

National strike in Finland against austerity and anti-strike laws; Iranian steel workers in Ahvaz in further strikes over pay and conditions; pay stoppage continues at Cape Town University, South Africa

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.

Three-day national strike against Finnish government's austerity programme and attacks on the right to strike

Between Tuesday and Thursday this week, workers across Finland joined the latest strikes against the right-wing coalition government's programme of austerity and attacks on the right to strike.

According to the *Helsinki Times*, over 130,000 workers were expected to take part, on buses and railways, in kindergartens, ports, warehouses, manufacturing and other sectors.

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 "illegal." The Confederation of Business and Industry estimated the strikes against the coalition's plans had an economic impact of almost one billion euros and called for political strikes to be restricted as soon as possible.

The unions have repeatedly signalled their demand is for "negotiations" over the government's plans, not their complete reversal. The chairman of the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions and the Finnish Confederation of Professionals said the government should be satisfied with a "win on points."

Large sections of the political establishment agree with this perspective and would prefer to rely on the trade unions to police the working class and prevent mass political strikes rather than provoking workers with unpopular anti-strike laws. The Social Democratic Party, which led the previous (2019-23) coalition government, plans to call a vote of no confidence in the government if it does not begin "serious" negotiations with the unions, *YLE* reported.

Swedish IF Metall union partially lifts blockade against Tesla repairs

Sweden's IF Metall union announced this week it would lift a ban on its members repairing Tesla cars in third-party workshops. The blockade against Tesla was imposed to support the ongoing strike by mechanics at Tesla workshops begun in October involving around 500 workers, who demand a collective agreement.

IF Metall said between next week and the end of April, it would allow its members at workshops not owned by Tesla to repair Tesla cars that are not roadworthy and estimated this would be between 100 and 200 vehicles in total. The union denies this is a concession, saying it "should be interpreted as a signal that we are prepared to continue for a long time."

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.

Slovenian doctors and dentists on fifth week of indefinite strike over pay

Doctors and dentists in Slovenia are now in the fifth week of an indefinite strike begun January 15. The minimum service required by law means many doctors remain at work to cover emergency cases, but a substantial number are refusing to work overtime from March.

According to *The Slovenia Times*, more than 6,900 appointments were cancelled or postponed during the strike.

The Fides union is calling for the government to honour promises it made in late 2022 for a separate pay rise for doctors and dentists. The prime minister insisted pay would only be looked at in ongoing talks for the entire public sector and refused to negotiate separately with Fides. *The Slovenia Times* summarised his reason for refusing as "lest it should open the floodgates for similar demands [for a pay rise] from other groups."

Strikes and protests continue against private universities in Greece

Teachers, lecturers and students in Greece continue strikes and protests in opposition to the right-wing New Democracy government's plan to introduce private universities.

More than 15,000 protested in Athens last week, and unions representing secondary school teachers and civil servants called work stoppages during the protest, with more rallies taking place on Monday and Thursday this week, *Kathimerini* reported.

The Association of Faculty Members of Panteion University also called a three-day strike for this week, opposing both private universities and the government's imposition of online exams. Many in-person exams were moved online due to student occupations against the private university plans, with the government dismissing all concerns about integrity and practicality raised by university staff.

Article 16 of the Greek Constitution prevents private persons from opening universities and begins, "Art and science, research and teaching shall be free and their development and promotion shall be an obligation of the State." According to *Kathimerini*, the government plans to allow private universities to charge fees to their students, fundamentally rewriting the constitution.

Greek teachers continue to boycott school assessment system, and attempted victimisation

Teachers in Greece continue to boycott a new school assessment system, which they are concerned will lead to a two-tier system of education. *Alfavita* reported data from the First Association of Athens Primary Education Teachers, showing 70 percent of teachers refused to comply with the assessments.

