

Hundreds of thousands join strikes in Finland against austerity and anti-strike laws; general strike in Kurdistan cities in Iran to protest the execution of Kurdish political prisoners; Ghanaian university administrators in nationwide strike over pay and conditions

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.

Widespread strikes in Finland against austerity and anti-strike laws

Hundreds of thousands of workers in Finland are taking part in strikes this week against the austerity programme and anti-strike laws being introduced by the right-wing coalition government.

Daycare workers in Helsinki stopped work on Wednesday and on Thursday were joined by around 300,000 workers in ports, railways, buses, schools, retail, hospitality, manufacturing, oil refining and mining, the postal service and airports. Around 13,000 workers protested in Helsinki on Thursday.

Workers at three factories of the ammunition manufacturer Nammo Lapua also joined the strikes. The company CEO said, “This would also affect ammunition deliveries to Ukraine,” although the Ministry of Defence claimed otherwise.

The government, led by the right-wing Coalition Party and far-right Finns Party, plans to cut unemployment payments, including removing the increased rate for unemployed parents, introduce unpaid sick leave, reduce housing benefit, and prevent pay rises from being larger than in industries that export goods and services, according to *YLE*.

It also plans to restrict political strikes to only 24 hours, with a 200 euro fine for individual workers and 150,000 euros for unions if a court finds a strike to be “illegal.” The Confederation of Business and Industry called for the government to go further and restrict political strikes to “a few hours at most.”

The unions have called strikes and protests against the plans since September, and these are the largest to date. However, they sought to come to some “compromise,” not to defeat the government’s plans to impose the cost of an economic crisis and escalating world war on the working class.

In their most recent joint press release, the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions and the Finnish Confederation of Professionals (STTK) said they “[do] not deny the need to adjust the economy, but the government’s means are completely wrong,” and called for “adjustments” to be worked out in tripartite collaboration between unions, the

government and employers. The chairman of the STTK relayed his message to the government to *YLE*: “You should never take a clean sweep, even a win on points can be enough.”

National teachers’ strike in France

Teachers across France joined a national strike on Thursday over pay, a recruitment crisis, more support for disabled students and rejecting planned “reforms” which include streaming children in mathematics and French.

Many teachers were mobilised. The SNES-FPU union said 47 percent of teachers in high schools and colleges joined the strike, and 40 percent in primary schools. The Ministry of Education said just over 20 percent of the around 700,000 teachers in the public sector stopped work.

Protests were held across the country, including a large demonstration in Paris. Local media reported that 2,000-3,000 teachers, students and parents joined a protest in Rennes, 2,300 in Nantes, 1,600 in Marseilles, and similar figures in other large cities.

Many teachers oppose the “knowledge shock” system of reforms put forward by new Prime Minister Gabriel Attal when he was Minister of Education in October, which one representative of the SNES-FSU told *Ouest France* will create “a two-tier school. On the one hand, we will group together weaker students, sometimes from less advantaged backgrounds, to whom we will close the doors to baccalaureate and higher education.”

Teachers were also outraged by the comments of new Minister of Education, Amélie Oudéa-Castéra, who told the media last week she had sent her children to a private school because of the “lots of hours not seriously replaced” (lack of supply cover for teacher absences) at their previous state school. Another of the four unions that called the strike also denounced a speech given by President Emmanuel Macron on education for its “priority given to symbolic subjects such as wearing a uniform or learning the Marseillaise.”

Estonian teachers’ union ends strike, accepts low wage offer

On Tuesday, the Estonian Education Workers' Union (EHL) called an end to the indefinite teachers' strike, accepting a pay offer far short of teachers' demands.

Around 18,000 teachers and other education workers stopped work on Monday last week, and although many returned to work at the end of the week, the EHL said some members intended to stay out much longer.

According to *ERR*, the government and EHL agreed to raise the minimum monthly salary to 1,820 euros, far short of EHL's initial demand of raising salaries to the national average of 1,950 euros. The government pledged to begin negotiations on implementing its promise to raise teachers' salaries to 120 percent of the national average by 2027.

However, the Minister of Education Kristina Kallas said, "Teachers' pay rises at the same pace as the national average salary," meaning the deal leaves the gap between teachers and the national average unchanged this year. EHL also agreed to a strike ban until the end of 2024.

