

Strikes in Finland continue against austerity and attacks on right to strike; general strike on West Bank after Israeli army kills 10 Palestinians over 24 hours; Kenyan doctors' national stoppage enters third week

## Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

28 March 2024

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

### **Finnish strikes against austerity and attacks on the right to strike extended**

The two-week strike in Finland, begun March 11 against the right-wing coalition government's plans to impose austerity and restrict the right to strike, has been extended to a four-week walkout.

The strike across all sectors was called by the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK).

A poll by *YLE* last week showed that a majority of Finns supported the strikes. Prime Minister Petteri Orpo told the broadcaster, "I understand people's concerns well," but said he would push through measures to cut public spending.

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."

While 130,000 workers joined strikes in February, SAK limited the recent walkouts to around 7,000 workers. Many manufacturing workers are now being laid off as companies slow or stop production due to being unable to either produce goods or transport products to customers.

### **Tens of thousands of Spanish banking workers strike over pay**

On March 22, workers at Spanish banks held a one-day national strike over pay, closing many branches.

According to the unions, more than 75 percent of the 80,000 bank workers stopped work, while the Spanish Banking Association (AEB) claimed only a quarter joined the strike.

The unions say workers in banks have lost 17 percent real pay since the beginning of the COVID pandemic and that much of the pay increases that were made were subtracted from bonuses and other benefits. Banks made huge profits in recent years, both through high interest rates and the massive wave of job cuts pushed through during the pandemic.

However, according to Reuters, the unions have already lowered their demand for a full recovery of pay and are now asking for 13 percent over three years, barely above inflation. Workers in smaller regional banks did not join the strike because the union signed a three-year deal for an even lower pay rise of 12 percent. The AEB is offering only 8.25 percent over three years, less than 2.8 percent per year.

*Europa Press* reported a press conference by the president of Santander bank, Ana Botín, who claimed the bank's employees received "competitive" pay. Botín also defended directors' pay after taking home 12.2 million euros last year, and "expressed [Santander's] rejection" of a windfall tax on banking profits in Spain.

She also replied to the campaign group Banca Armada's exposure of the billions of euros Santander has invested in the arms industry, saying Europe "is at war" with Russia, and claiming states "have the obligation to defend their citizens, to defend the values for which they have fought."

Botín implied Santander's policy is ethical as it does not finance the production of nuclear, chemical, biological and other banned weapons. She ignored the fact that the Netanyahu regime is massacring Gazan civilians using the "conventional" weapons Santander funds.

### **Spanish airport workers hold strikes over work conditions**

Workers at several airports in Spain are striking around the Easter holidays to demand improved working conditions.

On Wednesday, apron management workers at Madrid Airport joined a strike called by the General Workers' Union (UGT), *La Nueva España* reported, and another one-day strike is planned for Friday. Apron management workers are responsible for guiding the movement of planes on the ground, a safety-critical role.

The UGT is calling for pay rises and a new collective agreement in the privatised service, saying monthly salaries for new hires was cut by almost 30 percent under current operator Skyway. The strike cancelled

between 800 and 1,000 flights.

Air traffic control workers at Valencia Airport also began partial strikes for five days from Thursday, stopping work for two hours every day until Easter Monday. According to *Europa Press*, the works council is calling for changes to the system of shifts and wants a commission set up to improve staffing levels. It also calls for improvements to the canteen and time off to compensate for mandatory overtime, so workers can “balance their private life.”

Security workers at Alicante-Elche Airport, also in the Valencian Community, began partial strikes of one hour each morning and evening from Thursday. The unions representing workers at the airport’s security checks demand the new operator Sureste Seguridad abide by the collective agreement signed with the previous operator Ilunion, *Información* reported. Workers also call for the shift starting at 3:30 a.m. to be eliminated, a reduction in other early shifts, “meal breaks at reasonable hours and additional breaks.” According to *Europa Press*, these partial strikes could last until September.

An extremely high minimum service requirement was imposed on the 250 workers at Alicante-Elche Airport, preventing 85 percent of them from joining the strike.

### **Protests and walkouts against cuts and “reforms” in French schools**

Parents, students and teachers continue to oppose the French government’s education policy, demanding resources in schools and the withdrawal of the “knowledge shock” reforms.

Between 2,500 and 3,000 people marched in Nantes on Saturday against the reforms, denouncing plans to divide children into separate streams supposedly based on ability.

According to *Ouest France*, a WhatsApp group started by one parent in the department of Loire-Atlantique now has 1,642 members and is used to organise protests. On Thursday, parents arranged to keep their children home from school in protest against the “knowledge shock,” and another rally is planned in Nantes on Saturday.

Numerous local protests were also held against the “knowledge shock” and against cuts to school resources. Teachers at one college who joined a one-day strike in the Seine-Maritime department on Monday told *France Bleu* they were facing 10 job losses as there were 20 fewer students than last year. One teacher said, “With fewer students, there would have been fewer in the classes so we could better support the students. Instead, we will have these crazy level groups to do social sorting.”

Teachers’ demonstrations across France, including in Paris, are also planned for next week, *Ouest France* reported.

