESH... This mainly involves salary increases.”

The two strikes precede a national education strike on February 1, called by four education unions to demand solutions to a school recruitment crisis, increased pay, as well as increased hiring and more secure contracts for AESH workers. Teachers also oppose a reform to vocational schools, which will see children spend more time working as interns in companies.

National public transport strike in Italy over pay and conditions

Workers on buses, trams and other public transport systems across Italy stopped work on Thursday, called out by the USB, CUB, Cobas and other “grassroots” unions. The unions call for pay rises, improved working conditions and safety, and also an end to privatisation and expenditure on war.

Legal restrictions banned strikes during peak morning and afternoon hours, but outside these times many workers joined the walkouts. According to *ANSA*, 75 percent of workers in Turin and Bologna and 70 percent in Rome joined.

PSOE regional president in Asturias, Spain threatens striking vehicle inspection workers with privatisation

Workers at ITVASA, the municipally owned company responsible for carrying out legally mandated inspections of vehicles for safety and emissions in Asturias, Spain have been on strike since November over working hours and understaffing.

The president of the Principality of Asturias and general secretary of the Asturian branch of the ruling Socialist Party (PSOE), Adrián Barbón, made provocations and threats in response.

According to *EFE*, after a long, unsuccessful negotiation between ITVASA and the unions, Barbón said the government would negotiate *after* the strike was called off. He provocatively said he would accept the demand for reduced working hours, but only on the condition of increased productivity, from 13 to 15 inspections per person.

Most notably, he said that if the strike continued, he would have to consider “other models” in which private mechanics can carry out statutory inspections as well as the public ITVASA. The far-right opposition party Vox made near-identical comments. While opportunistically criticising Barbón for not resolving the strike, Vox called for “allowing entry into the market of private companies,” reported *Europa Press*.

Romanian healthcare workers continue protests over low pay

On January 18 and again on Thursday, healthcare workers protested in Bucharest, Romania to demand a 20 percent pay rise for all workers in

health and social care, in groups of 250 people each time. The Sanitas union is also collecting signatures to call an all-out strike.

The prime minister Marcel Ciolacu said, after meeting with Sanitas representatives, “Unfortunately, the deficiencies accumulated over years cannot be corrected at once.” He said he had secured Sanitas’ agreement to “create a working team that includes representatives of the Sanitas Federation and experts from the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Health,” according to *Spotmedia*.

Spontaneous walkout by maintenance workers at Brussels Airlines in Belgium over demands including outdated equipment

Workers in the maintenance department of Brussels Airlines, Belgium’s largest airline, stopped work for around 24 hours in a spontaneous walkout on Tuesday afternoon, delaying two long-haul flights.

According to *Nieuwsblad*, a new operational director of the department came to the workplace to introduce himself, but workers were dissatisfied with his answers to their questions about future changes, such as whether outdated equipment would be replaced.

Brussels Airlines said it was talking with the trade unions over all issues, but *RTL* reported it said it was seeking “balanced solutions,” which involved vague promises of “giv[ing] our company and our employees’ opportunities for growth, while controlling our costs in a very competitive market.”

Workers at new UK Amazon site to walk out over pay

Around 100 workers at Amazon’s new flagship fulfilment centre in Birmingham, England were set to walk out on Thursday.

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. It marks 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 were 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.

UK car parts supplier workers in Hartlepool begin indefinite strike over pay offer

Around 180 UK workers at car parts supplier TMD Friction in Hartlepool began an indefinite strike Monday.

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.

They previously held a series of 24-hour stoppages earlier in January.

UK nuclear weapons maintenance workers hold 24-hour stoppage over pay

UK workers at the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) site in Berkshire held a 24-hour strike on Wednesday.

The Prospect union members, including scientists, engineers and administrative workers, have seen their pay stagnate for years and rejected an inadequate pay offer from AWE. They have been taking action short of striking by working to rule, working to contract and withdrawing from any voluntary duties since November 13. They are resuming action short of strike after Wednesday's stoppage.

The Berkshire establishment is responsible for maintaining the UK nuclear deterrent.

Bus control staff at London's Abellio strike over pay

Around 40 bus controllers working for the Abellio bus company in London plan to walk out Friday over pay. They previously walked out on January 19.

The Unite union members based at Battersea and Twickenham bus depots rejected a 5 percent pay offer for 2023. They use GPS systems to track buses to avoid traffic jams and accidents to keep the buses moving freely. They say their pay is around £10,000 a year less than controllers at other bus companies.

