

Teachers in France in further walkout against school “reforms”;
Lebanese public sector workers in national strike over pay erosion;
bus workers in Johannesburg, South Africa take wildcat action over
pay and shift changes

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.

French teachers hold second national strike against school “reforms”

Teachers in France joined a second one-day strike on Tuesday, following a national strike last week, which was joined by tens of thousands. Teachers are opposing low pay, poor working conditions and the “knowledge shock” education reforms devised by now-Prime Minister Gabriel Attal.

Teachers are particularly opposed to the proposed system of streaming—separating children into level groups in French and mathematics—the promotion of nationalism through singing the national anthem and the imposition of national service. Many were also angered by the comments of new Minister of Education Amélie Oudéa-Castéra, who said she sent her children to a private school because classes missed due to teacher absences in state schools were “not seriously replaced” by supply cover.

France Bleu reported a government spokesperson said Oudéa-Castéra “has the confidence” of both Attal and President Emmanuel Macron. The minister herself dismissed calls for her resignation and told *TF1*, “I apologised. I explained myself. Now let’s move on.”

As well as the strike, the teaching unions called for a “week of action” in education involving protests to pressure the government. On Wednesday, teachers in the city of Clermont-Ferrand protested, telling *La Montagne* about the issues their schools faced. A school in one of the most deprived areas announced it would close two classes, leaving 35 students in a single class. After a petition was signed by more than 1,200 parents, one of the classes was retained, but teachers are still opposing the closure of the other.

At another protest, teacher Marie Blot told *Ouest France*, “Because we refuse to allow a part of the youth to be sacrificed, because we want a different social project for the school than that which consists of giving billions to rearmament on the one hand and setbacks and attacks on public education on the other, we will continue to mobilise with the entire profession to push back the government.”

Dock workers in France strike against application of pension reforms

Workers at major ports in France held a 24-hour strike on Wednesday, accusing the government of renegeing on its promise to exempt them from the national pension reform, which workers opposed with mass strikes last year.

According to *Le Monde*, dock workers were able to take early retirement at age 58 due to the physical demands of their work, but this has now been raised to 60.

Hundreds of workers stopped work in Marseilles, while the major port of Le Havre was reportedly completely paralysed. There was also widespread participation in the strike in the ports of Lorient and Rouen.

The strike was called by the General Confederation of Labour (CGT). Last year, two-thirds of the population was in favour of a general strike to stop the Macron government’s pension cuts, but the CGT and French Democratic Confederation of Labour bureaucracies demobilised the mass protests and channelled opposition behind support for parliamentary manoeuvres or negotiation with the government. Now that the mass working class resistance to the reforms has been strangled, the government is able to renege on the false promises it made to powerful sectors like the dock workers, while the unions isolate workers by sector.

National rail strike in Spain after PSOE government blocks elimination of lower-tier workforce and reduction of hours

Rail workers in Spain will hold a national strike on Friday, called by the Workers’ Commissions union after the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Sumar government intervened to overturn deals agreed with state-owned rail operator Renfe and the Railway Infrastructure Administrator (ADIF).

According to *El País*, Renfe agreed with the unions to eliminate a lower tier of job categories it created in 2016, which employed new workers at 30 percent lower wages. Initially, workers remained at the lower tier for five years, but Renfe agreed in 2018 to move workers with two and a half years’ tenure up, shortened to two years in 2022. ADIF had agreed to reduce the working week to 35 hours. Both agreements were annulled by the government, citing the cost of backdating to March 2023.

Very high minimum service requirements were imposed, preventing many workers from exercising their right to strike. Between 50 and 75 percent of services on the Madrid commuter rail were required to run during peak hours. According to *Europa Press*, 65 percent of medium-distance trains, 73 percent of long-distance trains and 25 percent of cargo trains were also included in the minimum services.

Greek students and civil servants continue opposition to private universities

Students in Greece continue to oppose the introduction of private universities, joined by teachers and civil servants.

