French public sector workers in national 24-hour pay strike; workers at Iran’s Aghajari Oil and Gas Exploitation Company join ongoing protests by workers across the sectors over pay and conditions; workers’ protests in Alexandria, Egypt against falling living standards

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

21 March 2024

The World Socialist Web Site *invites workers and other readers to* ***contribute*** *to this regular feature.*

National pay strike by French public service workers

Workers throughout the public sector joined a national strike in France on Tuesday, called by the major unions to demand increased pay for all categories of workers.

Teachers’ unions called for a three-day strike beginning Tuesday as part of the public sector strike and to demand withdrawal of the 700 million euro education budget cuts. This is part of cuts of 10 billion euros announced in February, and the Macron government’s “knowledge shock” reforms.

The school reforms would separate children into streams based on ability and promote nationalism through singing the national anthem. The Snes-FSU secondary school union reported that 30 percent of teachers in middle schools and high schools stopped work on Tuesday. The government recorded 10.6 percent on strike in secondary education and 6.4 percent of France’s 5.7 million public sector workers.

Just as the unions defused the mass opposition to the Macron government’s pension reforms, they will not seriously challenge austerity plans if they are “negotiated.” The French Democratic Confederation of Labour told *RTL* they were asking for pay rises but “above all real negotiations” with the government on pay.

Two-week strike continues in Finland against austerity and attacks on the right to strike

Finnish workers are now in the second week of a two-week strike. The strike was called by the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK) against the right-wing coalition government’s plans to impose austerity and restrict the right to strike.

Workers have been opposing these plans since last year. Around 130,000 joined strikes in February.

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 larger than in industries that export goods and services.

It also plans to restrict political strikes to only 24 hours, with fines for both unions and individual workers if a court finds a strike “illegal.” The CEO of the Bank of Finland said that to meet EU deficit targets, cuts of 3 billion euros would have to be made from public spending, *YLE* reported.

The stoppages have had a major economic impact, reportedly costing hundreds of millions of euros, but the unions restricted the latest strike to only around 7,000 workers, mainly in manufacturing and logistics.

SAK emphasised it is willing to make “far-reaching compromises” and would agree even to the ban on political and sympathy strikes if it came with a ban on scab labour.

Such bans exist in a number of European countries, such as France, but are routinely circumvented by engaging companies for “services” rather than hiring scabs directly.

Italian metal workers strike following latest death at work

On March 12, Italian metal workers at the Laminazione Sottile aluminium plant stopped work, after one of their colleagues was killed by a machine.

A four-hour strike throughout the metal sector in the province of Caserta was called the next day.

According to *ANSA*, 26-year-old agency worker Giuseppe Borrelli, who had only been at the factory since the start of February, was working alone. Shortly after 7pm, he was injured by the machine he was working on unsupervised and was later found dead by a colleague. A case for manslaughter was opened by the local prosecutor’s office.

The three unions representing metal workers, FIM, FIOM and UILM,

© World Socialist Web Site

issued a press release stating, “the frequency with which deaths at work are repeated is unacceptable” and “appeals and occasional statements cannot and must not be enough, measures are needed to restore dignity to work.”

Outside of the token strikes they call to defuse workers’ anger, the unions offer little more than “appeals” to the fascistic Meloni government and “occasional statements” that companies should improve health and safety instead of ruthlessly maximising profits.

Rail workers strike against understaffing in Catalonia, Spain

Station staff, ticket inspectors and other workers for the Catalan rail network Rodalies, Spain held a one-day strike on March 15 to demand the hiring of more staff.

The Workers’ Commissions and General Workers’ Union said Rodalies, a subsidiary of Spanish state-owned national rail operator Renfe, “does not provide the necessary resources to guarantee quality service,” *el Periódico* reported.

The Catalan government imposed high minimum service requirements, restricting the right to strike. During peak hours, two-thirds of ticket inspectors were required to work, and one-third at off-peak times. Forty percent of all other workers were also prevented from striking.

Prison staff continue protests in Catalonia, Spain after cook’s murder, despite government campaign against “illegal strike”

Hundreds of prison officers and other staff have been protesting and blockading prisons in Catalonia, Spain, since Thursday last week. A cook was murdered by a prisoner, who later killed himself.

The cook, identified by the media as Núria L., was alone in the kitchen with the prisoner, who, according to *El Periódico*, had been sentenced for hitting another prisoner only a few months before.

