

Two days of transport stoppages across Italy over pay and conditions; strikes and protests continue across Iran over collapse in cost-of-living; confectionery workers in Johannesburg, South Africa fight food giant Premier Foods over living wage

## 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.*

### Two days of widespread transport strikes in Italy

On Sunday, workers at the Italian state-owned rail company Trenitalia held a 24-hour strike, alongside colleagues in the part-privatised Trenord and private Italo rail services.

The strike was called by the “grassroots” USB union and the PdM/PdB National Assembly, which describes itself as “the self-organised group of [Italian railway] Train Drivers and Conductors who demand a fair renewal of the [collective agreement].”

The Assembly said after the strike around 60 percent of high-speed and long-distance trains were cancelled, and around 80 percent of regional services.

On Monday, several unions called an eight-hour strike in local public transport throughout Italy, to denounce low wages, a poor work-life balance and “the continuous risk of attacks,” *ADN* reported. The unions claimed that 85 percent of transport workers joined the strikes.

### Dutch workers begin strikes for early retirement

On Saturday, a wave of strikes began in the Netherlands in a campaign for the right to early retirement in physically demanding industries. According to the *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, dock workers in Rotterdam held a four-hour strike starting Saturday night.

An official from the Dutch Federation of Trade Unions (FNV) told the paper, “They do physically demanding work, work in shifts and perform on-call services, where they have to be on call all the time. The workload is enormous, it is almost impossible to sustain it. And I’m not even talking about the consequences for your health after retirement.”

The country’s current scheme for early retirement expires at the end of 2025, and FNV and Christian National Trade Union Federation members are demanding it be made permanent.

Workers in local transport and the national rail company NS stopped work on Tuesday and Wednesday, also halting international services and the Eurostar. Hundreds of cleaners at Schiphol Airport stopped work for 24 hours on Monday and protested outside the airport.

Schiphol’s management applied for an injunction against the rail strike, and a court ruled that four trains per hour must run between the airport and central Amsterdam, *Nieuwsblad* reported.

### Strike at construction sites across Ireland over travel payments

Plumbers, fitters, welders and apprentices at construction sites managed by the Mechanical Engineering and Building Services Contractors’ Association (MEBSCA) held a one-day strike in Ireland on September 6.

Unite union members want the restoration of payments for up to an hour’s travel time, which was cut after the 2008 financial crash. Another 24-hour strike is planned on Friday.

### German kindergarten workers hold strike in long-running staffing dispute

On Thursday, workers in municipally owned kindergartens in Berlin, Germany held a one-day warning strike, with another planned for next week. According to *rbb24*, around 2,000 workers walked out. The dispute has been running for months, including a five-day strike in July.

Verdi and GEW union members demand increased staffing levels in the capital’s kindergartens. The Berlin Senate continues to insist it is unable to make any changes as they must be agreed by the Tariff Association of German States, which includes most federal states. The GEW is balloting for an indefinite strike.

### Belgian autoworkers refuse to allow vehicles to leave Audi Brussels plant after threats of closure

Last week, workers at the Audi plant in the Forest municipality of Brussels refused to return to work after a prolonged shutdown after receiving the news that owner Volkswagen would not produce its new model at the Forest plant.

According to *The Brussels Times*, up to 1,500 jobs could be lost in October and a further 1,100 next year if a buyer is not found for the plant.

After workers protested, Audi began a lockout at the factory, sealing the gates and refusing to pay salaries. In response, workers confiscated the keys to around 300 cars to prevent the remaining stock being sold off.

On Tuesday, the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions said it “showed good will by returning the keys.” After the company responded with demands which are “not feasible in practice,” the unions said it would take Audi to court as it “has not respected the conditions for a lockout,” *Nieuwsblad* reported.

### **Brussels Uber drivers continue strikes against new assignment system**

Uber drivers in Brussels stopped work between 7am and 10am and again between 5pm and 7pm this week and will strike between 9pm and 3am at the weekend, opposing a recent change to the app, *The Brussels Times* reported.

The new “TripRadar” system reportedly assigns several drivers to the same passenger, creating competition between Uber drivers.

### **Staff and asylum seekers at Belgian detention centre strike and protest over unhygienic conditions**

Staff at the 127bis detention centre near Brussels Airport announced a strike on September 6 in response to a bedbug infestation. The centre holds around 40 asylum seekers whose claims have been denied. Fifteen refused to return to their infested rooms on Monday and spent the night outside in protest.

Getting The Voice Out, an organisation which opposes the repressive “Fortress Europe” policy by publishing information on the conditions in detention centres, stated: “They urgently need to close this centre or at least thoroughly disinfect and renovate it. It is no way to live, it affects us mentally and physically.”

One of the striking workers told *Het Laatste Nieuws*, “In the past, a pest control company would come by for a whole day, but today they are gone after 10 minutes.”

