

Port workers in Saint-Nazaire, France hold week-long stoppage over job security; protests continue across Iran against collapsing living standards; doctors' national strike in Kenya continues despite 100 sackings

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.

Four-hour national strike in Italy after five die in power plant explosion

On Thursday, workers throughout Italy stopped work for four hours to protest the massive wave of deaths in workplace accidents. This followed a deadly explosion on Tuesday at a hydroelectric plant near Bologna that killed at least five workers.

According to Reuters, as of Thursday 3 p.m. two more workers are still missing at the plant, which is owned by Italy's main electricity company Enel and staffed by many contractors from different companies.

The strike had been arranged before the explosion, which underscores the common dangers faced by workers. Enel workers, and workers in the construction industry, which is particularly unsafe, stopped work for eight hours. They joined many others in transport, manufacturing, post and other sectors to demand health and safety measures to protect workers' lives.

At the start of April, the National Institute for Insurance against Accidents at Work reported 119 people had already been killed in accidents at work in 2024. This figure excludes the death toll from COVID.

There is a stark contrast between the seriousness of the dangers faced by Italian workers, and the proposals on the part of the unions, which call for mere token walkouts. According to ANSA, the CISL union, one of Italy's largest, even refused to join Thursday's strike. The CISL instead cited a need for "maximum unity among all political, institutional and social subjects," i.e., for workers to "unify" with the government and employers responsible for the deaths.

Dock workers hold week-long strike over investment and job security in Saint-Nazaire, France

Workers at the Saint-Nazaire Montoir port on France's west coast resumed work on Monday, after walking out on an indefinite strike on March 29, which paralysed activity at the port.

According to *France Bleu*, members of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) called for investments to guarantee the future of jobs at the port.

The CGT called off the indefinite strike after reaching what it called a "crucial agreement." According to the general secretary of the CGT's docks section, in return for investments in the port the union agreed to renounce "historical social agreements in the name of flexibility and availability."

University workers and students in Italy stop work to oppose collaboration with Israel

Italian students, teachers and other university staff protested on Tuesday against Italian collaboration with Israel while its armed forces massacre the Palestinians in Gaza.

The USB union called for a strike in the afternoon by teaching and technical staff at universities, and for the whole day at universities in Rome, ANSA reported.

Students also held protests and occupations, calling for their universities to end scientific collaboration with Israel and not to renew the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs' cooperation agreement, which expired on Wednesday. An open letter was signed by 2,500 students, teachers and researchers.

Port workers strike over collective agreement in Italy

Workers at Italian ports stopped work on Friday to demand a new collective agreement, after the previous agreement expired at the end of 2023.

The CGIL union said that real pay has significantly fallen since 2022, and called for measures to support early retirement, *TGR* reported.

Hundreds of workers reportedly joined rallies at the ports of Genoa and Trieste, and the unions said more than 97 percent of workers walked out.

Finnish unions suspend national strikes to give the government “an opportunity to react”

Indefinite strikes in Finland, begun March 11 to oppose the right-wing coalition government’s austerity and attacks on the right to strike, were suspended on Monday by the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK).

Thousands of workers were part of the latest strikes, with stoppages in the key industries of transport and logistics having a large economic impact.

In a press release, SAK said it made the decision because the government issued an ultimatum that “it will not seek any settlement with employee organisations while strikes continue” and “we shall now give the Orpo-Purra Government an opportunity to react.”

The “reaction” of the government is to intensify its attacks on the working class. The same day as SAK announced the strikes would not continue this week, state broadcaster *YLE* reported that parliament’s Working Life and Equality Committee cancelled a trip to Canada in order to meet this Monday, when parliament and its committees are not usually in session, in order to rush the anti-strike bill.

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.”

Bus drivers begin indefinite strike over working conditions in Bilbao, Spain

Bus drivers at the Bilbobus service in the Spanish city of Bilbao began an indefinite strike on Tuesday, demanding improvements in their working conditions.

According to *Europa Press*, they have not had a new collective agreement since 2021 and have been holding strikes and protests for months to demand a new agreement.

Biobide, the private company which operates Bilbobus, accused striking workers of failing to comply with a minimum service requirement, which would ensure 30 percent of normal services were provided.

Biobide is owned by the British multinational Mobicco Group (formerly National Express Group). In its accounts for the first half of 2023, Mobicco’s chief executive ominously stated, “We have seen significant wage inflation however, we expect this to be recovered—as planned—in the second half.”

Portuguese IT teachers strike against digital tests with poor equipment

IT teachers in Portuguese schools began an indefinite strike on Monday,

opposing the government’s plans for exams to be carried out in a digital format.

The National Association of IT Teachers and the National Federation of Teachers say they are being made to do work they are not qualified for in setting up these exams, and called for the government to hire more technicians.

Teachers also warned that schools do not have the resources needed, with many lacking working computers and having only poor internet connections, *Lusa* reported. The unions say they may extend the strikes until the end of the school year if their demands are not met.

