

Strikes in Italy and Iran against exposure to coronavirus at work;  
South African bus strike threat over pay

# 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.

## Strikes across Italy over coronavirus fears

Strikes have taken place across Italy over concerns related to the COVID-19 outbreak. From March 12, workers began walkouts, spreading across the country, to protest the lack of health precautions.

Negotiations between employers and trade union representatives under the auspices of the Italian government led to the signing of a protocol. Expressing the corporatist nature of the agreement, designed to serve the interests of business, the Italian prime minister tweeted, “For the good of the country, for the protection of workers’ health. Italy does not stop.”

On March 11, authorities in Rome announced workers could work from home but did not order a complete shutdown of production, leaving companies to make their own decisions.

Workers in the northern city of Liguria at the shipbuilding company Fincantieri came out on strike on March 12 after a worker tested positive for coronavirus. The strike spread to other shipyards in the region.

At the same time, in the southern region of Puglia, steelworkers at the Ilva company began a 10-day strike demanding protective measures to guard against the disease.

## Staff at Belgian care home strike

Care workers employed by the French-based European-wide care provision group Orpea in Belgium have been protesting staff shortages. SETCa and CNE union members at one home held a strike on March 10. A strike took place the previous week at an Orpea care home in Waterloo. A further strike was scheduled for March 16.

Workers explained that due to staff shortages, they have only 16 minutes in a morning to give each resident breakfast and get them cleaned and dressed ready for the day.

## UK: London ferry workers’ stoppage

UK workers on the Woolwich ferry service across the Thames River in London held a 24-hour strike on March 13. The Unite union members previously held a 24-hour strike on February 28, and further ones are planned for March 27 and April 6.

The workers are employed by Briggs Marine. They accuse the company of failing to pay the London Living Wage of £10.75 an hour. The company argues it does, and Briggs Marine is signed up as a Living Wage accredited employer. However, the workers say the wage is calculated based on supplements for extra duties, which is in opposition to the Living Wage regulations.

Transport for London (TfL) will take over the contract for running the ferry later in the year.

## UK housing repair workers at London council to strike

Around 120 UK housing repair staff working for Greenwich Council in London are to strike March 23 and 24. The Unite members are protesting the council reneging on a pay agreement reached last October.

The workers accuse the council of unilaterally imposing changes to the performance bonus scheme.

## Strike by charity workers for the homeless in southern England

Several hundred UK workers at St Mungo’s homeless charity began a three-day strike on Monday. The Unite union members based in London and across southern England are opposing changes in sickness policy and the ratio of more-experienced senior workers employed. They are concerned the changes are aimed at creating a lower-paid workforce with inferior conditions.

Picket lines were set up in London, Brighton and Bristol. In a *Guardian* article on March 16, a Unite regional officer said, “St Mungo’s workers have tried their utmost to arrive at a reasonable settlement with their employer and have been rejected at every turn.”

The charity provides beds for nearly 3,000 homeless people in over 100 hostels. The striking workers are also angry at St Mungo’s sharing information on migrant rough sleepers with the Home Office. St Mungo’s initially denied this but later admitted it had.

## **UK staff at London Council announce strike against new work contract**

Teachers and other council staff at Labour-run council Tower Hamlets will hold a one-day strike next week. The Unison and National Education Union members are opposing attempts by the council to impose a revised work contract.

The council is seeking to impose its “Tower Rewards” new work contract, which will mean worse terms and conditions for staff. The council plans to sack its workforce and re-engage them under terms of the new contract.

## **Iranian workers protest being forced to work in midst of COVID-19 pandemic**

The coronavirus is raging in Iran, but workers are being forced to work despite the danger of contracting the disease.

On Sunday around 3,500 iron ore miners in the southeastern province of Kerman walked out after being forced to work despite the risk of infection. Senior managers at the mine have been allowed to quarantine at home.

Manufacturing workers in the northwestern city of Tabriz are being forced to work in spite of high levels of COVID-19. Workers told the press they work 12-hour shifts in close contact with other workers. They also report not being supplied with protective clothing or masks and are not checked for high temperatures.