### **Taxi drivers strike in Athens, Greece, against new tax law**

Taxi drivers in Athens began a 24-hour strike on Monday, opposing the Greek government’s new tax law, which targets self-employed workers and freelancers, and may cost them thousands of euros each year.

The Attica Taxi Drivers Union said it was also opposing “[t]he government’s obsession with electrification by 2026,” stating that “[u]nfair competition from private cars, multinational applications and piracy robs us every day of our highest quality transport work with the tolerance of the State,” *ef.syn* reported.

### **Delivery workers protest draconian new rules in Istanbul, Turkey**

“Gig economy” delivery workers for the Turkish food delivery company Yemeksepeti, owned by the German multinational Delivery Hero, protested this week against draconian new compliance rules.

According to *BirGün*, these included being locked out of the app for three days if they contact the support team more than three times in a week.

On Sunday, they held a press conference outside a warehouse in Istanbul, and on Monday protested outside Yemeksepeti’s headquarters. The president of the Motor Courier Workers Association said delivery workers were declared “heroes” during the earthquake and pandemic, “But when it came to taking our bread, you declared us inferior,” *Evrensel* reported.

### **French video game developers strike over pay and the right to work from home**

Workers at the French video game studio Spiders held a strike last week, with pickets on September 2-3, demanding higher pay and the right to work from home.

In an open letter published on the website of the Video Game Workers’ Union, 43 workers said their pay was lower than the industry average, and they had suffered “[u]njustified refusals to allow work from home,” including when temperatures in the office were “exceeding 28°C or 30°C.”

On September 5, Spiders issued a press release claiming the open letter was “false and defamatory” but also agreeing to allow remote working and a 3 percent average pay rise, *RTBF* reported.

### **Further strikes by hundreds of hospital ancillary staff at Colchester, UK hospital trust privatisation plans**

Hundreds of UK ancillary staff at Colchester Hospital began a four-day walkout Tuesday, while those at Ipswich Hospital and Aldeburgh Community Hospital began a 48-hour one. The hospitals are run by the East Suffolk and North Essex NHS Foundation Trust (ESNEFT).

The Unison union members, who work as caterers, cleaners, housekeepers and porters, are protesting plans by ESNEFT to privatise the ancillary services provided by the workers. A final decision on the privatisation plans is due November.

The stoppage follows a five-day strike held August 19-23. Unison accused the trust of drafting in strike-breakers during that stoppage from as far away as Newcastle. It said the trust accommodated them in hotels and bussed them to the hospital sites, paying them £27 an hour on the night shift and £17 an hour on the day shift.

Ancillary staff working for ESNEFT at Ipswich Hospital are already employed by private contractor OCS on inferior conditions. They have less annual leave and lower sick pay than directly employed NHS staff.

### **More stoppages by job centre security guards in England over pay**

Around 600 security guards at job centres in England began a week-long strike Monday.

The 600 Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members are employed by outsourced company G4S. They are on the minimum wage of £11.44 an hour. They turned down an offer of an extra 23p an hour.

Around 1,500 GMB union members working as security guards also took action over the issue of pay and held a joint strike with PCS members at the end of August. GMB began stoppages in May, while PCS members began in June.

The GMB union has suspended action by its members while they vote on an improved offer from G4S. PCS members will ballot on the offer September 17-27. At the same time, they will ballot over whether to hold further pay stoppages.

A further week-long stoppage by PCS members is planned for September 23. The walkouts by security guards have led to the closure of some job centres over safety concerns.

### **Valley Vets veterinary staff in South Wales garner support for ongoing strike**

Around 100 veterinary staff working for Valley Vets in South Wales are continuing their pay strike begun August 6. They initially walked out July 16-30. The striking workers have garnered nearly 50,000 signatures in solidarity support.

The British Veterinary Union (BVU) members rejected a derisory pay deal effective from April 2024. The BVU is a branch of the Unite union. They are employed as veterinary surgeons, nurses, animal care assistants and receptionists.

Valley Vets is part of the VetPartners group. The stoppage is the first by veterinary workers employed in private practice. The strikers are providing emergency cover throughout the stoppage.

Announcing the strike, Unite noted, "Valley Vets has offered its lowest paid staff a derisory pay rise that takes them to slightly above the minimum wage. This is despite 80 percent reporting that they regularly borrow money to meet basic living costs and five percent reporting having to use food banks.

"Meanwhile, higher paid workers have been offered increases of between one and 1.5 percent from April 2024. The offer is a real terms pay cut as the RPI rate of inflation was 3.3 percent when the deal was due to be implemented."

Unite said VetPartners made gross profits of over £550 million in 2023, up more than £100 million on the previous year. VetPartners acquired around 100 practices in the last financial year. It is owned by private equity company BC Partners, which has a North American and European-wide portfolio worth £138 billion.

