

Farmers' protests across Europe signify food security threatened by austerity and wars; Iraqi teachers in Kurdistan-controlled provinces continue stoppage; indefinite pay strike by public sector workers in Niger State, Nigeria

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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Farmers continue protests across Europe

A massive wave of protests by farmers across Europe is continuing, begun at the start of the year against austerity measures, the impact of the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine, and the devastation of farms by the global economic crisis.

Farmers' protests have occurred across Western and Eastern Europe and worldwide, including a protest of over 100,000 farmers and farm labourers in India.

Thousands of Greek farmers protested in Athens this week, after weeks of nationwide protests on roads and rural towns, *Kathimerini* reported. Farmers are demanding tax exemptions for fuel, natural disaster relief after severe flooding last year, and other measures to protect agriculture.

The right-wing New Democracy government in Greece offered electricity price reductions, but claims meeting all the farmers' demands would be unaffordable. One farmer at the Athens protest told *ef.syn*, "We don't care what [prime minister] Mitsotakis says, that they supposedly have no more money to give, we have to get back what they stole from us. We don't have to farm, the farmers don't have to feed the animals. The whole world is with us and this is something that has never happened before."

Polish farmers have also held nationwide protests, particularly concerned about the import of cheap produce from neighbouring Ukraine. A number of farmers had joined the months-long blockade of the Ukrainian border organised by Polish lorry drivers.

Tuesday's "Farmers' Strike" across Poland, involving tractor protests on major roads, followed a similar protest on February 9. There has also been an ongoing blockade at the Ukrainian border, leading to a queue of 3,300 lorries waiting to enter Ukraine, *Ukrinform* reported.

There has been a major campaign for legal repressions against the border blockade, including over a relatively minor incident where farmers spilled grain from lorries and trains from Ukraine. The Ukrainian ambassador to Poland said this "should not be tolerated in a civilised European country" and "we demand to find and bring the culprits to

justice."

In a drastic attack on free speech, another farmer was arrested by the police for flying the hammer and sickle flag of the Soviet Union and charged with "promoting a totalitarian system," which can carry a two-year prison sentence. The Polish foreign ministry also alleged the protests were "probably under the influence of Russian agents." The only "evidence" was a sign from the same farmer reading, "Putin, fix things with Ukraine, Brussels and our leaders."

Hundreds of farmers also protested in Madrid, Spain, this week. According to *Euronews*, Spanish farmers say supermarkets were being allowed to ignore a law mandating fair payment to food producers.

In the Czech Republic, farmers held a national protest on Thursday, travelling to demonstrate alongside Slovakian, Hungarian and Polish farmers. Farmers' protests have also taken place in Bulgaria, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany and France over recent weeks.

While food insecurity has been a common feature in former colonial countries, the fact that farmers are protesting in the wealthy nations is a measure of the stage reached in the crisis of world capitalism.

Construction and metal workers join national strike in Italy after five killed in horrific workplace accident

Workers throughout the construction and metal sectors in Italy joined a national strike on Wednesday, outraged at the death of five workers killed in a collapse at a construction site in Florence. The CGIL and UIL unions called for a strike in response, but only a two-hour stoppage, despite the deadly seriousness of the issue.

According to *ANSA*, more than 60 percent of construction workers in many regions joined the stoppage. There was clearly widespread outrage that fatal workplace accidents are extremely common in Italy, which had the second-highest number of workplace deaths in the EU in 2021, according to *Reuters*. Highlighting the ongoing massacre, a worker was killed at a Stellantis factory in Campania only the day after the strike.

Despite determination in the working class to end deadly working conditions, the solutions proposed by the unions are even more toothless than the sanctioned two-hour token strike. In an interview with *ADN*, the head of the UIL's construction branch called for the neo-fascist Meloni

government to set up a “permanent table” involving the “most representative unions” in overseeing safety regulations, and to “establish a special prosecutor’s office on accidents and deaths at work.”

While the union pointed to genuine issues with the widespread use of subcontracting and cost-cutting which lead to unsafe workplaces, they are responsible for preventing any major fightback against these conditions. After every avoidable death, they call a brief strike to blow off steam and to ensure workers are kept from any unified campaign across workplaces and sectors.

Strikes at privatised bus services across Germany

Drivers in private bus companies in several German states held strikes this week during collective bargaining negotiations.

According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, around 2,000 bus drivers in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate joined a warning strike called by the United Services Union (Verdi) on Wednesday.