### **Greek teachers continue boycotting school assessments, despite threats of fines and prison sentences**

Teachers in Greece have indicated they will continue to boycott a school assessment scheme despite a court ruling that the boycott was “illegal.”

*ef.syn* reported that a criminal court in the city of Chania ruled against the Union of Secondary School Staff (ELME) on Tuesday, handing down a fine of 2,000 euros for each day the boycott continues. The Minister of Education had reportedly called for far greater repression, asking the court to impose a daily fine between 5,000 and 10,000 euros and a prison sentence for the president of the Chania ELME, Christos Belbas.

Belbas told *ef.syn* teachers intend to continue the boycott saying, “We

will not let inspectors enter our classrooms, write down whatever they want on paper and make the permanency of 20,000 new recruits depend on it. We are fighting for a democratic school.” According to *ef.syn*, almost 20 members of teachers’ unions have been prosecuted.

*Alfavita* reported that dozens of ELME branches across Greece have already decided to announce a resumption of the boycott before next week.

### **New 36-hour strike over pay by Austrian Airlines ground handling workers**

On Thursday, ground handling workers at Austrian Airlines (AUA), part of the Lufthansa group, began a 36-hour strike over pay, cancelling around 400 flights.

Vida union members are calling for pay equality, as they are paid 40 percent less than staff in other parts of the Lufthansa group.

In an interview on *ZiB2*, the airline’s CEO claimed the pay demand is “far beyond AUA’s economic performance” and its 5.5 percent profit margin was not enough. AUA reportedly offered a two-year deal to raise pay by 18 percent for cabin crew and pilots, and 28 percent for co-pilots. Vida called these “fictitious numbers” as they include several one-off payments.

The unions in Europe play a key role in facilitating the divide-and-conquer tactics of Lufthansa and other airlines by blocking any joint struggle in defence of pay and working conditions. This week, the German Verdi union signed a collective agreement with Lufthansa in “behind closed doors” arbitration facilitated by Left Party politician Bodo Ramelow, the *Kleine Zeitung* reported, calling off a planned indefinite strike by German Lufthansa workers. A strike by pilots at Lufthansa subsidiary Brussels Airlines was also called off with a last-minute deal by Belgian trade unions.

### **Italian journalists strike to oppose sale to far-right MP**

Journalists at the Italian news agency AGI held a two-day strike last week after it was reported that MP Antonio Angelucci of the far-right Lega had offered 40 million euros to buy the agency, *Euractiv* reported.

Angelucci already owns several newspapers, and journalists said his purchase of AGI would threaten jobs, as well as the “independence and autonomy of journalists.”

AGI’s management denied there were negotiations with Angelucci, but confirmed he had made a “spontaneous expression of interest” and they had met with him about it.

### **Strike at cleaning contractor in Stellantis auto factory in Italy against job losses**

Workers at the cleaning company Albasan in the Italian town of Termoli held a one-day strike on Thursday, calling for their jobs to be protected.

Albasan has the contract to clean the Stellantis auto plant in Termoli, which is scheduled to close March 31, according to *Ansa*.

The stoppage was called by the CGIL, CISL and UIL unions, but both the CISL and UIL signed a deal with Stellantis on Monday allowing

“voluntary” job losses at the Italian multinational auto company, effectively endorsing the closure of factories with the resulting loss of direct and indirect jobs.

### **Amazon workers strike at UK site over pay**

Around 200 Amazon workers at the company’s new high-tech Minworth site near Birmingham, England, which opened last October, began a 48-hour strike March 27 as part of their campaign for £15 an hour.

The GMB members at the site held their first-ever stoppage in January this year.

Last week, GMB members at the BHX4 site in Coventry held a 48-hour stoppage. They have walked out in a series of stoppages since January last year for improved pay. They are demanding £15 an hour.

The GMB is campaigning for union recognition at Amazon and recently re-applied for union recognition with the government body, the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC). The CAC can impose union recognition on a company if the union is able to recruit more than 50 percent of the workforce.

### **Strike by lecturers at Glasgow College, Scotland over pay**

Lecturing staff at Glasgow Clyde College, Scotland, held a one-day stoppage Monday.

The Educational Institute of Scotland-Further Education Lecturers’ Association (EIS-FELA) members are involved in an ongoing dispute over pay as they have not received a pay increase since September 2022. They also oppose plans by college management to cut posts.

EIS-FELA members at colleges throughout Scotland are involved in the dispute. They are due to begin a three-week programme over the issue beginning April 16.

### **Library staff in two London boroughs walk out over pay and conditions**

Library staff in the London boroughs of Bromley and Greenwich walked out Tuesday over pay and conditions.

The Unite union members are employed by social enterprise Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL). Their demands include new minimum pay rates backdated over the past two years, a new sick scheme and permanent posts.

GLL refuses to recognise or meet with trade union representatives. In total GLL employs over 10,000 workers, 60 percent of whom are on zero-hour contracts.

### **Controllers at Abellio London Bus company in UK capital continue strike over pay**

Around 40 bus control staff working for the Abellio London Bus

company began a three-day stoppage Wednesday.