In a press release, Unite noted, "VetPartners says it is running at a loss despite its extremely healthy cash flow. This is because the company, which has more than 400 UK sites, has a policy of loading itself with debt to fund aggressive market expansion to increase its sale value. BC Partners bought VetPartners for £700 million in 2018; the company is now worth an estimated £3 billion."

Unite also noted, "Rather than engage in negotiations, VetPartners has reacted to the strikes by closing its four satellite veterinary surgeries and moving all staff to its central hospital in Cardiff. The company says this is necessary to review Valley Vets' business future. Unite, however, believes this is an attempt to intimidate the workforce into ending their dispute."

With the increasing gobbling up of small and independent vet practices by big corporate entities, the BVU has become the fastest growing Unite

union branch.

### **Food production workers at Oscar Mayer in Wrexham, Wales set to strike over "fire and rehire" threat**

Around 550 UK ready meal production workers employed by Oscar Mayer in Wrexham, Wales were due to walk out Thursday over threats to cut pay.

The Unite union members voted by a 98 percent majority to strike in response to the company's plans to get rid of some paid breaks and enhanced payments as well as abolishing days off in lieu of working bank holidays. Unite says the cuts will leave the workers around £2,000 a year worse off, and that if they do not accept the cuts they will be fired and rehired on the inferior conditions.

The action is due to last four weeks until October 10, with Unite saying action will escalate if there is no resolution.

Oscar Mayer produces ready meals for supermarket chains including Asda, Sainsbury's and Tesco.

### **Packaging workers at Jiffy in Winsford, England in second week of two-week strike over pay and conditions**

Around 50 UK workers employed by the Jiffy packaging company plant in Winsford, Cheshire, are in the second week of a two-week stoppage begun September 2.

They previously walked out for over five weeks and have implemented an overtime ban since July 1. One of the products produced is the Jiffy padded envelope.

The Unite union members rejected a 1.5 percent pay increase, backdated to April 1. This represents a cut in real terms, with RPI inflation at 4.3 percent. The workers demand an 8 percent pay rise and an increase in sick pay to 12 weeks from the current eight. They also want a restoration of breaks and changes to bank holiday working arrangements.

The firm's latest profit figures were around £6 million. Further strikes are scheduled.

### **Walkout by school support staff at London school over job cuts**

Around 35 school support staff, including teaching assistants at the Mulgrave Primary School in Greenwich, London, walked out for one day on Wednesday.

The GMB, Unison and Unite union members oppose restructuring plans by the school, which would cut 14 jobs and cut pay while increasing unpaid duties and removing flexible working.

According to Unite, further industrial action could be on the cards.

### **Administrative staff at UK education union strike over workloads**

Around 30 administrative staff working for the National Education Union (NEU) at its HQ in the UK capital walked out on Wednesday.

The Unite union members are protesting excessive workloads that are leading to high levels of sickness and stress. According to Unite, NEU management refuse to acknowledge the issue. A two-day stoppage is planned for October 2-3.

### **Asda supermarket workers in England protest over equal pay**

Monday saw protests by UK Asda supermarket workers in Brighton outside the Trades Union Congress and in Manchester outside the Manchester Civil Justice Centre.

The GMB union members are part of an equal pay claim against the Asda supermarket chain. Monday was the first day of the hearing of the case at the Civil Justice Centre in Manchester, which is expected to last three months.

The basis of the GMB's equal pay claim is that the mainly women retail staff earn up to £3.74p an hour less than warehouse staff, who are mainly men. The long-running case, brought by law firm Leigh Day, began in 2014. Leigh Day is representing thousands of other retail staff working for other supermarket staff in similar claims, including at Tesco and Sainsbury's.

An Employment Tribunal in August ruled in favour of Next fashion and homeware outlet workers in a dispute over pay differences between retail and warehouse staff.

### **Protest by Iraqi education contract workers in Baghdad**

Around 450 education workers protested in Al-Tahrir Square in Baghdad, Iraq on Sunday.

The teachers were taken on in 2020 as contract workers. They were protesting the government's refusal to give them permanent contracts after four years of temporary employment. They threatened to strike as the new school year begins if their plight is not addressed.

### **Union suspends strike of Israeli teachers over pay and hire of non-union staff**

The union representing high school teachers throughout Israel suspended the strike of teachers on Sunday. They began their walkout on September 1, the first day of the new school year.

Teachers were seeking higher pay, but the Ministry of Education has seen budget cuts driven by the cost of the war in Gaza. Israeli teachers have long suffered low pay. An average Israeli teacher's monthly salary is around NIS 7,583, compared to a national average of NIS 11,000.

Teachers also oppose Ministry of Finance plans to hire teachers on an individual contract basis rather than collectively through the union.

