

Belgian postal workers begin stoppages against job cuts and restructuring; general strike in West Bank after Israeli forces kill 10 Palestinians in refugee camp; Kenyan doctors continue national stoppage over pay and conditions despite government threats

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.

Belgian postal workers strike against job cuts and reorganisation to focus on parcels

Workers at the Belgian postal service Bpost began a series of strikes this week, with delivery workers stopping work on Monday, and stoppages in logistics on Tuesday and sorting offices on Wednesday.

The CGSP and CSC unions say more strikes are planned over the next three weeks. Practically no letters were delivered in Brussels or the French-speaking south of the country, according to media reports.

Postal workers demand job protection and oppose a major restructuring of their working conditions. *RTL* reported that the end of state subsidies for distributing newspapers could cost as many as 2,000 jobs, and Bpost's own reorganisation plans threaten 4,000 jobs.

The company, which is just over 50 percent owned by the Belgian state, said a "structural decline" in the number of letters sent "requires continued efficiency efforts... a competitive and constantly evolving parcel market, requires us to evolve ever more quickly," implying it will force workers into a race to the bottom with Amazon and other parcel companies.

Postal workers at privatised Royal Mail in the UK face similar attacks on wages, jobs and conditions.

Spanish metalworkers continue months-long strike

Around 1,800 metal workers at the Acerinox plant in Cádiz, Spain, have been on strike since February 5 over pay rises and in opposition to the company's demand for far worse working conditions.

Acerinox made a new proposal last week for a collective agreement. This would include a pay rise of 2.25 percent next year, and 2 percent in every subsequent year until 2027, likely constituting a major cut in real pay.

Europa Press reported that the CEO of Acerinox said the company needed to adapt to a "very volatile world," which "cannot be done with the rigidity of the workforce." It threatened that if it could not push through extra "flexibility" and an increase in working time, it would have to resort to an ERTE. This element of Spanish employment law allows temporary cutting of hours.

According to *Europa Press*, Acerinox's profits for the first quarter of 2024 were 61 percent lower than the first quarter of last year, but it still made a profit of 53 million euros.

Teachers continue to oppose French government's "knowledge shock" reforms

Teachers in France continue to oppose the "knowledge shock" education reforms put forward by the government of prime minister Gabriel Attal.

Previous months have seen national strikes against the reforms. Parents and pupils have joined teachers in opposing the plans, which would see students put in streams based on attainment in mathematics and French.

The reforms were denounced by teachers as enforcing "social sorting" and lack any evidence of helping pupils' education. One mathematics teacher told *France Bleu* that, given the current resources, "With fifteen students, all in difficulty, I don't see how it is possible to give them special attention in 55 minutes of lessons." She added, "In heterogeneous classes, the students help each other... We're going to lose all that."

A one-day strike was held in Toulouse on Monday, on the first day of term after the Easter holidays. Other local strikes and protests took place, including in Seine-Saint-Denis, a department with some of the highest poverty rates in France. Teachers there demanded an increase in resources for schools, and parents joined the protests. A mother told *France Bleu* that due to teacher shortages, one of her children "has had no classes in sculpting for a year, and not in maths for six months."

French air-traffic controllers strike against restructure of working conditions

Most flights at France's largest airports were cancelled this Thursday, as air traffic controllers walked out to oppose a planned restructuring of their working conditions.

The UNSA union said the government was demanding "excessive flexibility," "restrictions on leave," and "assumed maintenance understaffing, reduction of services."

According to *Le Figaro*, 75 percent of flights were cancelled at Paris Orly airport, and 65 percent each at Paris Charles de Gaulle and Marseille airports.

This was the first major strike by air traffic controllers since the government imposed new restrictions on their right to strike. Under the new regime, workers are required to individually declare whether or not they will go on strike 48 hours in advance.

The SNCTA union, which represents around 60 percent of air traffic controllers, supported the restriction of the right to strike in January, and last year agreed not to call any strikes until after the Olympic Games. Indicating the anger of workers and opposition to such blatant corporatism, the SNCTA called the recent strikes, referring to the restructuring plans as "a provocation if not an insult," *Le Figaro* reported. Another three-day strike is planned in May.