Opponents of the assessment system compared it with the British Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education), which ranks schools based on a cursory assessment and has been used to convert many schools to private academies. Teachers in Britain widely called for the abolition of the system following the suicide of headteacher Ruth Perry in 2023, after Ofsted rated her school "inadequate" on spurious grounds. An inquest ruled that Perry's suicide was "contributed to by an Ofsted inspection carried out in November 2022," which the coroner described as "rude and intimidating."

Ef.syn reported on Sunday that the deputy head of a primary school in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace was fired for having taken part in the boycotts. The Xanthi PE Teachers' Association said this was illegal retaliation for taking part in industrial action. Following a protest, the deputy head was reportedly reinstated.

Strikes and protests by French teachers and parents against class closures and education "reform"

On Thursday, teachers in the French department of Loire-Atlantique held a one-day strike during the "school map" exercise, in which student numbers are supposed to be assessed and classes added or taken away accordingly.

However, *France Bleu* reported that in Loire-Atlantique the projections are that there will only be 48 new classes, while 97 classes will be closed.

According to *Ouest France*, around 150 teachers joined a protest in the

departmental capital, Nantes, on Thursday, and a similar number of heads and other members of school management protested on Tuesday. They also denounced the "knowledge shock" education reforms put forward by current prime minister Gabriel Attal while he was education minister, which involved separating children into streams by ability.

One head teacher and official of the National Union of National Education Management Staff told the newspaper, "This is school segregation. Especially since all the research shows it. The way to help students progress is to form mixed groups." More than 47,000 people have signed a petition from the education unions opposing the "knowledge shock."

Net losses of education resources were announced in many other departments. In nearby Maine-et-Loire, *Ouest France* reported that parents protested the closure of 55 classes while only 24 new classes opened. The paper also reported that parents in the department of Côtes-d'Armor protested on Monday against the closure of one of only three bilingual French-Breton classes in their school.

Train conductors in France organise large-scale strike outside of official trade unions

Conductors at the state-owned French National Railway Company (SNCF) plan a strike over the weekend and have filed a strike notice covering a period between Thursday evening and Monday morning.

The strike notice was filed by the Solidaires and General Confederation of Labour unions, but according to *Le Monde* it was filed on behalf of the National Collective of Commercial Train Conductors (CNA). The CNA asked the unions to file the paperwork as it was legally unable to do so but declares itself "apolitical and non-unionised." The unions estimate that at least 70 percent of conductors will join the strikes.

The CNA grew out of a popular Facebook group of around 3,800 conductors, which organised strikes in December 2022. Conductors are calling for a pay increase and for the strain of their job to be taken into account, with specific arrangements for workers close to retirement. They also say agreements made after the strike in 2022 have not been kept. In particular, they say there are not always two conductors on high-speed services, which can have more than 500 passengers per train.

The government responded to the strike with a series of denunciations of train conductors. Echoing a common right-wing attack on rail workers as "privileged," the new Minister of Transport Patrice Vergriete said he was "surprised," claiming conductors were offered "bonuses and salary increases which would be the envy of many of our fellow citizens," *Le Figaro* reported.

Prime Minister Gabriel Attal, who epitomises the Macron government's adoption of the far-right programme of the National Rally, said on Wednesday, "The French know that the strike is a right" but "also that working is a duty." This implicit threat was made explicit by Éric Ciotti, leader of the Republicans party, the largest party in the Senate (the upper of the two houses in the French legislature), who told *TF1*, "We must stop taking the French hostage." He vowed to "very clearly establish legislative texts to regulate" the right to strike.

Unions suspend vehicle inspectors' strike in Asturias, Spain, for vote on offer including speed-up

The union in the strike committee representing vehicle inspectors in

Asturias, Spain, who have been holding strikes since November over working hours and understaffing, suspended stoppages planned for Wednesday and Friday this week.

On Friday, workers will vote on an offer from ITVASA, the municipally owned company responsible for carrying out legally mandated inspections of vehicles for safety and emissions, and the Principality of Asturias.