Schools in northern and southern Israel had been exempt from the strike because of security concerns, but the strike affected around 2.4 million children.

The suspension follows demands from the Ministry of Finance calling on local authorities to cut the pay of strikers. A body representing pupils' parents called on Prime Minister Netanyahu to become involved.

Announcing the strike suspension, Teachers' Union head, Ran Erez said, "Out of responsibility to the state, teachers and students, and despite

the irresponsibility of the Finance Ministry and the 'blown-up' negotiations, we announce the strike is suspended."

### **Strikes and protests by various sectors of workers continue across Iran over cost-of-living crisis**

Strikes and protests by retirees, oil workers, teachers and others with grievances continue to take place across Iran.

A snapshot of such protests that took place Monday includes telecommunications retirees demonstrating in Tehran against the failure of pensions to rise in line with the escalating cost of living, while Literacy Movement Organisation teachers held a protest demanding payment of wage arrears and improved working conditions.

Protests by telecommunications retirees also took place in Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province and Kermanshah in Western Iran over the devaluation of their pensions.

In Bushehr, in southern Iran, workers at the Fajr Jam Gas Refining company protested in support of higher wages and improved working conditions.

The same day saw protests in Kerman in the south of Iran as victims of the Balad al-Amin housing project scam demanded the return of paid deposits. The protest was part of wider growing movement against systemic housing market corruption.

Meanwhile, tractor drivers and farmers in Dezful in Khuzestan Province protested fuel shortages.

Protests and strikes are ongoing against Iran's authoritarian regime and collapsing living standards, fuelled by US sanctions. NATO military action against Iran grows more imminent, as the imperialist powers accuse Iran of arming Russia in the Ukraine war.

### **Confectionery workers in Johannesburg, South Africa, fight food giant Premier Foods for a living wage**

More than 600 confectionery workers are continuing their indefinite strike, begun August 19, at the South African food giant Premier Group's Mr Sweet factory in Johannesburg.

The firm sought an order from the Labour Court to prohibit the strike, while 23 housing, law and labour organisations across the country called for a boycott of Mr Sweet products.

The majority union at the plant, the Simunye Workers Forum, dropped their initial demand for a R19,500 basic monthly salary to R12,000 but Premier Group still insist on an increase of only 7 percent on the lowest paid workers' monthly pay of R6,000. A basic monthly food basket for a worker costs R5,200, while last year, Premier Group made R921 million in profits, up 15 percent from the year before.

### **Casual municipal workers in Johannesburg, South Africa, continue protests for permanent employment**

Over 500 casual and voluntary municipal cleansing workers subcontracted to the Pikitup agency marched through Johannesburg, South Africa on September 6, and demonstrated outside the offices of the city mayor.

The workers, led by the community-based organisation, Combat Movement, demand permanent employment. They want to see the legal report made by the municipality in answer to their previous strike action. In May, over 300 Pikitup workers protested on the streets and picketed depots, but have still seen no change in their employment status despite the city filling 400 new posts.

They blame corruption within the municipal tendering process for the existence of subcontractors who employ the casual labour for Pikitup, often through nepotism.

data, voice, SMS messages and basic internet access affected.



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### **Kenyan airport workers strike to oppose takeover**

Airport workers at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi, Kenya began strike action September 11. They are opposing a 30-year lease being awarded to India's Adani Group Holdings to take over operations at East Africa's largest airport.

Operations at JKIA were brought to a standstill September 10, when workers began a go-slow prior to the start of the strike. Some airlines have suspended operations, while others are attempting to maintain services despite the risks without the usual staff.

The Kenya Aviation Workers Union has called for strike action three times in recent months, only to postpone it at the last minute. It could no longer avoid a strike due to the level of anger in the Kenyan working class, expressed in the recent mass protests.

JKIA airport handles 7.5 million passengers annually, making it one of Africa's busiest.

### **Students at Kyambogo University, Kenya continue protest over fee increase**

A student protest is continuing at Kyambogo University in Kenya against a 50 percent fee increase, despite at least 13 arrests and threats of victimisation.

The university management claimed the fee increase was acceptable because they were imposing it on "only" two departments—the School of Management and Entrepreneurship, and the School of Built Environment. They accused the protestors of being "political."

### **Nigerian telecommunication workers walk out in nationwide strike**

Around 800 Nigerian telecommunication workers walked out in an indefinite nationwide strike on September 9.

Their demands include reinstatement of sacked workers, recognition of workers' years of service, immediate pension deduction and remittance and the approval of the National Health Insurance Scheme, covering employees, their spouses and other dependents.

The Private Telecommunications and Communications Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PTECSSAN) is putting the focus on its "right" to immediate remittance of membership dues taken from its members' pay packets.

Transmission and field maintenance engineers, customer service engineers, fibre engineers, and other critical workers are among those taking part in the strike. The strike will likely soon lead to outages, with