## **Bus drivers in Israeli city of Jerusalem strike after attack**

Bus drivers on route 68 in Jerusalem held a two-hour strike last week to protest an attack on a bus driver, which had taken place a few days earlier. The drivers say there is a growing incidence of such attacks.

The strike by Histadrut transport union members called on the Transport Ministry to install dividing panels to protect drivers and to install security cameras on buses.

## **Transport workers’ strike planned on South Africa’s buses**

Transport workers on South Africa’s buses are planning strike action over failed wage negotiations.

Three rounds of negotiations have collapsed, two under the CCMA arbitration services over the last two months. Workers in five unions are demanding an 8.5 percent and 7.5 percent wage increase in two categories, plus other related demands in a one-year agreement.

The employers’ organisations in COBEA and SABEA in the South African Road Passenger Bargaining Council negotiating body offered a three-year agreement of 6.0, 5.5, and 4.5 percent.

The CCMA has issued the unions a strike certificate. The unions have dropped nine of their original demands, to no effect, but are still hoping the employers will come back with “something worth taking back to the workers.”

## **South African public sector strike may be suspended over COVID-19 fears**

South Africa’s public sector planned one-day strike and demonstration over wage cuts may be suspended over fears of coronavirus infection.

The National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) members planned to march on the African National Congress (ANC) headquarters in Johannesburg on March 20 if the government continues to renege on a final pay increase of a three-year deal. A wage agreement with NEHAWU is under threat, saving the government R37.8 billion on the national wage bill of R160 billion over three years.

The government banned gatherings of more than 100 persons to restrict the spread of COVID-19, effectively banning mass demonstrations.

NEHAWU, supported by the Confederation of South African Trade Unions, a partner in the ANC government, says it will defy the ban.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) planned demonstration March 13 at ANC offices against job destruction at state power company Eskom was called off. The NUM is supporting restrictions on gatherings of over 100 and has cancelled all union gatherings with immediate effect.

## **Walkout threat by municipal workers in Mpumalanga, South Africa**

Municipal workers in Ehlanzeni District, Mpumalanga, South Africa, are threatening a walkout. Workers demonstrated at their workplace, handing in a memorandum of demands and picketing.

The Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union and the South African Municipal Workers’ Union members are demanding pay equality for the same duties, safety at work, that temporary workers are brought onto the books, adherence to bargaining agreement over allowances, and an end to privatisation. They have given the council a week to respond to their demands.

## **Stoppage at Uitenhage Provincial Hospital, South Africa, over staff shortages**

Around 40 workers, including gardeners, cleaners, porters and other general staff at the Uitenhage Provincial Hospital, South Africa, went on strike March 12.

The NEHAWU members demonstrated inside the hospital over staff shortages. Cleaners complain that there used to be three cleaners for all six floors, and one must do them all now.

There are 40 vacancies among the auxiliary workers, who are demanding staffing return to the levels of 2015 when the hospital was fully staffed.

## **Waste disposal workers on go-slow in Durban, South Africa**

Workers at Durban Solid Waste (DSW) in South Africa have gone on a go-slow over a change in overtime payments.

Management of the Durban city authorities are restructuring the service to cut the wage bill. They say workers are milking the system and accuse them of claiming excessive overtime payments.

The South African Municipal Workers' Union and the Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union declare that clean-ups after city events incur extra work, which requires payment. The dispute has left bins unemptied, with rotting rubbish around the city for several days.

### **Nigerian academics strike over non-payment of wages**

Academic staff on a warning strike at Nigeria's universities say they will continue their stoppage indefinitely if their wages are not paid.

The government is not paying salaries to lecturers because they have refused to register onto the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), which they say is not appropriate. The Academic Staffs University Union has produced an alternative registration platform.

The Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities is also rejecting IPPIS after irregularities appeared in salaries.

Those irregularities also affected the Colleges of Education Academic Staff Union wages payments.

### **Ghana mortuary workers threaten stoppage over lack of coronavirus protection**

Workers at Ghana's mortuaries are threatening to strike over the lack of preparations regarding the coronavirus danger. The chairman of the Mortuary Workers Association of Ghana union said the government has not consulted them or provided any education or specialist equipment. If this does not change, workers will walk out next week.



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