The government insisted it would not increase public spending, so the 5.7 million euros for the rise will come out of other areas of spending, including by cutting all bonuses to employees of several ministries.

In an opinion piece for *ERR*, teacher Jaan Sudak wrote, "If you deduct taxes, the strike was fought for about 0.6 euros per working day. The wage loss for the days of work on strike was significantly higher. A mighty victory or a blow to dignity?"

He added, "I described the results of the strike to my students. They thought I was joking when I told them about the current salary increase...A joke started spreading on social media that there would soon be a strike by students who would also demand pocket money." Sudak also pointed out that the deal left unresolved many teachers' problems with workload, class sizes and an ageing workforce.

Tesla mechanics in Sweden continue strike for collective agreement with cross border solidarity action

Mechanics at Tesla workshops in Sweden continue a strike, begun in October, to demand a collective agreement from the American electric car manufacturer. The IF Metall union called the walkout, which escalated in December to include 500 workers.

Tesla does not manufacture cars in Sweden but imports them from abroad and operates a network of maintenance workshops. Dock and transport workers in Sweden, as well as neighbouring Denmark, Norway and Finland have all refused to handle Tesla cargo in support of the striking mechanics. There have also been sympathy strikes by auto parts workers, cleaners, electricians and postal workers in Sweden.

Dagens Nyheter reported this week that Tesla has taken extensive strike-breaking measures, employing scabs at its workshops as well as attempting to get around the sympathy strikes. The Transport union said Tesla is importing cars by lorry from Germany, and it has its numberplates delivered directly to customers since postal workers refused to deliver them to Tesla facilities.

While the participation of workers in several countries shows determination to oppose the notoriously poor working conditions at Tesla, the unions repeatedly made overtures for Tesla to realise the services they can render in the mass job cuts and attacks on workers' living standards accompanying the transition to electric vehicles.

Under the "Swedish model" of class relations, 90 percent of workers are covered by a collective agreement negotiated by the unions, and strikes are very rare. According to figures reported by the *Dagens Nyheter*, between 2010-22 the number of working days lost to strikes and lockouts in Sweden was 5.7 times fewer than in neighbouring Norway, despite Sweden having almost double Norway's population.

Slovenian doctors escalate strike over pay

Doctors in Slovenia have been on strike since January 15, and they began to work-to-rule on January 22, strictly following the requirement to spend one hour of the day preparing and a 30-minute lunch break.

On Wednesday, the Fides union also announced its members would refuse to work more than 48 hours per week or more than 16 hours continuously, which it said would have a major impact "[c]onsidering the large shortage of doctors in Slovenia".

The minimum service required during the strike meant that while many non-urgent procedures were cancelled, emergency cases and many other services have still been provided.

Fides is calling for a pay rise for senior doctors to match that given to junior doctors last year and other improvements to the pay system, which "will enable the retention and attraction of staff in the public health system."

Hungarian bus drivers hold national two-day strike

Drivers at the Hungarian state-owned bus company Volánbusz joined a two-day national strike on Sunday and Monday, as part of a pay dispute between Volánbusz and the Solidarity Bus Transport Union (SZAKSZ).

The eight other unions representing Volánbusz workers accepted a three-year pay offer of 25 percent, but SZAKSZ did not sign up to this.

SZAKSZ said 75-80 percent of workers joined the recent strikes, while according to Volánbusz 56 percent of drivers rostered for Monday stopped work, *24.hu* reported. This was the second two-day strike, following a similar stoppage in December.

According to *EconomX*, shortly after the strike, SZAKSZ accepted a deal increasing pay by 28.4 percent over three years, or the equivalent of 8.7 percent per year. Although the inflation rate recently fell to 5.5 percent, it averaged 17.4 percent over the last 12 months.

Workers oppose job cuts at Electrolux home appliances plant in Italy

On Monday, workers at the Electrolux factory in the northern Italian town of Porcia held a partial strike in each shift, to oppose plans to cut 170 jobs.

According to *ANSA*, the strike was for three hours per shift in some parts of the plant, and five hours in others. The workers whose jobs are at risk are currently on "solidarity contract," allowing companies who have signed a collective agreement with unions to impose shorter hours and lower wages, supposedly to avoid layoffs.