Abellio runs services across south west London. Further stoppages are scheduled for February 2, 9, 16 and 23.

Contractors at Scottish natural gas plant in pay

Around 90 workers employed by contractor Kaefer at Shell's Mossmorran gas plant near Cowdenbeath in Scotland walked out for 24 hours Tuesday. They are also due to walk out on Thursday.

The Unite union members, who have taken previous strike action, are protesting Kaefer's refusal to make a cost-of-living payment for 2023. Shell reported profits of £5.1 billion for the third quarter of last year.

Further 24-hour stoppages are planned for January 30, February 1, 6 and 13.

Northern Ireland Translink transport workers announce further stoppages over pay

Transport workers in Northern Ireland working for Translink will hold four days of strikes in February over pay.

Members of the GMB, Unite and SIPTA unions who work for the Northern Ireland public transport authority will walk out on February 1, with further stoppages planned for February 15, 27 and 28. Translink provides bus and train services in the province.

Translink workers took part in the January 18 strike of over 150,000 public sector workers in their fight for a cost of living pay rise. They previously took several days of action in December in their pay dispute.

Rail maintenance workers at UK firm to strike over pay

Several hundred UK rail maintenance workers employed by Hitachi Rail Limited are to walk out from Saturday until February 1.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) and Unite union members have rejected a 5.5 to 6 percent pay offer, a cut in real terms. Based at depots in Bristol, Plymouth, Penzance, Wiltshire, Swansea, London and Edinburgh, they work as highly skilled engineers, maintenance workers and technicians.

In its latest returns, Hitachi Rail made profits of £104 million. Its highest-paid director's remuneration was nearly £1.4 million.

London-based English National Opera staff to strike over redundancy threats

Members of the English National Opera (ENO) chorus based in the UK capital are to walk out on February 1.

The Equity union members voted 100 percent for the action in response to ENO's proposals to cut jobs and attack pay and conditions. They will be joined by ENO Musicians Union members. Conductor Martyn Brabbins, who resigned as ENO musical director in October, voiced support for the stoppage.

The strike is expected to lead to the cancellation of the opening night's production of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Scottish further education lecturers vote for strike over pay

Further education lecturers in Scotland renewed their mandate for strikes over their long-running pay issue.

The EIS-FELA union members voted by an 85 percent majority for action short of a strike and by 77 percent to walk out. Lecturers should have had a pay rise in September 2022, but despite previous stoppages, are still awaiting an acceptable offer. The employers' body, College Employers Scotland, insisted any offer would be paid for by a cull of lecturing jobs. This was rejected by the lecturers.

They held two weeks of rolling strikes beginning September 7 last year, followed by some targeted stoppages. They have also been taking action short of striking by working to contract and refusing to enter results of assessments into college results systems.

The union leadership has not announced any dates for stoppages and appealed to the employers and Scottish government to come back with a fair offer.

Teachers at two Brighton, UK schools vote to strike after council closure plans

UK teachers at St Bartholomew's in Brighton and St Peters in Portslade have voted to strike after the Labour-controlled Brighton and Hove City Council announced plans to close them.

The National Education Union members voted to strike after the council announced their closure due to falling roll numbers. A council meeting on Monday confirmed the schools would close at the end of the academic

year. Monday's council meeting was lobbied by parents, pupils and teachers.

Fuel delivery drivers in Grangemouth, Scotland, vote to strike over pay

Around 30 fuel delivery drivers working for Hoyer Gas and Petroleum Logistics Limited based in Grangemouth, Scotland voted to walk out after rejecting a 7 percent pay offer.

The Unite union members voted by a 100 percent majority on a 97 percent turnout. They have not had a pay rise since 2021. Unite has not yet announced any strike date and instead called on Hoyer to improve its offer. Hoyer's revenue for 2022 was £169.2 million, up over 20 percent the previous year and its profits were £4.1 million.

The drivers are responsible for delivering fuel supplies to garage forecourts and airports across Scotland.

Teachers' strike in Kurdistan, Iraq continues over unpaid wages

Around 70,000 Iraqi teachers in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)-controlled area have been on strike since the new academic year began in September 2023, affecting 3,000 schools.

The Kurdish Teachers' Union members are striking over non-payment of wages for several months and the fact that no promotions have taken place since 2016, as well as other issues.