Workers at recycling company continue long-running strike for a collective agreement in Leipzig, Germany

Workers at the recycling company SRW in the German city of Leipzig have been on strike for more than five months, since November 8.

Around 180 members of the IG Metall union are calling for a collective agreement involving an 8 percent pay rise, higher bonuses and a reduction in working hours, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported. IG Metall said that monthly wages at the plant are around 600 euros lower than at other companies.

The *EUWID* recycling industry news site reported that 79 members of the Bundestag signed an open letter to SRW calling for it to sign a collective agreement and provide what they called "German employment standards." IG Metall called for the company to sign a collective agreement and restart "our joint working relationship." SRW made a pay offer well below the striking workers' demands and claimed it would negotiate with the works council over individual contracts but not sign a collective agreement.

To channel the anger at poor working conditions into nationalism and anti-China agitation, the Bundestag letter, signed by Green and SPD politicians, said the Chinese embassy was contacted about the dispute. SRW is owned by the Hong Kong-based Chiho Environmental Group, which is not state-owned.

Dutch metal workers begin rolling strikes over collective bargaining

Metal workers in the Netherlands began rolling regional strikes this week, stopping work in Friesland on Monday and other provinces on other days.

According to *De Telegraaf*, the Federation of Technology Employers' Organisations, representing smaller metal companies, offered a pay rise of 9.19 percent spread across two years. The trade unions called for a pay rise of 12.5 percent to make up for the loss of real wages the last two years.

The FNV union said on Monday that it expected around 300 people to

join the strikes in Friesland, but a total of 600 stopped work, the *Algemeen Dagblad* reported.

Mechanics and electricians hold national one-day strike in Cyprus

Mechanics and electricians held a 24-hour national strike April 18, after the state mediation service declared a "deadlock" in negotiations between the Cypriot Association of Mechanical and Electrical Contractors (SEMIEK) and the employers' association OEV.

SEMIEK is calling for a collective agreement which will cover all workers in the sector, as well as an increase in pay. The *Cyprus Mail* reported that OEV called for the Ministry of Labour to intervene and ban the strike.

Teachers' pay strike at private schools in Finland

On Tuesday, teachers at 16 private schools in Finland began a two-day strike over pay, with around 1,300 teachers stopping work.

The OAJ teachers' union rejected an offer made by the government's mediation service. OAJ stated, "it is problematic that the national conciliator links the settlement proposal of the private education sector to wage increases and cost levels in the export sectors."

Trade unions in Finland generally accept that pay rises will be no higher than that agreed in the manufacturing and other export-oriented sectors, which has for the last few years ensured that almost all workers' pay increased by less than inflation. The right-wing coalition government, while pushing attacks on the right to strike through parliament, suggested enforcing this "Finnish model" with a rule that the mediator cannot suggest a higher rise.

Turkish auto workers strike against unfair dismissal of colleague

Last week, auto workers at a factory in the Turkish city of Bursa held a strike and protest against the dismissal of their 17-year-old colleague.

According to *Evrensel*, the company, a subsidiary of the German multinational auto company Continental, said the collective agreement with the Petrol-?? union gave it the right to dismiss the most recently hired employee, but Petrol-?? said it was an unfair dismissal.

Striking UK health care assistants continue fight at Leicester hospitals for pay grading increase

Around 800 health care assistants (HCAs) at three hospitals in Leicester, England began a 48-hour stoppage on Thursday.

The stoppage by Unison union members at Leicester General Hospital, Glenfield Hospital and Leicester Royal Infirmary is in support of being paid at band 3 level rather than band 2. HCAs on band 2 should be only providing personal care such as feeding and bathing. However, many do tasks such as taking blood and inserting cannulas, for which they should be on the higher band. The mainly female HCAs voted by a near 95

percent majority for the action.

The health care trust which runs the three hospitals accepts workers should be on band 3 but dispute how far back to backdate an uplift. Unison is arguing for it to be backdated to 2018, which has been accepted by other hospital trusts involved in similar disputes.

The Leicester HCAs have already carried out two previous 48-hour stoppages and are due to begin a 72-hour walkout on May 1, followed by a 24-hour stoppage on May 7.

Health care staff at hospital in the Wirral, UK walk out over pay grade

Health care workers employed as recovery theatre practitioners at Arrows Park Hospital in the Wirral, England, were on strike Tuesday and Wednesday.