The Association of Transport Employers’ Associations, which represents employers in the state, reportedly offered a pay rise of 2.5 percent, claiming that was all they could afford. Verdi is calling for monthly salaries to increase by 500 euros, and for a one-off payment of 3,000 euros to compensate for high inflation, now at 2.9 percent but averaging 5.5 percent over the past year. Rhineland-Palatinate transport workers are now voting on whether to call longer strikes in March.

In a similar dispute with a statewide employers’ association, Verdi called a one-day strike in Saxony-Anhalt on Monday, opposing a pay gap with other states of up to 500 euros. A five-day strike over pay is also planned in Schleswig-Holstein next week.

Teachers in Montenegro strike for three days over pay

Teachers in Montenegro began an indefinite strike on Monday to demand a pay rise in line with a collective agreement previously signed with the government.

The stoppage ended on Wednesday when the Education Union accepted an offer. Reportedly around 60 percent of the teachers nationwide took part.

The Education Union demanded a pay rise of 10 percent from the start of the year. In the deal it accepted, pay is increased by 10 percent from July, and a further 7 percent in September. *Novi Magazin* quoted the union’s president saying, “I can’t say that we came out as winners, but we are not losers either.”

The government made several attempts to ban the strike. It claimed that a 2006 law required a minimum service in schools, which effectively amounted to requiring teachers to go to work as normal. The union rejected this, saying it violated the right to strike and was superseded by a law from 2015. It did agree to some derogations from the strike, and kindergarten opening times were only shortened by one hour.

More than 30 teachers at a school in the town of Rožaje filed a criminal complaint after a policeman entered the school to take photos of strikers and verbally abused them, *Vijesti* reported.

Five Ukrainian sailors in Romanian port strike over unpaid wages

On Tuesday, the crew of a ship docked at the port of Constanța in Romania announced they were beginning a strike until they received all their unpaid wages, more than 29,000 euros. According to *Ziua de Constanța*, they were paid the next day, despite the shipowner’s claims that paying salaries on time is difficult in “these times.”

The brief strike demonstrates the highly international nature of the shipping industry. The ship was registered in Germany, all five crew members are Ukrainian nationals, and the ship was carrying wheat loaded at the Serbian port of Novi Sad along the Danube River.

Junior doctors in Wales walk out over pay

Around 3,000 junior doctors in Wales began a 72-hour stoppage on Wednesday in their pay dispute with the Welsh Labour government. The current walkout will be followed by a four-day stoppage beginning March 25.

The British Medical Association (BMA) members rejected the 5 percent pay offer from the Welsh government. They estimate their pay has eroded by around a third over the last 15 years. Picket lines were mounted at major hospitals.

Junior doctors in England are to begin a five-day stoppage on Saturday. It will be the tenth round of stoppages by BMA members, whose last strike was a six-day walkout at the beginning of January. Since then, the BMA junior doctors’ committee negotiations with the Conservative government health secretary, Victoria Atkins, have made no progress.

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

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

Workers at the National Museum Liverpool (NML) in England began an eight-week strike on Saturday.

The PCS union members voted by a 94 percent majority for the stoppage in protest at 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 are based at seven sites across Liverpool, including the Museum of Liverpool and the International Slavery Museum. The period of the strike will include the busy Easter holiday period.

Milk products workers in Newtownards, Northern Ireland begin week-long strike over pay

Workers at LE Pritchitt & Company Limited in Newtownards, Northern Ireland began a week-long strike Wednesday. The company, a wholly owned subsidiary of Lakeland Dairies, processes 600,000 litres of milk a day to produce long-life milk products.

Unite union members, who form the majority of the around 200 workers at the facility, voted unanimously to walk out after rejecting an 8.2 percent pay offer. There are five pay bands for production workers and those on the lowest pay band are paid only 10p above the current minimum wage

level of £10.42 an hour. Workers mounted picket lines on the first day of the stoppage.

Senior Unite representative, Gary Hamilton, told the *Newtownards Chronicle*, “The company has made record profits for six years running. They made €32.5m this year and they are the second largest milk processors on the island of Ireland. In my 31 years there has never been a strike in the company. There is a very loyal workforce in the place, and they’ve never went on strike before.”

Protest by staff and students at University of Kent, UK over job and course cuts

Around 200 UK staff and students held a protest and march around the campus at the University of Kent, rallying outside the Registry building.

They were protesting management’s plans to shut down nine courses, which would lead to 58 job losses across the Medway and Canterbury campuses.

Protest by school support and council staff outside Greenwich, UK council meeting over pay weighting allowance

School support staff and council workers staged a protest on Wednesday coinciding with a meeting of the Royal Borough of Greenwich council meeting.