Workers were demanding a reduction of weekly working hours from 37.5 to 35. A government spokesman told *Europa Press* vaguely that “there has been an approaching of positions” over this demand. According to *La Nueva España*, the agreement was for only half of workers’ demands on pay, and the reduction in hours came with an increase in workload, with workers expected to carry out an extra inspection every day.

A deputy from the pseudo-left Podemos attempted to provide an alibi for the union’s suspension of the strike. Acknowledging the offer was “very far from their maximum [demands],” he said the Principality of Asturias, led by the Socialist Party (PSOE), which Podemos supports nationally, “is blackmailing the workers.” He did not explain why the unions made themselves complicit in the blackmail by suspending the strike before any vote on the offer.

Vehicle inspectors at the equivalent company in the province of Alicante also began a campaign of strikes, two days every week from this week. According to *Europa Press*, they are calling for pay equality, as they earn between 30 and 40 percent less than their colleagues in Castellón and Valencia, who work for the same publicly owned company. A minimum service requirement was imposed, preventing 40 percent of workers from joining the strike.

UK Amazon staff in Coventry in three-day stoppage over pay and union recognition

Around 1,000 out of a total workforce of 2,700 at Amazon’s warehouse in Coventry began a three-day strike on Tuesday.

The GMB members, who have already taken over 30 days of stoppages, are fighting for a minimum pay rate of £15 an hour and union recognition. They took part in a one-day strike on November 24 to fight for improved pay and working conditions as part of an international protest on “Black Friday,” one of the most profitable days for retail firms.

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.

Around 100 workers at Amazon’s new flagship fulfilment centre in Birmingham, England also walked out over pay on January 25.

UK fast food delivery drivers’ Valentine Day strike over pay and conditions

Tens of thousands of UK delivery drivers struck on Wednesday by refusing requests from fast food delivery apps Deliveroo and Uber Eats between 5 p.m. and 10 p.m. An increase in demand was expected for Valentine’s Day.

They are protesting poor wages and working conditions. Classed as self-employed, they are not entitled to sick pay and other benefits associated with direct employment. The strike call was organised using social media by Delivery Job UK, a grassroots group of couriers. Their demands

include raising the minimum fee for a job from £2 to £5, with an additional £2 to be paid for every mile travelled after the first one.

A *Guardian* article by a fast food courier explained, “Adjusted for inflation, our earnings have been going down for years. A recent report looked at pay in the sector and found the vast majority of platforms couldn’t provide evidence that workers’ gross pay was at least the minimum wage after costs. I try to do three orders an hour and average about £10 before costs. Sometimes I make less, more like £7. Other riders who are less experienced or don’t have accounts with all the apps that I do make even less.”

A strike of around 3,000 delivery drivers working for Deliveroo, Just Eat and Uber Eats took place in several UK cities, including Bath, Brighton, Glasgow and London, on February 2 over the same issue.

A court case brought last year by the Independent Workers’ Union of Great Britain (IWGB) that Deliveroo delivery drivers be treated as employees was lost. IWGB supported Wednesday’s planned action.

Fast food delivery drivers in the US and in Dublin also walked out on Valentine’s Day over pay and conditions.

Striking aviation support staff at East Midlands Airport, UK extend walkout over pay offer

Around 180 workers employed by DHL Aviation at East Midlands Airport England began a pay stoppage on February 9. They were originally due to stay out until February 19 but have now extended the strike for a further 14 days from that date.

The Unite union members rejected a 9.8 percent offer due in April 2023, when RPI inflation was 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.

Musicians in London orchestra walk out over non-payment of wages

Half the musicians in the London Chamber Orchestra (LCO) walked out of a rehearsal last week, protesting non-payment of wages for the past five months.

The musicians take other work, including outside the music sphere, just to exist. The inability to pay wages arose after Barclays bank froze LCO’s account with no notice. This has now been unfrozen. A planned concert for February 7 was able to go ahead, but only after a frantic search to find enough musicians.

The LCO, founded over 100 years ago, is around half the size of a regular orchestra. Its president is internationally renowned pianist Vladimir Ashkenazy.

