

# Strikes mount across Europe against official response to coronavirus pandemic

**Allison Smith, Alex Lantier****26 March 2020**

Strikes and social anger are growing among workers across Europe against attempts by national governments and business groups, aided by the complicity of union bureaucracies, to force them to work at non-essential jobs amid the raging coronavirus pandemic.

After over a week of lockdown in Italy and France, and with lockdown now underway in Britain, Spain and much of Germany, the number of cases still is growing rapidly. As the number of global confirmed cases rose to 464,683 yesterday, Europe's total rose to 254,619 including 14,375 deaths. There were 5,553 new cases and 454 deaths recorded in Spain, 5,210 new cases and 683 deaths in Italy, 4,332 new cases and 47 deaths in Germany, 2,929 new cases and 231 deaths in France, 1,452 new cases and 43 deaths in Britain and 1,020 new cases and 31 deaths in Switzerland.

Across Europe, testing and hospital care are unavailable to the broad mass of workers, who are told instead to take painkillers and wait at home to see if they develop severe pneumonia. This leads to tragedies like the death last week of Kayla Williams, a 36-year-old mother of three in south London. On March 20, paramedics told her she could not be admitted to hospital as she was not a "priority." Williams died of COVID-19 the next day, untreated at home.

Workers are bitterly angry at big corporations, flush with cash from multi-billion-euro government bailouts, who demand they return to work to produce profits for investors whose bloated fortunes depend on constant handouts of public money. It is imperative for as many workers as possible to shelter at home, on full pay, to avoid spreading the disease. With more social contact at work inevitably leading to more COVID-19 deaths, the question posed to workers is: how many workers want to die for the profits of the super-rich?

Yesterday, in the regions of Milan and Rome in Italy, metalworkers mounted a one-day strike called by the unions, two weeks after launching wildcat strikes across Italy that compelled Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's government and Italy's corrupt unions to agree to a nationwide lockdown. The metalworkers strike came amid repeated

strikes at Amazon plants, including the giant Torrazza Piemonte facility, and threats of a walkout by petrol station attendants and owners.

Far broader layers of workers still forced to work in Italy and across Europe—postal, grocery and bank workers—are also discussing strike action and their anger at being kept on the job, often for non-essential purposes, without proper masks and protection equipment against the coronavirus.

A grocery store attendant living in a working class district of southern Madrid told the press about his fear and anger at being kept on the job under unsafe conditions, after at least 12,000 people have been infected, 1,500 have died, and over 1,000 are in intensive care in the city. "We are the third class passengers on the Titanic," he said. "We are playing with our lives just for shit. We have been sold out."

Similarly, workers at the Amazon facility in Saran, France overwhelmingly called in sick last week and a few hundred attended a meeting with union officials and management to demand the right to get paid time off if there is an imminent threat to life at work—a right guaranteed under French law. One worker at Saran commented, "A package can be manipulated twenty times by different people. We come to work every day with fear in our throats. It can't go on like this."

Workers at Saran receive no protective equipment—even as they ship face masks, hand sanitizing gel and other critical equipment internationally—and are often packed together, violating rules requiring a minimum 2-meter distance between workers. Faced with management's attempt to buy workers' agreement to these deadly conditions with a measly offer of a two euro pre-tax wage increase, another worker refused, saying, "That is just shameful."

Workers there join their brothers and sisters at PSA auto plants at Mulhouse and Trémery, the Toyota plant at Onnaing, the Renault auto plant at Sandouville, the Bombardier plant in Crespin and the *Chantiers de l'Atlantique* shipyard at Saint Nazaire—all of whom have walked off the job, citing their right to avoid imminent threats to life at work.

Representatives of the ruling class are intensely aware and fearful of the growing challenge from workers for control of the factories. “In every industrial sector, including in many where activity is not banned by health measures, there is an extremely brutal shift in workers’ attitudes,” warned the vice-president of France’s MEDEF business federation, Patrick Martin. Callously denouncing workers’ “over-reaction” to the deadly threat of COVID-19, he complained that management “can no longer continue production due to pressure from workers.”

Yesterday, workers at multiple food-processing plants in Northern Ireland—ABP Meats in Lurgan and Moy Park at Seagoe, Portadown and Co Armagh—walked out. Workers at these facilities have “key worker” status, as their continued work is critical to ensuring the population’s food supply. However, despite this supposedly critical status, workers at these plants are left to work in deplorable, even lethal conditions.

Striking workers at ABP, whose owner Larry Goodman is worth an estimated €2.45 billion, demanded social distancing measures at work and the deep cleaning of workstations previously used by workers who tested positive for COVID-19. Workers at Moy Park, a UK-based transnational with operations from the Republic of Ireland to France and the Netherlands, posted pictures on Twitter showing workers forced to cram into a crowded canteen, violating basic safety guidelines for avoiding infection.

For workers, the way forward against the pandemic and the irresponsible policies of the capitalist class is to organize their struggles via committees of action, independent of the trade unions. No confidence can be given to the union bureaucracies, financed and controlled by the same corporations and governments trying to force workers back to work. If the pandemic has already shown the need for workers to take control of industrial facilities to save public health, it is also increasingly showing the need for workers to take political power.

This is the lesson of the trade union talks with Conte and the Confindustria business federation in Italy yesterday amid the one-day trade union strike. While Confindustria demanded a halt to all strikes, and Conte claimed Italy “can’t afford” strikes by workers, the unions gave their blessing to a rotten deal for police authorities and businesses to jointly issue certifications that their operations are “essential.” This would allow them to force workers back to work.

The affluent operatives of the union bureaucracy signed a deal consciously hostile to workers’ demands to shelter at home. Police prefects, the unions boasted in a document jointly published with Confindustria, “will involve territorial organizations to assist self-certification by companies that

they are engaged in functional activities to maintain the continuity of essential supply chains.”

The claim that Italy or Europe cannot afford strikes is a political lie. In fact, what Europe cannot afford is more mass deaths caused by policies designed to enrich the financial aristocracy.

Corporations and billionaire investors have gotten a €750 billion bailout from the European Central Bank, a €1.1 trillion bailout in Germany and hundreds of billions in subsidies overwhelmingly benefiting big business from every major European state. A small but not insignificant part of these funds are earmarked to fund the union bureaucracy. And as the super-rich exploit the COVID-19 pandemic to grab trillions of euros, they adopt policies that ensure the pandemic will continue.

A decisive confrontation between the workers and the financial aristocracy is being prepared.

Fury is building among workers across Europe at governments’ failure to undertake an aggressive response to the pandemic. In France, an Odoxa poll found that 70 percent do not believe the government tells the population the truth, 79 percent do not believe it has a clear policy, and 88 percent believe confinement of the population should have begun earlier. Yet the main lines of the French pandemic policy—opposing sheltering at home, contempt for security measures and denying the sick testing and hospital care—were shared across Europe.

The way forward is a revolutionary struggle by the working class to expropriate the vast sums of public money handed to the super-rich, putting those resources toward socialist policies, including an internationally coordinated struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic.



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