Indefinite rolling strikes begin against overcrowding at Belgian prisons

Belgian prison guards have been holding strikes since April 1 against overcrowding, which has made prisons unsafe for prisoners and staff.

Last week, there was a strike at many prisons, but as of Monday the unions adopted an “inventive” tactic of only calling members in one province per day to strike, *The Brussels Times* reported. Only prisons in northern Flemish provinces are striking, and the unions told the media that they had “no action plan for the moment” in French-speaking Wallonia.

The government responded to the strike by announcing plans to restrict the right to strike. The Justice Minister Paul Van Tigchelt told the Chamber of Representatives last week that he was imposing minimum service requirements “From the first minute.” Legally they cannot currently be imposed in the first 48 hours, but according to *De Standaard* the government reasoned it could requisition staff immediately because the strike was indefinite. In the first two days of the strike, 134 members of prison staff were given requisition notices.

Turkish “gig economy” workers protest against abolition of hourly wages

Delivery workers for the “gig economy” company Vigo, owned by the Turkish multinational Getir, held protests in several Turkish cities on Saturday, the day after the company announced it would stop paying hourly wages.

According to *Evrensel*, Getir previously paid 85 lira per hour and an additional 50 lira per package but announced it would now pay 75 lira per delivery, with no guaranteed hourly pay.

One courier told the newspaper, “They are not ashamed to reduce our wages on the eve of Eid.” Pointing to the risks workers will have to take to earn a decent wage under the piecework system, he said “We don’t want to die while chasing packages in the middle of the street.”

All Vigo workers are technically self-employed, so they organised the protests through new associations outside the trade unions. *Evrensel* reported that couriers in Istanbul and Kocaeli organised a strike, refusing to take any orders.

Rolling strike at laundries in the Netherlands

Workers at industrial laundries throughout the Netherlands began rolling strikes last week, stopping work for 24 hours on different days in

laundries which service hospitals, hotels, restaurants and other institutions.

The walkouts were called by the Dutch Federation of Trade Unions (FNV) as part of a collective bargaining dispute with the Dutch Textile Management Federation (FTN) and Dutch Association of Textile Cleaners employers' associations.

The FTN went to court this week in an attempt to have the strikes banned, arguing they were not "proportional." It also claimed the FNV should have waited until a separate collective agreement signed by the Christian National Trade Union Federation (CNV) was voted on by its members, *De Standaard* reported.

According to the *Algemeen Dagblad*, 7,000 workers in industrial laundries are FNV members, a majority, and only around one in six is a member of the CNV, mostly on higher pay grades. The FNV said the employers were offering only a 5 percent pay rise, closing the gap with the minimum wage which increased by 11 percent for a 40-hour week in January. Striking workers are also opposing an extension of working hours.

Isle of Wight social workers take action to oppose changes in work conditions

Adult care social workers employed by the conservative council on the Isle of Wight in the English Channel are refusing to work on-call standby shifts.

The 90 Unison members are protesting a proposed mandatory rota system. At present staff maintain 24-hour cover on a voluntary basis. They are threatening to walk out.

Mental health social workers in Barnet, London continue dispute over pay and staff shortages

Mental health social workers plan to walk out for two weeks from Monday, as part of action over nine weeks. They voted 91 percent in a 100 percent turnout to continue taking strike action.

The Unison members have already taken 27 strike days to demand a payment for recruitment and retention to retain staff and end staff turnover. They are paid 25 percent less than staff who work with children.

Further stoppages are planned May 13 to June 1, and June 17 to July 12.

NHS consultants' dispute ends without pay restoration; junior doctors continue pay fight

National Health Service (NHS) consultants in England have voted to end their year-long dispute, which included strike action.

The British Medical Association (BMA) members voted by 83 percent to accept a deal pushed by their union. This goes nowhere towards reversing the decline by a third in pay over 14 years.

In addition to 6 percent awarded last year, not backdated, the deal includes changes to how the doctors' and dentists' review body assesses pay and a 2.5 percent (£3,000) increase for senior doctors of four to seven years duration.

Nurses accepted a below-inflation 5 percent pay deal last year pushed through by the Royal College of Nursing, the same deal foisted by Unison on ambulance staff. Junior hospital doctors are continuing their dispute, claiming a rise of 35 percent to restore pay to 2008 levels.

The doctors took 41 strike days since March last year, including five days in February, and the BMA members voted overwhelmingly to continue action until September.

The NHS has suffered decades of funding cuts, with seven million presently on waiting lists for procedures and more than a third of cancer patients facing life-threatening delays in England. There is a nursing shortage of 43,339 in England according to the RCN.

UK clinical support workers on the Wirral, Merseyside win rise to reflect clinical duties

After 61 days of strikes, UK NHS clinical support workers (CSWs) on the Wirral, Merseyside have won their fight over pay.