Junior doctors in England announce further strike over pay

Junior doctors in England are to begin a five-day stoppage on Saturday, February 24.

It will be the tenth round of stoppages by the British Medical Association (BMA) members, whose last strike was a six-day walkout at

the beginning of January. Since then, the BMA junior doctors' committee has been involved in negotiations with the Conservative government health secretary, Victoria Atkins, but with no resolution.

Their original demand was for full restoration of pay lost since 2008. This would mean a 35 percent rise. The government increased its previously imposed 8.8 percent rise by a further 3 percent but spread across grades.

Previous strikes by junior doctors took place while other health staff, including nurses and ambulance workers, were in dispute. The unions representing these health workers pushed through below-inflation deals, leaving the junior doctors' fight isolated.

The BMA junior doctor members in England are currently balloting to renew their mandate for strike action, which runs out this month. The ballot closes March 20.

Junior doctors belonging to the Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association will strike on the same dates. Around 3,000 junior doctors in Wales, also BMA members, will begin a 72-hour stoppage on February 21, followed by a four-day stoppage on March 25, in their pay dispute with the Welsh Labour government.

Further strikes announced by hospital workers at Barts hospital group, London 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 five hospitals in east and central London, are to hold a further stoppage February 19-21.

The Unite union members, who have taken previous action including a 12-day stoppage ending February 9, demand they be 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.

Ancillary hospital workers at North Devon District Hospital, UK to walk out over non-payment of lump sum

Ancillary staff, including porters at North Devon District Hospital, England, are to walk out on Friday and February 19.

The Unison union members working for contractor Sodexo were not paid a one-off payment worth at least £1,655 paid to directly employed NHS staff as part of an agreed pay rise for 2022-23. Unison say Sodexo has a long-standing agreement to treat its staff in line with pay and conditions for directly employed NHS staff.

Train drivers at two train operating companies in England to strike over non-compliance with agreements

Train drivers at LNER and Northern train operating companies (TOCs) in England are to strike on March 1 and conduct an overtime ban on February 29 and March 2.

The action by ASLEF members is over the two companies' failure to adhere to existing agreements. In the case of LNER, the agreements are over rostering and diagramming agreements.

The dispute is separate from the ongoing pay dispute, in which drivers have had no pay increase since 2019. ASLEF on Wednesday announced the results of rebalotting at five TOCs: Chiltern Railways, 2C2, East Midlands Railway, Northern Trains and TransPennine Trains. At each company, members voted by 89 percent or more to continue the action over pay.

Further strike by UK pension regulator workers over pay announced

Around 300 workers employed by The Pensions Regulator (TPR), the UK pension regulatory body based in Brighton, have announced further stoppages.

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members have 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.

The new dates to walk out are February 28-29, and March 1, 4-6, 13-15, and 18-20.

White collar staff at UK car manufacturer vote to strike after rejecting pay offer

Around 3,000 salaried and managerial staff working for car manufacturer Ford at its UK sites, including Dagenham and Halewood, have rejected an unconsolidated 5 percent pay offer.

The Unite union members voted by 90 percent to reject the offer. Ford also wants to amend the current absence procedure. Ford management grades recently achieved union recognition. Unite called on Ford to attend talks brokered by government mediation service Acas or face strike action.

Ongoing strikes by Iranian steel workers in Ahvaz over pay and conditions

On Monday, workers at the National Steel Industrial Group in Ahvaz in southwest Iran held a protest that stopped some of the production lines. They also gathered outside the office of the Vice President of Social Affairs to voice their demands.

Demands include the implementation of a proposed job classification plan and pay parity with other nearby steel production plants. The protests followed a strike by the steel workers on Saturday. Saturday's stoppage was part of an ongoing series of strikes by the Ahvaz steel workers in their protracted dispute.

Saturday also saw a protest by steel workers at the Khazar Iron and Steel facility in Gilan in northwest Iran. They were protesting the closure of the factory and wage delays.