Electrolux is the world's second-largest manufacturer of home appliances, headquartered in Stockholm. According to *Reuters*, Electrolux made a loss of 3.2 billion Swedish krona in the last quarter of 2023, mostly in spending around 2-2.5 billion krona on a global restructuring programme.

Migrant workers fired after pay strike in Shakhty, Russia

On January 15, around 60 workers at the Khimpek plant, which produces bags for transporting goods, in the Russian city of Shakhty in the Rostov Oblast region, walked out to demand a pay rise.

According to the *Caucasian Knot*, the strikers, mainly migrant workers from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, say they were promised a 20 percent pay rise, but did not see it in their wages on January 14. The news site reported that 63 workers at the plant were fired and told to leave the factory's dormitory. The company's director accused them of being an "aggressive group of saboteurs."

Some of the fired weavers were reportedly rehired, others were employed at a warehouse elsewhere in Rostov Oblast, while some left the region, although contradictory figures for how many ultimately lost their jobs were given in different publications.

Train drivers in England hold further strikes in ongoing dispute over pay

Train drivers working for train operating companies (TOCs) across England began a series of rolling 24-hour strikes from Tuesday until February 5.

The Aslef union members have been in dispute for 18 months, seeking a pay rise after not being offered one for the last five years. To date, they have held 14 days of stoppages. The drivers will also refuse to work overtime during the period of rolling strikes. The overtime ban is likely to have a severe impact, as the TOCs rely heavily on overtime to maintain a regular service. Thousands of train journeys were expected to be cancelled each day.

The TOCs chose not to implement newly enacted legislation that would have imposed a 40 percent minimum service level.

The programme of stoppages reported by Aslef includes on January 30, Southeastern, GTR Southern/Gatwick Express, GTR Great Northern Thameslink, SWR Island Line, South Western Railway Depot Drivers, South Western Railway mainline drivers; on January 31, Northern Trains, Transpennine Trains; on February 2 Greater Anglia, C2C, LNER; on February 3, West Midlands Trains, Avanti West Coast, East Midlands Railway; and on February 5, Great Western Railway, CrossCountry, Chiltern.

The rail unions, including Aslef and the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT), have opposed unifying the struggle of all rail workers over pay, conditions and job losses, dividing and selling out a movement of tens of thousands across the TOCs, Network Rail and London Underground. London.

London overground rail staff to walk out over pay

Around 300 London Overground rail staff will hold 48-hour strikes on February 19 and March 4 after rejecting a below-inflation pay offer.

The RMT union members work in security, control, station and revenue for the London Overground contract which is held by Arriva Rail London. They will also take part in industrial action short of striking.

Pay strike by public transport workers in Northern Ireland

Around 2,500 workers employed by the public transport body Translink in Northern Ireland walked out Thursday over pay. Translink is responsible for train and bus services in the province.

The Unite, GMB and SIPTU members previously walked out in December and January. They voted by majorities of over 90 percent to strike, after Translink announced it would not be offering a pay rise this year and refused to set a date for negotiations.

Translink said it could not offer a pay rise because of budget issues. 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 (DUP) pulled its support over Brexit arrangements for the export of goods into the province from the rest of the UK. The DUP this week agreed to go back into government and the assembly will resume but the Translink strike went ahead. The British government is to make around £3 billion available once the assembly is back up and running, with around £0.6 billion earmarked for public sector pay rises.

Hospital workers at Barts hospital group, London walk out over non-payment of COVID bonus

Workers including porters, cleaners and catering staff working for the St Barts NHS trust, which comprises several hospitals in east London, began a 12-day stoppage Monday.

The Unite union members, who have taken previous action, demand they are paid the £1,650 bonus other health workers receive who worked throughout the pandemic. They are also protesting staff shortages.

A four-day strike scheduled this week by Unite union members working for St Barts in pharmacy, A&E and pathology was suspended after negotiations produced some progress.

Further strike by UK pension regulator workers over pay

Around 300 workers employed by The Pensions Regulator (TPR), the UK pension regulatory body, based in Brighton, were on strike Tuesday to Thursday this week.

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members notched up over 50 days of stoppages 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.

Workers at fuels systems company in Gillingham, UK walk out over attack on conditions

Around 60 UK workers at Gillingham based Phinia held a 48-hour strike Monday opposing the company's plans to abolish their paid lunch break.