The 600 Unison members work at Arrowe Park and Clatterbridge hospitals. They demanded payment reflecting the clinical component of their work, in addition to washing, dressing and feeding patients. A majority of health authorities have conceded this, moving CSWs up from Band 2 to 3, a pay increase of £2,000 a year.

UK healthcare assistants at North Tees and Hartlepool and South Tees NHS hospitals walk out over pay banding

More than 1,000 UK healthcare assistants at North Tees and Hartlepool and South Tees NHS Foundation Trust began a 72-hour strike Monday in another dispute over pay grades.

While employers agreed to move workers up to Band 3, back pay will be limited to July 2021. The Unison members want it backdated to 2019.

Mass demonstrations continue across Iran against cost-of-living crisis as currency collapses

Mass protests continue across Iran against falling living standards, which will deteriorate further as the rial fell against the dollar by 30 percent.

Rallies and demonstrations by pensioners in the Social Security Organisation took place in Isfahan, central Iran, where retirees from the steel industry took to the streets, and in Shush, Kermanshah, Arak, Ahvaz and Desful. Pensioners are demanding the government abide by its own laws and increase pensions in line with inflation.

Inflation is around 35 percent, but the government has only promised a 20 percent increase in pensions and wages. Food prices have soared. A 50,000 rial note currently only buys one egg, as opposed to 30 ten years ago.

Farmers and medical staff have joined the protests. In Zabol, in southeast Iran, truck drivers staged a rally to protest the government's decision to reduce subsidies for fuel.

Iran's economic crisis has been fuelled by US sanctions. The economy is on a precipice, as the NATO powers set the stage for drawing Iran into its widening battleground in the Middle East through provocations—such

as the killing April 1 of seven military officers, including two generals, in the Iranian embassy in Syria in an attack by Israel's IDF.

National strike by Kenyan doctors continues and spreads as 100 doctors are sacked

Kenyan doctors are continuing their national stoppage, begun March 14, to protest the government's broken promises made to end a 100-day strike in 2017.

The Kenya Medical Practitioners Pharmacists and Dentists Union members are demanding comprehensive medical cover, permanent posts for interns, and an end to low pay and poor working conditions.

The Kenyatta University Referral Hospital in Nairobi announced that 100 striking doctors had been sacked and would be replaced with new recruits.

Thousands of doctors and their supporters took to the streets outside the Kenyan parliament in Nairobi on April 9, marching and chanting.

Irene Kenyatta, a final year medical student at the University of Nairobi joined the doctors on the demonstration, saying, "I'm fighting for my future. I went to school to have a bright future. It can't be the moment that I'm going to finish school you are telling me that I can't have the bright future after all."

The strike is expected to widen to nutritionists and pharmacists on April 16. The National Union of Pharmaceutical Technologists and the Kenya Union of Nutritionists and Dieticians gave a seven-day strike notice on April 9.

Each union tabled four demands on April 2, which they said have not been addressed. The Kenya National Union of Nurses (KNUN) is using the doctors' strike to get verbal promises from management which may never be kept. The KNUN leaders claimed there was no need for them to call a strike because their demands are being met.

Unemployed doctors protest as patient-doctor ratio reaches "crisis level" in South Africa

Unemployed doctors staged a sit-in at the KwaZulu-Natal Health offices in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa last week to demand jobs and to end the "crisis-level" labour shortage in the health service. The doctors said they would not end their protests until they had been re-employed.

Hundreds of doctors are still unemployed, despite a stated commitment by the health ministry that they would be employed by April 1.

South African Medical Association Chairperson, Mvuyisi Mzukwa, said: "This was a promise made by the minister in parliament, that come the first of April these doctors will be absorbed into the system. We know how the challenges are in the system, the dire shortages of healthcare workers—especially doctors, and in the rural areas. But now we have these smart, young, qualified medical doctors who are sitting at home, who have been trained here in our country."

One of the young doctors interviewed at the protest by *sabcnews* said the situation was "totally unprecedented," adding, "as dedicated and committed health care workers who are young and aspire to make a difference in the South African health care sphere... we try to uplift the needs of our people who are much marginalised and deserve this much needed health care. So, it's unfair that they are left stranded because hospitals are understaffed and doctors are roaming the streets unemployed."

Unemployed Ghanaian nurses and midwives demonstrate in Kumasi to demand jobs

Graduate nurses held a protest on April 7 in Kumasi, the Ashanti regional capital in Ghana, to demand the government give financial clearance for them to be given permanent posts.

Many unemployed nurses and midwives have been forced to find other employment because of long delays in getting appointments.

Protests by traders in Ugandan shops against new tax system spreads

A strike by traders begun in Uganda's capital Kampala has spread to Masaka City, where several shops stayed shut from April 8 to protest the introduction of the Electronic Fiscal Receipting and Invoicing Solution tax system.

The shops affected are mainly wholesale and related businesses. Traders complain that the "unprecedented penalties" imposed on them have caused shops to have to close.



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