Iran, with inflation around 35 percent, has been hard hit by US sanctions and is in the crosshairs of US/NATO's widening war in the Middle East and Ukraine against Russia.

Lebanese court officers extend their strike over pay

Court officers in Lebanon are continuing their pay strike begun February 1.

The court officers' committee stated at the weekend, "Rather than being enough for the whole month, our salaries don't even cover five days." The strike has led to the closure of all civil and criminal courts, as well as tribunals and public prosecutor's offices.

Lebanese workers are seeing an ongoing erosion of the real value of their wages, as they are hit by inflation of nearly 200 percent and the sharp devaluation of the Lebanese pound.

University of Cape Town, South Africa pay strike continues

Over 1,400 professional, administrative and support staff at the University of Cape Town, South Africa are continuing their strike action for wage increases begun February 8.

The University of Cape Town Employees Union members are 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 the establishment of a unified bargaining forum, among other things.

Negotiations with management broke down over the weekend. Around 150 workers marched through the University Campus to picket the University administration offices.

Hundreds march in Pretoria, South Africa in opposition to forced removal from mining areas

Hundreds of people from mining-affected communities marched to the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy in Pretoria, South Africa on February 8. They are being forcibly removed from land where they have lived for decades, some including ancestral graves. Some marchers told *GroundUp* they were battling with sinkholes because of mining activity.

Protesters' demands were read out, including the inclusion of mining-affected communities in decision-making processes, legislation that makes it binding for mining companies to seek free, informed and prior consent from communities, and an overhaul of the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act.

Patricia Rabanye from Khutsong, a township in Merafong, told *GroundUp*, "It feels as though they are waiting for someone to die before doing something. The premier of Gauteng came in 2021, and other officials have also come after that, singing the same song addressing the matter but nothing has changed."

Unemployed doctors march in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa for jobs

Over 80 unemployed doctors marched to the KwaZulu-Natal

Department of Health's offices in South Africa on Monday to demand the healthcare budget is increased to employ a further 700 qualified medical practitioners. They handed over their CVs and a signed register from 84 doctors.

Busiziwe Mancotywa, a grade one medical officer, told *GroundUp* she had been unemployed since completing her training at the end of last year: "You apply for some positions where you meet the minimum requirements but for whatever reason you are never contacted."

Dr Siya Shoji explained that the turnout did not represent the large number of unemployed doctors in KZN and its rural areas.

Nigerian tricycle drivers in Yobe call indefinite strike over state extortion

Tricycle drivers in Yobe, Nigeria began an indefinite strike on February 13 against what they denounced as "extortion" by state officials of the Yobe State Road Traffic Management Agency (YOROTA). The strike impacted commuters and businesses.

Chairman of Tricycle Riders Association, Damaturu Branch, Mohammed Inusa confirmed the strike was in progress. He explained, "This morning we heard that our members have commenced strike, but we were not consulted prior to this action and this contravened our rules and regulations."

The drivers are angry that YOROTA officials demand daily payments from them, as well as demanding they re-register with the agency, or pay a N7,000 fine if they do not.

Nigerian bakers in Kogi State set to strike over rising ingredient prices

Bakers in Kogi State, Nigeria are set to begin a strike from February 27 against the rising prices of their ingredients and fuel.

The Association of Bakers and Caterers of Nigeria (AMBCN) members are demanding the reduction of the prices they pay, financial help and exemption from all taxes. The AMBCN warned of a total stoppage if their demands were left unmet.

Ghanaian education workers continue strike over pay and conditions

Tertiary education workers in Ghana began strike action on February 1 over unpaid allowances for vehicle maintenance, overtime, extra duty and "Tier 2" (a 5 percent contributory pension scheme).

With the strike entering its second week, leaders of the Tertiary Education Workers Union of Ghana (TEWU-GH) met with the government on February 9, with the government agreeing to pay the Tier 2 and overtime allowances but refusing to budge on vehicle maintenance. The strike is continuing.



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