The Catalan government attempted to defuse the protests by promising to hire an extra 700 prison staff, issuing panic buttons and ensuring nobody is left alone with a prisoner. The protesting prison workers, however, said their demand for the dismissal of Secretary of Penal Measures Amand Calderó is non-negotiable. Calderó was reinstated in 2022 after being forced to step down in 2021 following the deaths of three inmates in two weeks.

The Minister of Justice for the Catalan government, Gemma Ubasart of the pseudo-left Podemos, said Calderó’s “resignation or dismissal has never been on the table.”

Around 500 people protested in Barcelona on Wednesday, *El Nacional* reported, and the paper wrote that the meeting between the unions and government without Calderó’s dismissal “did not help to defuse the conflict.”

The police have reportedly been mobilised in large numbers to prevent blockades of prisons, and the Catalan government repeatedly threatened “sanctions” against an “illegal strike” as the unions did not file any strike notice.

Podemos’ Ubasart said “the workers have to go to work, it is their obligation,” and government spokesperson Patricia Plaja cynically stated, “out of respect for [Núria’s] memory and her people, we should not make interested use of an absolutely tragic event,” *Europa Press* reported.

Strike continues at poultry plant in ?zmir, Turkey

Workers at the Lezita poultry processing plant in the Turkish city of ?zmir have been on strike since March 7 to demand the right to join a union of their choice.

Öz G?da-?? union members are demanding Lezita begin negotiations with their union and reinstate the 100 union members fired since 2021, *Evrensel* reported.

Production has continued, with managers and foremen taking part. It is reported that 50 new workers were hired from India only two days before the strike began. Highlighting the danger of running the factory without experienced workers, a 1.5-ton machine fell on a maintenance worker on Tuesday while it was being moved, seriously injuring his leg, according to *SOL*.

Strike over pay at semiconductor factory in Nijmegen, Netherlands

Workers at the NXP semiconductor plant in the Dutch city of Nijmegen began a two-day strike over pay on Tuesday, following another stoppage last week. The Dutch Federation of Trade Unions (FNV) is calling for a 9 percent pay rise, while NXP is offering 6.6 percent spread over 26 months, the *Algemeen Dagblad* reported.

Around 240 FNV members joined Tuesday’s walkout, which was opposed by other unions at the Nijmegen facility. NXP threatened to reconsider future investments in its Dutch operations because of the strike, and white-collar union De Unie openly agreed with the multinational chipmaker, telling press, “Our members know how difficult the market is at the moment. A strike is not good for the company's image.”

Two-hour warning strike at Mercedes auto factory in Kecskemét, Hungary

Auto workers at the Mercedes-Benz factory in Kecskemét, Hungary held a two-hour warning strike last week during collective bargaining negotiations between the Vasas union and the German luxury car manufacturer. Around 160 workers walked out to oppose an “offensive” pay offer.

According to *24.hu*, Vasas is demanding a 14 percent pay rise in 2024 to make up for inflation, which averaged 13.7 percent over the last 12 months. For 2025 it wants a 12 percent rise, as well as several one-off payments in 2025 and 2026. Vasas told *Economx* that Mercedes’ offer had not changed in five months and amounted to a below-inflation 20,000 forints (50.66 euros) per month increase for most workers.

Polish miners hold protest in pay dispute

On Tuesday, almost 200 miners protested for two hours outside the offices of the Bogdanka Coal Mine near Lublin, *Dziennik Wschodni* reported.

In December, the miners demanded a 15 percent pay rise, which the mine's management claimed it was not in a financial position to meet. According to the unions representing Bogdanka miners, the mine has

© World Socialist Web Site

started to implement pay rises of only 7 percent, above the current inflation rate but less than its average of 9.1 percent for the last 12 months.

Despite reportedly pleading poverty in pay negotiations, Bogdanka put out a press release for investors in January boasting of "a record net profit of PLN 687.1 million for the full year of 2023. That is 391 percent more than in 2022." It even attributed this to "the ambitious attitude of the entire workforce".

Waste disposal workers hold week-long wildcat strike against bullying in Copenhagen, Denmark

Twenty-six workers at the waste disposal service in Hvidovre, a suburb of the Danish capital, walked out on a wildcat strike on March 13, demanding the removal of their manager.

They allege he harassed and bullied workers, and was allowing unsafe overloading of bin lorries, which put workers and the public at risk.

One worker told *Fagbladet 3F* his manager told him to go on a diet and then to take the slimming pill Wegovy but refused to reimburse him for the expensive drug. He said, "It is so far over the line and also humiliating that a boss can think of saying something like that" that he contacted the 3F union shortly afterwards.