The Greek Constitution prevents private persons from opening universities and stipulates “Art and science, research and teaching shall be free and their development and promotion shall be an obligation of the State.” Prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis intends to introduce amendments to the constitution to allow private universities, which was opposed by teachers’ stoppages and student protests and occupations.

Students have been met with heavy-handed repression. *Kathimerini* reported that 400 protesting students were prevented by police from occupying the Democritus University of Thrace on Monday, and 18 were arrested.

The government issued a circular to universities saying they must “comply with the law” and organise exams, even though the occupations make in-person exams impossible, suggesting “modern remote assessment methods,” *ef.syn* reported. The Senate of the University of Patras responded that, “The mass examination of courses by online means does not guarantee the integrity of the examinations.” Mitsotakis, who worked in finance before entering politics and has no experience in education, arrogantly responded on social media “There are ways to make valid exams even in the chat gpt [sic] era as long as there is a will.”

The Civil Servants’ Confederation called a walkout on Thursday, and the Panhellenic Federation of Associations of the Teaching and Research Staff called strikes for the same day in opposition to the reform and the “punitive conditions” applied to force academics to organise online exams, according to *ef.syn*.

Strikes at airports across Italy over pay and conditions

On Friday, workers at airports across Italy plan several strikes, which will have a major impact.

The CUB “grassroots” union called a national strike in the ground handling sector in a dispute over the new collective agreement. According to *ANSA*, CUB is calling for pay increases in line with inflation, as well as other demands over pay and working conditions. It is also opposing “layoffs, precarious work, real cuts in wages, the worsening of regulations and variability in hourly schedules.”

Sky News reported that workers at security company Italpol will also hold a four-hour strike, as will pilots at Air Dolomiti. The National Civil Aviation Authority imposed many conditions on the strikes, including that flights departing between 7am and 10am and between 6pm and 9pm must be guaranteed, and planes arriving during the strike must be able to land.

Medical assistants strike against low pay in Germany

Medical assistants joined a one-day strike called in Germany on Thursday, demanding an increase in pay. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported that the Association of Medical Professionals (VMF) members protested in Berlin with signs such as, “We save lives, but can hardly finance our own lives.”

The VMF said around 2,000 medical assistants signed up to join rallies in cities across Germany. Medical assistants have a wide range of responsibilities, from registering patients and scheduling appointments to assisting with medical procedures, hygiene and billing, according to *DPA*.

Dutch court rejects ban on cargo pilots’ strike for equal pay but exempts lucrative flower trade flights

Around 150 cargo pilots at Royal Dutch Airlines (KLM) have been on strike since February 1, demanding equal pay with other KLM pilots.

The AVV union members were formerly employed by Martinair before it was merged with KLM and were all fired in 2014, *De Telegraaf* reported. They were rehired due to a court ruling in 2021 but are employed on separate contracts from other pilots.

KLM went to a court to attempt to have the strike banned, but on Monday the judge ruled against them. The ruling said KLM’s attitude towards the cargo pilots “demonstrates double standards,” particularly as ex-Martinair pilots had their pay frozen in recent years while other pilots’ pay rose by 22 percent.

However, the judge did rule that strikers could not disrupt flights carrying flowers until after Valentine’s Day. The flower trade is a lucrative part of the Dutch economy: according to the International Trade Centre, the Netherlands exported 4.76 billion USD worth of cut flowers in 2022, and the volume of trade peaks around Valentine’s Day.

Hospital workers at Barts hospital group, London continue walkout over non-payment of COVID bonus

Workers, including porters, cleaners and catering staff in so-called soft services, working for the St Barts NHS Trust, comprising several hospitals in east and central London, are due to end their current 12-day stoppage Friday.

The Unite union members, who have taken previous action, demand they are paid the £1,650 bonus received by other health workers who worked throughout the pandemic. The Trust is refusing to pay the bonus as some employed in soft services transferred back into the NHS from private providers during the pandemic.