Organised by the GMB union, it was to protest against the unfair allocation of London weighting payments. School support and council staff are paid the lower outer London weighting, while the teachers they work alongside are paid the higher inner London weighting.

Teachers’ strike in Iraqi KRG provinces continues

Striking teachers in the province of Sulaimani and the administrations of Garbiyan, Raparin, and Koya, Iraq are continuing their stoppage, as are non-contract teachers.

Striking teachers in the province of Halabja, however, agreed to return to work after a meeting Monday between teachers’ representatives and the KRG deputy prime minister Qubad Talabani.

The around 70,000 teachers in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)-controlled area walked out indefinitely in September, affecting 3,000 schools. The teachers began their strike over delays in being paid, and other issues including lack of promotions and some teachers not being offered contracts. The KRG blamed lack of funds since an agreement to export oil through pipelines in Turkey broke down in March.

Steel workers at Iranian company locked out following strike last week

Following strikes on February 13-14 by workers at the National Steel Industrial Group in Ahvaz in southwest Iran, some workers had their access cards blocked when trying to enter the site this week.

Their demands included implementation of a proposed job classification plan and pay parity with other nearby steel production plants. The Ahvaz steel workers have been involved in an ongoing series of strikes in their protracted dispute.

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.

State employees in Niger State, Nigeria, walk out on indefinite strike

An indefinite strike by state employees in Niger State began on February 21.

The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) is focused on getting promotions for those at the top of the civil service, including to the posts of Executive Director, Director General, Chairman, and permanent commissioner, and demanding the state government stop appointing Permanent Secretaries from outside the civil service.

The striking NLC members, however, are more concerned about keeping their pay in line with rising prices and putting an end to victimisation and bullying, which the NLC appears to regard as secondary issues. Inflation has hit 28 percent.

Nigerian nurses protest, prepare to strike over restrictive guidelines

Nigerian nurses held a protest on February 12 at the head office of the Midwifery Council of Nigeria in Abuja and Lagos. Nurses expect to begin a nationwide strike over new certificate verification guidelines, which they fear will restrict their ability to practice.

The National Association of Nigeria Nurses and Midwives (NANNM) members are also demanding increased hazard allowance, improvements in working conditions and better prospects for promotion.

The NANNM declared a 48-hour ultimatum on the new verification guidelines that ran out on February 14. A union statement said, “It is time for us to resist all forms of oppression against nurses and work towards our liberation as certified professionals.” No date for strike action has yet been announced.

Workers at South Africa’s University of Pretoria strike for wage increase

Workers at the University of Pretoria, South Africa continued their strike this week over wages. Gates at the Hatfield Campus were locked on Monday as staff protested outside the administration offices.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers’ Union (Nehawu) members walked out on February 15 to demand a 7 percent pay increase, a thirteenth cheque, a one-off bonus and five days leave.

The workers have been in dispute since a deadlock in talks at the end of November, after a final offer of 4 percent. This is below the consumer price index, which stood at 5.3 percent in January 2024.

Tshontsi, the Nehawu Gauteng secretary, told the *Pretoria Rekord*, “Workers feel insulted and undermined by the management of the institution, which continues to give themselves fat annual bonuses while preaching ‘austerity measures’ to poor workers.”

South African workers at Marine World in Durban strike over pay

Workers at uShaka Marine World in Durban, South Africa walked out on February 13 to demand a 15 percent salary increase.

Pickets outside the tourist spot protested with placards demanding “Equal Pay for Equal Work” and “We Demand a Living Wage of 15 percent.” *Eye Witness News* reported that the strike followed months of unsuccessful negotiations with the eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality.

Liberian mineworkers begin indefinite strike over unsafe conditions

More than 80 mineworkers at Bong Mines in Liberia began an indefinite strike on February 13 over unsafe work conditions. The workers gathered at the gate to the company premises, blocking entry and exit.

The China Union Workers Union also say the Chinese-owned company, China Union, is deducting income tax from their employees without paying the funds into the NASSCORP (government social security and welfare) authority.

A miner explained that as part of improving working conditions, the company had to resolve the lack of safe drinking water and personal protective equipment (PPE) for employees during working hours, as well as the lack of housing facilities,

Union chairman Edward S. Nimmo complained that the company and union agreed on provision of tuition fees of US\$100 for each child of an employee, medical benefits for employees and their dependents, and to provide PPE, but the company were not keeping their side of the agreement.

The Liberian government, China Union, and the union leaders agreed to meet with the company’s CEO to bring the strike to an end.



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