The Unite union members will hold further 48-hour stoppages throughout February. Phinia threatened workers with fire and rehire if they do not accept the attack on conditions. US-based Phinia produces fuel systems for the auto industry. Its last reported revenue figures were

around \$800 million.

Banknote printers at Bolton, UK site strike over pay offer

Around 70 UK workers at the De La Rue printing plant in Westhoughton near Bolton held a 24-hour stoppage on January 23.

The Unite union members walked out after rejecting a 2.5 percent pay offer following a decade of below par settlements. They also imposed an overtime ban. The company produces polymer bank notes.

UK driving examiners to walk out over workloads

Around 2,000 driving examiners at 270 test centres across England, Scotland and Wales are to begin four days of stoppages on February 8.

The PCS union members are protesting workload pressures arising from Secretary of State for Transport Mark Harper's plans for the examiners to carry out a further 150,000 tests before the end of March. The examiners want increased resources, including additional examiners, to cope with the volume of tests.

Workers at care home in Salford, England protest non-payment of wages

Care assistants and nurses protested outside Laburnum Court care home in Salford, England on January 30.

According to the Unison union, some workers were paid 10 percent of their latest salaries, while others were paid late. The home is due to close due to "inability to maintain financial stability" and residents moved to other establishments.

UK care of the elderly was privatised and became a profit stream in the 1980s, continuing under Labour as well as Conservative governments.

Council building workers in Sandwell, UK to strike over broken promise of pay supplement

Around 100 UK workers employed as construction workers, plumbers and decorators by Sandwell Council in the west Midlands are to strike on February 5, 9, 12, 15, 19, 23 and 26 and on March 1, 4, 8, 11, 15, 18 and 22.

The Unite union members are angry that the council reneged on a previous promise to pay them a market supplement of £2,900.

Unions suspend proposed strike at London-based English National Opera over redundancy threats

The actors' union Equity and the Musicians Union suspended a strike by members of the English National Opera (ENO) chorus based in the UK

capital who were due to walk out Friday.

The members of both unions had voted to strike in response to ENO's proposals to cut jobs and attack pay and conditions. The suspension follows talks between ENO and both unions, who said they had reached an interim agreement and expected to soon reach full resolution. The strike mandates are live until a final settlement is negotiated.

Conductor Martyn Brabbins, who resigned as ENO musical director in October, had voiced support for the stoppage. With the threat of the strike lifted the opening night of *The Handmaid's Tale* will now go ahead.

Continuing strikes and protests by Iranian workers

Last year's strikes and protests by workers and pensioners in Iran against plummeting living standards and authoritarian rule are continuing. Following several days of strikes in December, workers at the Iran National Steel Industrial Group (INSIG) facility in Ahvaz in the Khuzestan Governorate held a rally on Sunday.

It was the sixth consecutive day of protests by the steel workers protesting poor pay, bad working conditions and incompetent management.

The same day saw a protest rally by contract oil workers in Gachsaran, demanding increased pay, job security and an end to contract middlemen taking a cut of their wages. Workers at the Makran Desalination Project near the port of Chabahar in southwest Iran rallied the same day protesting unpaid wages.

Living standards have been hard hit, partly due to US sanctions, which are a precursor to war against Iran.

Ghanaian university administrators begin nationwide strike over pay and conditions

University administrators declared a nationwide strike on January 23. The strike is continuing despite a directive from the National Labour Commission to suspend it.

The Ghana Association of University Administrators (GAUA) members are angry about the chaotic implementation of an office-holding allowance, non-payment of contributions, and discrepancies in the salary structure.

The University Teachers Association of Ghana declared solidarity with the GAUA strikers, saying it was considering its own action, while urging the government to "avoid" joint action by both unions by addressing their demands.

University workers in Ondo State, Nigeria protest unpaid supplement

Workers at the Adekunle Ajasin University in Ondo State, Nigeria walked out on January 26 to protest an unpaid supplement.

The Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities, the Non-Academic Staff Union and National Association of Academic Technologists members have not been paid the supplement to cushion them from the impact of the removal of fuel subsidies. The payment began in November.

Joint Action Committee Chairman Tayo Ogungbeni said, “The federal government announced a palliative wage award of N35,000 for all workers in Nigeria, we are part of the general work force, why is Ondo State excluding us?”

The protest comes one week after a protest over similar issues in Olusegun Agagu University of Science and Technology, also in Ondo State.



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