They are also protesting staff shortages. The mandate for their action expires this month, and Unite is planning to rebalot for further action.

Strike by ancillary staff at Cambridge University, England over pay offer

Around 450 staff at Cambridge University England, working in the University Library, the engineering department, estate management, the Fitzwilliam Museum and information services, held a three-day stoppage from January 31 to February 2.

The Unite union members rejected a pay offer of between 5 and 6

percent. Some of the workers earn less than £23,000. They are demanding an above-inflation pay increase. Cambridge is one of the most expensive areas of the country to live.

Further strikes by mental health social workers at Barnet council, London over staff shortages

Mental health workers at Barnet's north and south teams in the UK capital began a five-day stoppage on Monday over chronic staff shortages.

The Unison members already held 22 days of stoppages, with a further walkout planned for March 4-8. Last week, they held a rally outside Hendon town hall to push their demands.

In June, the Unison union branch reported nine workers out of a full complement of 22 had left that year. There is also a lack of experienced workers in the teams.

Unison is calling for a 20 percent pay supplement to help staff retention. The council offered £1,000 a year, representing an average 2.5 percent increase. The council offered pay increases of between 7.5 percent and 25 percent to social workers in family services but only 2.5 percent to those in adult services, including mental health workers.

Low pay has led to a recruitment and retention problem. Waiting lists for those seeking mental health support have soared, with Unison reporting some wait up to 15 months to be seen.

Strike by beverage drinks workers in Coleford, England over pay

Around 200 UK workers employed by Suntory Beverage and Food in Coleford, Gloucestershire, began a week-long strike Monday.

Suntory produces well-known drinks and cordials, including Lucozade and Ribena. The Unite union members are protesting the company's renegeing on a pay deal. A two-year deal effective from April 1, 2022, included a provision to review the second year of the deal should inflation exceed 5 percent between January and June 2023.

Inflation was very high over that period, but the company's offer does not reflect it. According to the union, the company is offering 1.75 percent on top of a previously offered 3.5 percent, making 5.25 percent overall. Suntory is valued at over £1 billion.

The strike at the facility is the first since the 1970s.

Wildcat strikes by food delivery drivers in three UK cities over low pay

Thousands of delivery drivers working for Deliveroo, Just Eat and Uber Eats held wildcat stoppages in London, Brighton and Bath on the evening of February 2.

While remaining on line they refused to accept any orders for several hours, leading to a backlog of orders. The drivers are protesting low pay and poor working conditions. They are calling for an increase in the amount paid per mile as well as the base rate. The delivery drivers are classed as self-employed, with no recourse to collective bargaining.

A court case brought last year by the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain that Deliveroo delivery drivers be treated as employees was lost.

Junior doctors in Wales announce further round of stoppages over pay

Around 3,000 junior doctors in Wales are to hold further strikes over pay restoration.

The British Medical Association (BMA) members will begin a 72-hour stoppage on February 21, followed by a four-day stoppage on March 25.

They held a three-day stoppage January 15 in opposition to a 5 percent pay offer for 2023-4 by the Labour-run Welsh Assembly. The strike saw well-attended picket lines with widespread public support.

The pay award was tabled as a "first and final offer" in August last year, when the RPI rate of inflation stood at 9.1 percent. The BMA has undermined a joint fight by doctors in Wales, Scotland, Northern England over pay restoration.

Aviation support staff at East Midlands Airport, UK to walk out over pay offer

Around 180 workers employed by DHL Aviation at East Midlands Airport England are to walk out Friday until February 19 after rejecting a pay offer.

The Unite union members rejected a 9.8 percent offer, due in April 2023, when inflation was at 11.3 percent, so the offer is a real-terms cut. The workers employed in aircraft handling and overseeing the airport tower are paid as little as £10.96 an hour. They are aggrieved their pay offer is less than that made to their counterparts at Bristol and Gatwick airports. DHL profits for last year were £66 million.

