

# Strikes spread in Europe and Africa over lack of coronavirus safety precautions

## 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.

### French Amazon workers protest lack of safety over coronavirus

Around 200 out of the 1,700 workforce at Amazon's distribution centre in Douai, northern France walked out on March 17 protesting unsafe working conditions in relation to the coronavirus pandemic. The following day, half the workforce at Amazon in Montelimar, southwest France went on strike. The company said it would not pay the strikers.

According to the Sud-Solidaires union, around 80 Amazon staff at Lauwin-Planque distribution centre near Dunkirk walked out on March 19. One worker speaking to the *Financial Post* said, "It's impossible for the safety distances to be respected in the warehouses. Our lockers are all stuck next to each other, when I come to get my belongings, we're all rubbing shoulders." Other Amazon workers report that facemasks and hand sanitisers are in short supply.

Amazon in France has experienced a surge in demand and is seeking to recruit an additional 100,000 temporary staff to cope.

### Italian metal workers strike over companies operating despite COVID-19 pandemic

Metal workers in Lombardy and Lazio in northern Italy held a 24-hour strike on Wednesday. They were protesting having to work at companies not considered essential during the coronavirus outbreak. The region has been hard hit by the epidemic, with over 5,000 having died from the disease.

Textile and chemical workers were also due to take part in the strikes.

### Walkouts at two UK postal delivery sites

Postal workers at Southwark in London and Bridgewater in Somerset walked out on Monday over safety fears related to the coronavirus epidemic. The members of the Communications Workers Union (CWU)

were concerned at lack of hand sanitisers and social distancing measures.

Earlier this month, the CWU cancelled national industrial action despite a near 95 percent vote in favour to oppose attacks on jobs and working conditions by their employer Royal Mail. Within hours of announcing the result, the CWU announced it would not call any of its 110,000 members out. Instead it announced it would offer them an "additional emergency service" during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Unions at UK airport agreed pay cut linked to COVID-19 outbreak

According to a *Manchester Evening News* article March 21, trade unions representing airport workers at Manchester Airport agreed a deal with Manchester Airport Group (MAG)—including a 10 percent pay cut for some workers. MAG runs Manchester Airport as well as London Stansted and East Midlands airports.

The agreement was drawn up between MAG and the recognised unions prior to the government's bailout announcement for corporations last week, in which it agreed to pay 80 percent of workers' wages nationally as part of the coronavirus "job retention scheme."

An internal joint statement by MAG and the unions declared, "We have agreed the following with effect from 1 April 2020 to enable us to manage the business impacts over the next 12 weeks:

"All colleagues will take two weeks of the next 12 weeks as annual leave (there may be exceptions to this rule).

"Colleagues will be paid at 90 per cent of their contractual pay (including contractual sick pay, any associated shift premiums and allowances).

"This will be for 12 months from 1st April 2020 and includes when a colleague is on holiday or sick.

"Colleagues on an individual basis have the option to take a three-month career sabbatical, the duration of which they can take paid employment outside of MAG."

The deal ensured that the COVID-19 crisis was utilised to rule out any pay increase until next year, declaring, "Discussions on pay increases will be deferred until 2021."

The future imposition of even worse pay and conditions was built into the agreement which stated, "This agreement covers measures designed to deal with the next 12 weeks only, for colleagues who are working or not working during this period; if the situation deteriorates further or conversely improves, MAG and the Unions reserves the right to reopen conversations."

MAG said the deal “would be implemented in the absence of any government support”. Following the government’s pay support scheme, the agreement will not now go ahead but is a graphic illustration of the role of the trade unions as partners of big business who are prepared to sacrifice workers’ pay and conditions.

### **Jail threat to Hungarian journalists exposing government inaction over coronavirus**

On Monday, as part of emergency powers related to the COVID-19 outbreak, Hungary’s right-wing government led by Viktor Orban brought in legislation to imprison journalists for up to five years for spreading “fake news.”

The legislation will be used against independent journalists publishing stories exposing government inaction over the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Strike by Portuguese port and transport workers**

Portuguese dockworkers, rail, airport staff and other public sector workers held a 24-hour strike Tuesday. The strike of dockers led to the closure of ports.

The workers are protesting proposed pay cuts, pension freezes and tax increases to be brought in by the Portuguese government. The government is seeking to introduce the measures in response to the deteriorating economic situation.

### **Walkout by library workers in London over coronavirus concerns**

Staff at 10 library sites, working for Lambeth council in south London walked out on March 20. The Unison union members were protesting the lack of protective measures against the spread of coronavirus. There are no hand sanitisers or disinfected wipes for keyboards and screens.

Unlike many local authority libraries, Lambeth council has not closed its libraries to slow the spread of the disease. Local libraries in the London borough of Bromley are also open, although the central library has been closed. The libraries are run by the social enterprise Greenwich Leisure Limited.