The Unite union members began a series of nine days of stoppages on March 7, with the last scheduled strike Friday. They voted for the action after Abellio failed to improve a pay offer. The controllers are responsible for controlling the routes taken by buses. Abellio pay their controllers around £10,000 less than staff performing the same role at other bus companies.

The strikes impacted services across 12 routes in south London. The controllers previously took six days of strikes in January and February.

### **West Bank general strike in response to Israeli attack that killed 10 Palestinians**

A general strike took place on March 21 in response to an Israeli drone attack in the West Bank city of Jenin and the adjacent refugee camp. The attack killed three Palestinians and severely injured a fourth, bringing the death toll to 10 over 24 hours.

The general strike led to the closure of shops and schools as well as the suspension of public transport.

Since Israel’s army entered Gaza and the genocide of Palestinians began, it has also stepped up raids on the West Bank, killing hundreds since October 7.

### **Protest by Israeli port workers over job cuts**

Workers at Israel’s Red Sea Eilat Port held a protest on March 20. They were protesting plans by the port to cut around half of the 120 jobs there.

Activity at the port has been severely curtailed by the ongoing Houthi drone attacks in the Red Sea area in response to Israel’s genocidal attack on Gaza.

### **Strikes in Lebanon by telecommunication workers and UNRWA staff**

Workers employed by the Lebanese state-owned telecoms company Ogero and mobile phone company Alfa held a stoppage on Wednesday.

The strikers were highlighting the erosion of the value of their salaries, which are worth only a fifth of their value before the economic crisis wracking Lebanon. They are calling for their value to be restored.

Workers at United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) at its Saida, Ain al-Hilweh and Mieh w Mieh sites in Lebanon held a one-day strike Tuesday. It was in response to the suspension of an UNRWA employee who expressed support for the Palestinian cause.

Lebanese workers are seeing an ongoing erosion of the real value of their wages, as they are hit by inflation of more than 177 percent and the sharp devaluation of the Lebanese pound.

### **Ongoing struggles by public sector workers in Iraq’s Kurdistan region over pay and conditions**

On Sunday, teachers organised by the Council of Contract Teachers in Sulaymaniyah lobbied the parliament in Baghdad, Iraq.

They are demanding permanent employment, which would mean increased pay and improved working conditions. Currently, as contract workers, they are paid a stipend and feel they are treated as second-class citizens.

On Monday, striking teachers on permanent contracts protested outside the headquarters of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in Dabashan. They were protesting delays in salary payments. In February, responsibility for paying public sector workers in Kurdistan was transferred from Erbil (the Kurdistan capital) to Baghdad because of wage delays, but the problem persists.

The delay in paying wages has hit other public sector workers in the Kurdistan region and Sunday saw strikes by public sector workers from a variety of sectors in several areas of the Kurdistan province. Areas affected included Sulaymaniyah, Halabja and Raparin. Those striking included health workers at the Shahid Peshraw hospital.

### **Strike by Kenyan medics to enter third week**

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

The Kenya Medical Practitioners Pharmacists and Dentists Union members' demands include comprehensive medical cover, for interns to be given permanent posts and an end to low pay and poor working conditions.

A seven-hour meeting between the government and the KMPDU on March 22 made no progress. In the second week of the strike, the doctors stopped providing emergency services.

As the national strike by medics in Kenyan entered the end of its second week, hundreds of medical staff took to the streets in Nakuru singing protest songs.

The Council of Governors (CoG) is now demanding the doctors call off their strike in line with court orders issued on March 13 and 15 or face legal consequences without any improvements being made. Unless the strike is ended "their employers will be at liberty to take any appropriate actions," in the words of the CoG chairperson.

The same issues have been behind several strikes since 2017, with each strike ending with promises that were never kept.

### **Public Works employees in Gqeberha, South Africa walk out against non-payment of wages**

South African workers from the Mayoral Cleaning and Greening Programme in Gqeberha, Eastern Cape Province, took strike action last week against non-payment of wages.

Around 200 workers confronted the mayor for public health outside the Gqeberha City Hall. They blocked the front and back entrances with garbage.

The around 1,500 workers, based in townships such as Zwide, New Brighton, Seyisi and KwaZakhele, are paid by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environmental Affairs (DFFE) and the municipality provides protective clothing and tools. The workers clear up illegal dumps, plant trees and support recycling services. They are paid minimum wages for the Public Works Programme of R130 a day.

The DFFE paid them a week later.

### **Mozambican health workers' union suspends national strike over lack of resources at eleventh hour**

A national strike by around 65,000 health workers in Mozambique, set to resume March 28, has been called off by the Association of United Mozambican Health Professionals (APSUSM).

The dispute, unresolved after the APSUSM suspended a strike in August, is over issues including lack of medication to treat even the commonest of illnesses, lack of masks and gloves, syringes and needles, plasters, catheters, and paper to print documents. Staff also have to cope with shortages of lab reagents, fuel for ambulances, food, and hospital linen.

Government/union talks will recommence.



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