National Museum Liverpool, UK workers vote to walk out over withheld cost of living payment

Workers at the National Museum Liverpool (NML) in England voted to strike for eight weeks by a 94 percent majority.

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 one of more than 200 employers to have withheld the payment.

The NML workers, based at seven sites across Liverpool, including the Museum of Liverpool and the International Slavery Museum, will stop work from February 17 until April 14. It will include the normally busy Easter holiday period.

Social work managers at Swindon, UK council to strike following "botched" pay and grading review

Nineteen social work managers at Swindon Council England are to walk out for two days a week for two months beginning February 27.

The GMB members who work as Assistant Team Managers and Independent Reviewing Officers are taking action following a "botched"

pay and grading review. They say the review has undermined their pay and status.

A recent Ofsted inspection classed the social work department as inadequate.

Workers at UK supermarket in Gosport to strike over “toxic” working environment

Around 100 UK workers at the Asda supermarket in Gosport, Hampshire, will begin a 48-hour stoppage on Friday.

The GMB members are in a drawn-out dispute and accuse management of bullying and creating an unsafe working environment. Previously scheduled strikes were put off to allow further negotiations.

Workers rejected the latest proposals from management and voted to go ahead with the strike. According to a *retail-week* online article of February 7, “It is not yet known what proposals Asda put forward during the crunch talks.”

Unions postpone pay strike by public transport workers in Northern Ireland as Assembly resumes

A strike of around 2,500 workers employed by the public transport body Translink in Northern Ireland due to take place February 15 has been postponed.

Translink is responsible for train and bus services in the province. The Unite, GMB and SIPTU members were involved in six stoppages since December, including one last week as they fight for a pay rise. They voted by majorities of over 90 percent to strike, after Translink announced it would not be offering a pay rise 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 last week agreed to go back into government and the assembly resumed.

The British government had promised 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. The unions suspended the February 15 action to allow for negotiations, but state if no agreement is reached on pay a proposed 72-hour stoppage by Translink workers due to begin February 27 will go ahead.

PCS union suspends strike of UK driving examiners over workload

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union has suspended a four-day strike of driving examiners due to begin Thursday.

Around 2,000 driving examiners at the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency at 270 test centres across England, Scotland and Wales oppose workload pressures from Secretary of State for Transport Mark Harper’s plans for 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.

Announcing suspension of the strike, the PCS stated, “Following the negotiations which concluded yesterday, we are pleased to report that we have reached an improved proposal, presented as a full package, which meets the 8 demands PCS members were balloted on. These include members’ safety, terms and conditions and the standards of safety that driving tests require.”

The PCS will shortly hold a consultative ballot on the management proposals.

Unite union calls off strike of UK car parts supplier workers in Hartlepool as workers accept new pay offer

The indefinite strike by around 180 UK workers at car parts supplier TMD Friction in Hartlepool, begun on January 22, has been called off after workers accepted a new pay offer.

The Unite members, many on as little as £12.88 an hour, rejected a 4 percent pay offer. TMD’s new offer of a 7.5 percent pay rise backdated to June 2023 and an additional 3.5 percent from this June was accepted and the stoppage ended.

TMD supplies brakes and brake parts to outlets across the UK.

The workers previously held a series of 24-hour stoppages in January, before beginning the indefinite stoppage on January 22.

Unite union calls off proposed strike of council building workers in Sandwell, UK, after employer agrees to pay supplement

Unite has called off 14 days of scheduled strikes by around 100 UK workers employed as construction workers, plumbers and decorators by Sandwell Council in the West Midlands.

The construction workers voted for the action after the council reneged on a previous promise to pay a market supplement. The proposed stoppages in February and March were due to begin this week.

The council subsequently agreed to offer to pay a market supplement of £2,703, which workers accepted.

Lebanese public employees in national strike over pay erosion

Public sector workers in Lebanon walked out January 30 to February 9 over falling living standards.