Education authorities in the Sulaymaniyah governorate of the KRG threatened to sack any teacher who does not return to work within 30 days of the announcement on January 9.

Ongoing protests by Iranian oil workers

On Sunday, oil and gas workers in the Gachsaran oil field held a protest outside the complex's management office. Their demands included the removal of contract agencies and for improved safety and welfare conditions.

On Saturday, contract workers at several South Pars oil refineries held protests with the same demands, announcing they would hold weekly protests to push their demands.

Last year's strikes and protests by workers and pensioners against plummeting living standards and authoritarian rule are continuing. Living standards have been hard hit, partly due to US sanctions, which are a precursor to war against Iran.

Strike by Lebanese private school teachers averted after employers agree to boost pension contributions

A strike by teachers in Lebanese private schools over pensions, due to begin Tuesday, has been called off.

Teachers wanted the employers' contributions to their pension funds to be increased sevenfold. This was to make up some of the value of their

pensions, eroded by the ongoing economic crisis which has seen the collapse of the Lebanese pound.

Meetings last week between the Private School Teachers Union and the employers' body, the Union of Private Educational Institutions, under the auspices of the Education Ministry, failed to reach agreement. A further meeting Monday, however, came up with an agreement for the employers to increase their pension contribution sixfold. This was accepted by the union.

The value of the pensions of around 4,000 already retired private teachers has been severely eroded since 2019, leaving them practically worthless.

Residents near Durban, South Africa in ongoing protests against water shortages

Large numbers of residents from the area of Verulam, north of Durban, South Africa took to the streets to begin ongoing protests against water shortages on Monday. The intersection of Parkgate and Ottawa was blocked with tyres and debris and branches were burned.

Workers want to know when they will have water. They have had no constant water supply for two years, following floods in April 2022. They also state that around 55 percent of the water supply is lost due to leaks, power outages and poor infrastructure.

Roshan Lil-Ruthan, spokesperson of the Verulam Water Crisis Committee said, "I warned previously that every excuse will be thrown out there by EWS [eThekweni Water and Sanitation Unit], to justify that they dismally failed us. They failed to maintain the infrastructure and now we must suffer. The Verulam Water Crisis Committee has called for several interventions and meetings with various Heads of Government, and they refuse to acknowledge the flood devastation and suffering of our people."

Health workers strike over dangerous conditions in pathology laboratory in South Africa

South African health workers in Rustenburg Forensic Pathology Unit stopped work on January 15 to protest the appalling conditions they are forced to work under.

The Health and Other Service Personnel Trade Union of South Africa (HOSPERSA) members say their health is at risk due to the company's non-compliance with occupational health and safety. This includes performing autopsies without personal protective equipment, and fridges breaking down, so bodies start to decompose.

HOSPERSA representative Ramalau Rammutla told ENCA News things began to deteriorate from 2021, when the lab was sold by the government to private services.

University workers in Ondo State and Abia State, Nigeria protest against low pay

University workers at the Olusegun Agagu University of Science and Technology, in Ondo State, Nigeria, held a protest Tuesday during working hours. The protest disrupted both academic activities and local

businesses.

The Senior Staff Association of Nigeria Universities, Non-Academic Staff Unions and Allied Educational Institutions, and the National Association of Academic Technologists members are angry about the non-implementation of the minimum wage and lack of a pay rise.

The chairman of the Joint Action Congress, the umbrella body of unions, Temidayo Temola, complained about the injustice of the workers getting below the minimum wage, ignoring the role the unions played in bringing their members to the present impasse.

Both academic and non-academic staff at Abia State University in Uturu began strike action on January 22, to demand their outstanding 11 months of salary arrears.

Doctors in Enugu State, Nigeria set to strike

Doctors in Enugu State, Nigeria expect to begin an indefinite strike on 31 January, as the 14-day ultimatum set by the Association of Resident Doctors (ARD) to the Enugu State government approaches its end without their demands having been met.

The doctors accuse the government of renegeing on the promise made over 180 days ago to permanently employ resident doctors now on short-term contracts. Salaries have not been increased, and house officers were excluded from the hardship payment of N25,000 given by the state government.

An ARD communiqué said, “We are still back to where we were in 2023 or even worse as plans are on the way to increase the rents of those living in the hospital quarters (one-bedroom apartment) by about 375 per cent from N8,000 to N30,000 monthly.”

On security and safety, ARD said security operatives posted at the hospital gates had been removed, and assaults on doctors increased as a result.



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