Workers picketing the depot told *Fagbladet 3F* that a scab lorry had accelerated towards them, stopping only half a metre from their picket. Press photographer Joachim Rode also reported being threatened by three men, reportedly from another depot, driving a bin lorry. They nearly hit him with their lorry. Two of them then got out and verbally abused him, demanding he hand over his press badge.

Workers opposed the token measures of Hvidovre Municipality, which said it would open a legal investigation, and walked out to demand the manager's immediate removal. 3F filed a complaint against the manager on its members' behalf but opposed the wildcat strike, saying: "It is a work stoppage contrary to the agreement, so we encourage the employees to resume work." Work resumed this Wednesday after a court threatened to impose fines.

Biomedical scientists at Merseyside, UK hospital strike over pay dispute

Biomedical scientists working for the Merseyside and West Lancashire Teaching Hospital NHS Trust in England began a series of three-day strikes on March 14.

The Unite union members based at the Whiston hospital on Merseyside work in the microbiology unit. They walked out in protest at not being paid an essential services payment of around £4,000, paid to other members of the pathology department.

A further three-day stoppage began Wednesday. The workers will hold 36 days of stoppages in total. Three-day strikes are planned to start March 27, April 3, 10, 17, 24, and May 1, 8, 22 and 29.

Week-long strike by hospital security staff at two London hospitals over low pay

Hospital security staff at St Thomas' Hospital and Guy's Hospital, in Lambeth, south London began a week-long strike on Monday.

The Unite union members are protesting the Trust's refusal to pay a £2,000 a year increase, which equates to 96p per hour. They are among the lowest-paid workers in the Trust, on £10.76 an hour. Hospital security staff at Kings' College Hospital are on £30,000 a year. Another source of dispute is the way their annual leave allowance is calculated, leaving them at a disadvantage.

The walkout is an escalation of the two days of stoppages in January.

Walkout by staff at UK debt advice charity over pay parity and conditions

Frontline debt advice workers at the London-based Rooted Finance walked out Monday and Tuesday.

The Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) members voted by 100 percent to strike. They are seeking pay parity with other debt advice workers, improved training opportunities and an end to victimisation by management.

According to the IWGB, Rooted Finance management held "intimidatory" one-to-one meetings with the advice workers after they sent an open letter last December expressing concern over low pay and lack of training and requesting voluntary trade union recognition.

IWGB say seven former Rooted Finance advice workers penned a public letter expressing concerns over practices at the charity. The concerns included excessive workloads, unsafe working conditions and management bullying.

Energy-from-waste workers in Wolverhampton, UK strike over pay

Workers at the energy-from-waste (EfW) facility run by Wolverhampton council began a three-day stoppage Wednesday.

The GMB members are protesting at not having a pay rise since April 2022, despite soaring inflation. The EfW plant processes around 100,000 tonnes of household waste for the council to produce electricity for the local community. The workforce is due to be transferred to a new employer from April.

Housing association maintenance workers in London, UK hold further stoppages over pay

Around 50 housing repair workers employed by the Sanctuary housing association based in Hackney, in the UK capital began a three-day stoppage Wednesday.

The Unite union members are protesting a 4 percent pay rise imposed in 2023 when inflation was over 11 percent. They previously walked out for three days in February and early March. Stoppages are also planned for March 25-26. Sanctuary's revenues for 2023 were over £940 million, with its surplus funds up by nearly 75 percent at over £100 million.

Protest rally of special educational needs workers in Leeds, UK calls

© World Socialist Web Site

for increased resources

UK special educational needs (SEND) support staff in schools rallied outside Leeds Civic Hall on Wednesday.

GMB union members, supported by parents of SEND children, were calling for increased pay and resources, including increased staff levels. Leeds City Council were holding a full council meeting in the civic hall. The protest included a deputation calling on the council to support SEND reforms, which were due to be discussed by the meeting.

Ongoing protests by Iranian oil workers over pay and conditions

On Sunday, casual workers employed at the Aghajari Oil and Gas Exploitation Company in Iran held a protest. Among their demands were increased pay and the complete removal of contracting agencies who act as middlemen, eating into workers' remuneration. Protests by casual workers are increasing.

On the same day, permanently employed workers at the company also protested. Their demands include the dismissal of corrupt officials, scrapping the limitation on retirement payments and no payment ceiling.