Around 12,000 Public Administration Employees Association members took part, with around 900 judicial assistants expected to join the stoppage on Thursday. The action by judicial assistants was expected to disrupt the work of the courts. Protests were expected in Tyre, Zahle and other parts of the country.

The immediate cause of the walkout was the recent Lebanese government budget, which does not address the ongoing erosion of the real value of their wages, hit by high inflation and the sharp devaluation of the Lebanese pound. According to their union, their salaries have lost 92 percent of their value since 2018.

Further protests by Iranian oil workers over pay and conditions

Saturday saw protests by oil contract workers employed in seven refineries of the South Pars Gas complex, Iran. The workers gathered outside some of the refineries despite threats of intimidation by management and security staff.

Demands include an increase in pay, elimination of contracting agencies and for drivers to be able to work 14 days on, 14 days off.

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, part of the war build-up against Iran.

South African bus workers in Johannesburg take wildcat action over pay and conditions

Workers at Johannesburg Metrobus, South Africa took wildcat strike action for two days from January 31 over unreliable payment of wages and shift selection. They said that when buses are hired for private trips they are not paid.

According to *timeslive*, another demand was reinstatement following dismissal of workers subject to unfounded accusations of stealing from the company.

Municipality workers' stoppage in Nkomazi, South Africa for overtime pay

Municipality workers in Nkomazi, Mpumalanga in South Africa walked out on January 31 to demand pay for overtime worked during the holidays.

The South African Municipal Workers' Union members marched to the municipal managers office to demand payment. They told *Citizen* this was promised for January but not paid. They say this is related to transferring jobs from one department to another.

University support staff strike in Cape Town, South Africa over pay

Professional, administrative and support staff at South Africa's University of Cape Town began a stoppage on Thursday for wage increases.

The University of Cape Town Employees Union is demanding a wage increase of 1.5 percent for 2023 and 7.5 percent for 2024, the immediate release of payments of the performance awards for the June 2022 to May 2023 cycle and establishment of a unified bargaining forum, among other things.

Nigerian construction workers begin three-day strike after government breaks pay promise

Nigerian construction workers in Kano State began a three-day strike on February 5 to demand implementation of the wage agreement between the Federal Government and the unions.

The government had promised a N35,000 wage increment for state-employed workers for six months to cushion the impact of petrol subsidy removal. The strikers are National Union of Civil Engineering, Construction, Furniture and Wood Workers (NUCECFWW) and the Construction and Civil Engineering Senior Staff Association members.

NUCECFWW General Secretary Ibrahim Walama said, "The Joint NEC of both Unions have directed all members of the union to proceed on a three-day warning strike, starting from Monday 5th February 2024, in the first instance, to press home our demand."

After years of union betrayals of previous strikes, how a token strike will "press home" workers' demands was not stated.

University workers in Benue State, Nigeria, begin indefinite strike over pay issues

Academic staff at Benue State University began an indefinite strike on February 3 over the same issues that led to a strike of May-June 2023—called off by the unions on the basis of empty promises that their demands would be met.

The Academic Staff Union of Universities stated the Benue State government increased its payments in line with an agreement made in January 2023, but that the University failed to "pay the staff their entitlements." The unresolved issues behind the strike include the payment of accrued arrears of promotions and annual increments from 2020 to today, as well as allowances and health insurance payments.

Strike and occupation at Burkina Faso gold mine

A previously unreported strike and occupation, which began January 21 at the second biggest mine in Burkina Faso, owned by multinational Endeavour, ended on February 1. It is unclear what sparked the dispute, according to media reports, but the action halted all operations at the mine with "significant financial impacts."

The strike was the subject of a court ruling declaring it illegal and threatening fines against those who did not accept this. The court's intervention was sought by Endeavour, which also has holdings in Senegal and Ivory Coast. The Burkina Faso mine produced almost a third of the company's 1.1 million ounces of gold last year.



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