

Finnish unions launch “political strikes”

Friday 8 March 2024, by [SAK](#) (Date first published: 6 March 2024).

At a press conference on Tuesday, the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK) explained its efforts to establish negotiating channels with the Finnish Government in recent weeks. These efforts have been futile, and the Government has instead announced the intention to continue implementing its plans in all respects.

“We have been willing to negotiate on major issues of principle that are important to us, in line with the Government’s objectives. Even such significant compromises have not evoked a response from them,” explains SAK President **Jarkko Eloranta**.

The SAK trade unions will accordingly begin a wave of political strike action on Monday 11 March that is currently intended to continue for two weeks. The individual unions will announce the targets of this strike action in accordance with their own notification obligations.

“We are keen to ensure that these measures pose no danger to public health or safety. I have been in touch with the National Emergency Supply Agency proposing a low threshold for contact in the event of any problems. This also applies to other public authorities.”

The participating SAK affiliates are the Industrial Union, the Public and Welfare Sectors Trade Union JHL, the Finnish Transport Workers’ Union AKT, the Electrical Workers’ Union, the Finnish Construction Trade Union, and Service Union United PAM. Other SAK trade unions will also demonstrate their solidarity by contributing financially. The unions will announce potential further sympathy measures separately.

The measures will target export and import operations at ports and the railway system. Major industrial plants and distribution terminals will also be affected. About 7,000 employees will be taking strike action in key industries.

The unions are prepared to suspend their preparations and strike action if the Government indicates that it is willing to mitigate and balance its proposed cuts.

SAK commissioned Verian to conduct an SMS survey of a random sample of SAK-affiliated trade union members a few weeks ago. This survey asked respondents whether they were in favour of taking strike action against cuts in the world of work. Some 81 per cent of the 7,598 respondents expressed support for such strikes. A further 15 per cent opposed strike action, and 4 per cent were undecided.

“We are doing this to defend the rights and interests of all employees, and we are also seeking to ensure fair and equitable treatment for future generations of employees in Finland. This treatment should enable employees to influence their own terms and conditions of employment through collective bargaining and agreement,” SAK President Jarkko Eloranta insists.

Some examples of issues on which SAK has been willing to negotiate

- Cuts in earnings-related unemployment benefit should be eased for the low paid, families with children, and the elderly unemployed. This could be realised by such measures as deferring benefit phasing, partly restoring child supplements, and easing access by the elderly to a new round of eligibility for earnings-related benefit.
- The parties to local collective bargaining must be determined in accordance with a collective agreement. If a business has no shop steward or applicable collective agreement, then a representative elected under the Employment Contracts Act or the entire staff collectively could be a party to the agreement. A statutory right to elect a shop steward should nevertheless be enacted for all workplaces, with the shop steward serving as the primary contracting party.
- If the right to local collective bargaining is extended to unorganised enterprises, then duties must also be imposed on them. A general provision of reasonableness must be enacted for local bargaining, whereby any local agreement that merely compromises the interests of employees is deemed null and void. This provision should at least apply when the party negotiating the local agreement is not a representative of a national employee association.
- Instead of abolishing adult education subsidy, it should be reformed to support our national objective of improving the level of skills. The subsidy should be targeted at employees with less education or training, who hold a secondary or lower level qualification or standard of training. The subsidy should be tailored to provide more effective support for in-service training. The amendment that took effect in 2020 already strongly encourages this.
- Political strikes should be permitted, but subject to an assessment of proportionality by the Labour Court. Sympathy strikes should be lawful in principle when called in support of lawful industrial action. The Labour Court could assess the proportionality of sympathy strikes. This assessment should consider the connection to the main industrial dispute, the genuine coercive impact, and adequate safeguarding of enterprise operating conditions. Notification periods for strike action should be reduced, and the use of agency labour in strikes should be banned.

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<https://www.sak.fi/en/whats-new/news/sak-unions-begin-political-strikes-monday>