### **UK sixth form college teaching staff take new strike vote**

Teaching staff at UK sixth form colleges in a long-running dispute over pay and inadequate funding have returned a renewed strike ballot. The National Education Union (NEU) members have taken strike action at various colleges across the UK. Under Tory anti-trade union laws, the NEU was forced to recently re-ballot its members as is required after six months of the dispute.

Around 50 colleges more than in the first round of action voted by a more than 50 percent majority to pursue further industrial action. However, the action will not now take place as the colleges have been closed as part of the Tory government coronavirus measures.

### **Irish construction workers call for sites to be closed**

Around 150,000 construction workers in Ireland forced to work on construction sites around the country are demanding sites be closed due to the COVID-19 threat. The Unite union representing many construction workers called on the Irish government to close all but essential sites, but is not organizing a mass walk out.

Construction workers are unable to maintain safe social distance measures either at work or travelling to work.

### **Zimbabwe doctors and airport workers strike over lack of protection against coronavirus**

Zimbabwe Hospital Doctors Association members walked over lack of protective equipment to deal with COVID-19.

A letter was sent to the Mnangagwa government on Monday demanding the distribution of personal protection equipment (PPE).

Workers have also walked out at the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZRA) at the Robert Mugabe International Airport, over similar concerns. Staff at ZRA are worried passengers have gone through the airport and have later died from COVID-19. Broadcaster Zororo Makamba, attended by workers at the airport, went on to die from the virus.

The Zimbabwe Revenue and Allied Workers Trade Union sent a letter to the government complaining they have no testing equipment to alert its members to infection.

Workers, including medical staff, have taken months of strike action to demand wages are paid in US dollars. With inflation at 600 percent, they cannot afford to travel to work.

### **South African public sector March 30 strike and demonstration may be suspended due to coronavirus fears**

A planned 24-hour strike and demonstration by South Africa’s public sector on March 30 may not take place due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) members are protesting the government’s reneging on a three-year pay deal, signed off in 2018 affecting 1.3 million sector workers, with an agreed final year’s increase of around seven percent threatened.

Cyril Ramaphosa, the African National Congress (ANC) president, declared a state of disaster on March 15, to be possibly followed by a state of emergency. About 200 cases of COVID-19 in South Africa were confirmed March 5.

Disaster management regulations limit gatherings to no more than 100 persons. The NEHAWU is proposing workers demonstrate in groups of 99.

### **South Africa nurses oppose attacks on wages**

South African nurses are threatening action in opposition to the

government's plan to reduce wages from April 1. Government/union talks broke down March 17 over the government's plan to renegotiate an agreed wage increase for the financial year 2020/21.

The Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa is calling on the arbitration services, CCMA, to intervene and threatening to call strike action. The National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers (NUPSAW) threatened "a national shutdown of public facilities".

The ANC government, responding to a downgrading threat by Moody's Investors Service, is seeking to impose public sector wage cuts and around 30,000 redundancies over the next three years.

Nurses will play a central role in the Coronavirus crisis.

### **Striking South African munitions workers' jobs taken by untrained scab labour**

Striking workers at South African munitions plant, Rheinmettal Denel Munition, are being replaced by scab labour.

The National Union of Mineworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) members are demanding the right to withdraw from an expensive medical scheme. Workers are expected to pay for a company imposed medical scheme they cannot afford.

The strike began February 11, and untrained scab labour is being employed under conditions hazardous both to the workers and the public.

Rheinmettal Denel Munition is a joint venture between South African and German arms companies producing naval guns, mortars and other artillery.

### **Kenyan nurses strike threat over lack of coronavirus protections**

Kenyan health workers have threatened to walk out if they are not properly equipped for the coronavirus pandemic. The Occupation Health and Safety Act stipulates workers can refuse to work if their lives are at risk.

A Kenya National Union of Nurses spokesperson said hospitals are under resourced and confronting an overwhelming number of patients with inadequate equipment. Nurses are expected to work excessive and exhausting hours without protective gear.

Doctors complain every county is being left on its own, with no national strategy.

### **Nigeria state public sector workers embark on strike while doctors end stoppage to attend to COVID-19 patients**

Public sector workers in River state, Nigeria have declared an indefinite stoppage on March 23 over the non-implementation of the minimum wage. The local Nigerian Labour Congress and the Trade Union Congress gave the state government seven days to implement the 15-month old wage agreement.

Doctors struck last week in the capital, Abuja, over unpaid wages. The Nigerian government is to implement a \$39 billion cut in expenditure, decided in its December budget.

Resident doctors have called off their strike in Gombe state as the increased coronavirus infection rate climbs throughout Nigeria. The

National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD) leadership cancelled the strike at their congress March 21 "for the sake of humanity."

Doctors have been on strike since March 16 over upgrades for interns and time-based allowance increases for doctors with over six years' service.

Civil Service Doctors (CSD) called off their four-week strike in Alhambra state because of the coronavirus threat. CSD decided to return to work at their conference, March 24, citing their oath to uphold the health of citizens. As of March 25, forty-six COVID-19 cases have been declared in Nigeria with one death.



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