The Unite union members, who walked out two days last week, are seeking a pay regrade. They argue that their responsibilities and duties mean they should be paid at a higher grade. They say they are owed around £8,000 each due to being wrongly graded.

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

Mental health social workers in Barnet in the UK capital are in the second week of a two-week strike.

They are involved in a long-running dispute over pay and staff retention, begun in September last year. They voted 91 percent in a 100 percent turnout to continue their action.

The Unison members have now held over 30 days of stoppages. They are paid 25 percent less than staff who work with children. Plans by Barnet council to use the services of social work staff agency Flex360 during the two-week strike were ended when Flex360 pulled out of the proposed arrangement.

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

Pay strikes by housing maintenance workers in London continue

Strikes by around 50 housing repair and maintenance workers employed by housing association London Sanctuary Housing are continuing, with stoppages Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

The Unite union members are opposing the imposition of a below-inflation 4 percent pay rise for 2023 and the cancellation of a £500 retention bonus. The walkouts, begun in March, are the first strikes ever undertaken by the workforce. Based in Hackney in London the workers are responsible for the maintenance of around 10,000 properties across the capital city.

According to Unite, some of its members at Sanctuary Housing, the UK's largest third sector employer, have to resort to foodbanks while the housing association has assets of more than £5 billion. Sanctuary's revenues for 2023 were over £900 million and its CEO is paid nearly £400,000 a year.

UK teachers at Lincoln school walk out over bullying claims

Teachers at the Sir Francis Hill Community Primary School in Lincoln, England walked out on Tuesday and Wednesday.

The National Education Union (NEU) members voted to strike in March, accusing school managers of bullying. The stoppage led to the closure of all but year six classes on Tuesday, and all classes on Wednesday.

Teachers belonging to the NASUWT union walked out on Wednesday over the same issue. They also plan to strike on May 1-2. According to the BBC, several teachers at the school have recently resigned.

Unite union suspends scheduled strike of airline passenger meals provider workers at London airport to ballot members on new deal

The Unite union has suspended a strike due to begin Friday of around 100 workers, including HGV drivers, employed by airline catering company Dnata at Gatwick airport, London.

The Unite union members voted to walk out to protest the unilateral removal of a shift allowance payment in April 2023, leaving workers around £1,500 to £2,000 a year worse off. Emirates-owned Dnata is responsible for providing in-flight meals to airlines EasyJet, TUI and others.

Unite is balloting workers on a new settlement proposed by Dnata. The strike was scheduled for April 26-29, with further stoppages May 3-6 and May 10-13.

Canteen workers at Drax, UK power station protest at employer's AGM

Around 20 mainly female canteen workers employed at Drax power station in Yorkshire, England will protest at their employer's AGM.

The Unite union members have held a series of stoppages since early December last year in their fight for a 50p an hour pay increase. They are employed by BaxterStorey on behalf of Drax power station. BaxterStorey's AGM is being held in London. It has assets of over £200 million and its latest reported operating profit was £25 million. Drax's operating profits for 2023 were £908 million.

A Unite union press release announcing the protest said fresh strike dates will be announced shortly.

London Underground rail station managers to strike over changes to terms and conditions

Hundreds of Customer Service Managers (CSMs) on the London Underground (LU) rail system (the tube) are set to begin a 24-hour strike Friday.

The action by Transport Salaried Staffs' Association members is in response to LU's "Station Proposals," which could potentially change CSMs' terms and conditions as well as their roles and location. Along with the stoppage, the CSMs will impose an overtime ban from April 29 to May 5. With some CSMs due to begin shifts during Friday, the impact

of the stoppage is likely to run into Saturday.

The walkout is expected to lead to last-minute closures of underground stations on the network. A previous strike on April 10 over the same issue led to last-minute closures of underground stations.

West Bank general strike in response to killings of Palestinians by Israeli forces

Sunday saw the occupied West Bank closed down by a general strike, leading to the closure of schools, banks, shops and universities. Public transport was also impacted.

The strike was to protest a raid on a refugee camp the previous day by Israeli military forces. The raid led to the death of at least 10 Palestinians. Attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank have intensified since the Hamas incursion of October last year.