Falling living standards exacerbated by US sanctions and police violence—including the murder of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 for improperly wearing the veil—have driven a wave of strikes and mass protests in Iran. Workers taking action include medical staff, oil and sugar workers, as well as retirees. Iran is in the crosshairs of NATO's expanding wars in the Middle East and against Russia in Ukraine.

Strike by traffic directorate staff in Iraqi city of Sulaimani over unpaid wages

Traffic directorate staff in the city of Sulaimani in the Kurdistan governate of Iraq went on strike Sunday, protesting non-payment of February's wages.

The responsibility for paying Kurdistan civil servants was transferred in February from Erbil, the Kurdistan capital to Baghdad. Money has been transferred for the traffic directorate staff but has not yet been distributed.

Teachers in the Sulaimani and Halabja provinces were on strike from September last year to early this month over unpaid salaries.

According to Kurdistan's Rudaw Media Network, civil servants in the Kurdistan governorate were only paid 75 percent of their wages for 2023 and have only been paid for January so far this year.

Protest demonstration in Alexandria suburb, Egypt against falling living standards

Workers demonstrated March 15 in the Dekheila suburb of Alexandria, Egypt against soaring prices and declining living standards, holding banners with anti-government slogans.

In February, inflation hit 36 percent, and food prices doubled last year. Slogans included "You've starved us, Sisi," referring to President Abdel Fattah El Sisi, who came to power in a military coup in 2013.

Dozens of the protesters were arrested by Egyptian security forces for taking part in the peaceful protest. Nine political prisoners have died in police custody since the beginning of the year.

Security guards on strike over unpaid bonuses in Northern Cape, South Africa

South African security guards employed by the Northern Cape Department of Sport, Arts and Culture are on indefinite strike action over outstanding bonuses.

The bonuses should have been paid by 29 February, and strikers demanded payment by 11 March, which the company said they could not fulfil. As bonuses were paid late last year, the guards were not confident these would be paid.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) claimed the service provider was taken on at a cheaper rate and unable to pay the standard rates for security guards.

South African strikers at Nelson Mandela University march for higher wages in Gqeberha, Eastern Cape

Over two hundred workers at Nelson Mandela University in Eastern Cape, on strike for three weeks for wage increases, took part in a protest on March 13.

Cleaners, caterers, clerks and supervisors marched to the university to hand over a memorandum of demands, including an 8 percent pay increase, better housing allowances, medical scheme benefits and equality between black and white staff members.

The following day, *sabcnews* reported that a 7.54 percent increase was agreed with the university, and NEHAWU called the strike off.

Miners in Penge, Limpopo province South Africa strike over pay and conditions

Miners at Annesley andalusite mine in Penge, Limpopo, South Africa have walked out over pay and conditions.

The General Industries Workers Union of South Africa members are demanding a 12.5 percent wage increase. The employers have offered 6.5 percent.

For a 7-day mine week—known as full calendar operations—the workers are demanding a monthly allowance of R7,000. The company wants to keep this at R2,500.

The Imerys mining company employs 150 permanent workers at this mine and the workers state they will continue their strike until their demands are met.

Kenyan doctors begin national strike for jobs and conditions

Kenyan doctors began a national strike on April 14, protesting the government breaking the promises it made to end a 100-day strike in 2017.

© World Socialist Web Site

The Kenya Medical Practitioners Pharmacists and Dentists Union (KMPDU) members held previous stoppages to demand comprehensive medical cover and postings for 1,200 medical interns.

The KMPDU leader, Dr. Atellah stated that between them, the national and county governments owe the union members over Ksh 3 billion: “We have had commitments before with the government in January 2023 but nothing to date has been implemented.”

University Staff in Nigeria take strike action over funding and unpaid salaries

University staff in Nigeria began a seven-day “warning” strike on March 17, which halted most activity at the federal universities.

Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU) and Non-Academic Staff Union of Educational and Associated Institutions members walked out to demand payment of unpaid salaries and increased funding.

University of Abuja branch chairman of SSANU, Nureden Yusuf said, “We are on strike basically to draw the attention of government to the state of our universities... one of the contentious issues why we went on strike in 2022 was the issue of the renegotiation of the 2009 agreement. [It] ought to have been renegotiated every three years and now we are 2024.

“Also, we are talking about withheld salaries. Mr. President in October 2023 gracefully agreed that our withheld salaries during the period of strike in 2022 should be paid to us. Our counterparts in ASUU have been paid their four months salaries, we are yet to receive our salaries.”

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site