According to the *Telegraph of India*, nearly 500 Palestinians in the West Bank have been killed since October. Deadly attacks by Israeli settlers have also increased. Around half a million settlers live in the West Bank, alongside the 2.7 million Palestinians. Their attacks on Palestinians have been emboldened by the Israeli genocide in Gaza. Thousands of work permits allowing West Bank Palestinians access to the Israeli labour market were cancelled, leading to an economic squeeze on the territory.

Strike by students at Iranian university over new mandatory clothing edict

Around 200 students at the Amir Kabir University in Tehran went on strike Sunday, refusing to attend classes. The main faculties affected included the computer engineering, textile engineering and mathematics.

The walkout was in protest at the Noor Plan, launched on April 13, enforcing the mandatory wearing of the hijab. Since its introduction, there have been reports of arrests and harassment of women not complying.

In September 2022, 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died at the hands of morality police, who had accused her of improperly wearing the hijab. Her death led to widespread protests across Iran, which both fuelled and merged with mass protests against falling living standards by pensioners, sugar workers and other sectors.

With inflation currently at 35 percent, and its economy near collapse due to US sanctions, Iran is being drawn into NATO's widening war in the Middle East through provocations such as the killing April 1 of seven military officers and two generals in the Iranian embassy in Syria in an airstrike by Israel's IDF.

Kenyan doctors continue strike over pay and conditions in face of government intimidation

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

Despite many attempts to force them back to work, including declaring the strike illegal, the Kenya Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentists Union, Kenya Union of Clinical Officers and Kenya National Union of Medical Laboratory Officers are refusing to back down until

their demands are addressed. Their demands include the hiring of trainee doctors on permanent contracts, improved working conditions, and equal pay for equal work.

The government has threatened to fire all striking doctors, arrest the union leaders and cut the intern-doctor salary to just a third of that was previously agreed (70,000 shillings rather than 206,000 shillings). This would leave them earning even less than they did before the agreement in 2017. The latest threat is to put all public sector workers on temporary contracts.

The government is also using disinformation. They claim they are prepared to meet all but one of the doctors' demands, without mentioning that the excluded demand is the central one, giving interns permanent positions.

The Kenyan public sector pay budget represents just 4.5 percent of GDP, half the global average of 9 percent. The head of the Kenyan public sector is carrying through the demand of the International Monetary Fund to make a further 10 percent cut to the wages bill in the public sector.

Cargo Workers strike at King Shaka International Airport, South Africa over pay and conditions

Over one hundred cargo employees at the Dube Trade Port Corporation at South Africa's King Shaka International Airport began indefinite strike action April 24 over pay and conditions.

The National Education, Health, and Allied Workers' Union members held placards demanding a thirteenth cheque, a medical allowance, a danger allowance and to be treated with dignity.

They work in the bargaining unit of the Dube TradePort special economic zone and air cargo complex at the airport. The company is a business arm of KwaZulu-Natal provincial government.

South African public sector workers in Pietermaritzburg in protest march to demand a living wage and permanent jobs

South African public sector workers held a march April 22 from Mayor's Walk in Pietermaritzburg to the premier's office. They are calling for security, cleaning, and food handling services to be in-sourced and for permanent positions with a living wage.

There are huge pay disparities between National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers members in the KwaZulu-Natal region to other areas.

Bongumusa Magwaza, a community health worker (CHW) since 2003, told *Witness*, "In 2010, we managed to get R3,500 and now we are only getting approximately R1,400 more. I am a widower who has to take care of three children and myself with that [salary] and I cannot cope anymore.

"CHWs in Gauteng have been made permanent and are earning over ten thousand rand, I just do not know why we, in KwaZulu-Natal, are being overlooked. As community healthcare workers we travel door-to-door to take care of people and nobody takes care of us."

A temporary health worker who supports a family of five told *Witness* he is only paid a stipend of R2,300 a month, despite working five days a week for five years.

Strike by Ugandan science tutors over pay scale continues

Science tutors at 23 Primary Teachers Colleges across Uganda are continuing their strike begun April 3.

The Uganda Professional Science Teachers' Union members oppose the government's decision to remove science tutors and some Information and Communication Technology teachers from the approved science pay scale.



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