

Health workers in South Africa and Kenya striking for personal protection equipment against coronavirus face police attacks

## 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.

### Nurses shot and gassed outside South African hospital

Nurses protesting outside the Bongani Regional Hospital in Welko, South Africa demanding safe travel arrangements to protect them against coronavirus were shot by police and two were hospitalised.

The Free State police used stun grenades and rubber bullets to disperse nurses demanding the hospital temporary chief executive officer provide staff with transport to work, as agreed under the COVID-19 emergency regulations lockdown. Staff were travelling by taxi.

Health Minister Dr. Zweli Mkhize said, “We have noted with concern a number of confirmed COVID-19 cases of health workers who work both in the private and public hospitals.”

The police are under investigation for brutality including murder since the lockdown was put in place. South Africa has 1,380 confirmed cases of COVID-19 as of April 2, with 5 recorded deaths.

### Striking taxi drivers assaulted by police and military in South Africa

Taxi drivers on wildcat strike in Port Elizabeth, South Africa were attacked by soldiers and military police using stun guns and rubber bullets. Many were arrested and ten taxis were impounded. Shoppers were caught up in the attack and suffered injury.

The drivers blocked several roads and stopped informal taxis operating, demanding the government compensate them for loss of earnings since the coronavirus lockdown.

### South African ambulance workers face disciplinary action for refusing to be exposed to COVID-19 without safety equipment

Ambulance drivers at Greys Hospital, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, will be disciplined for refusing to attend a COVID-19 infected patient on March 23 without personal protective equipment (PPE).

Management informed the eight workers by letter of disciplinary hearings on April 17, after previously threatening to sack them. One worker told online publication *GroundUp*, “Our lives and our families are in danger, we are scared but the department doesn’t care.”

The area head of the health department admitted shortages of PPE, but only suggested they would speak to the National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU).

### South African prison inmates on hunger strike over COVID-19 danger

South African prisoners are on hunger strike, rejecting claims by the Department of Correctional Services that they are carrying out sanitation and restricting visitors. A Public Servants Association spokesman said an outbreak could be catastrophic for prisoners and staff alike, particularly when there is a shortage of 16,000 staff.

Prison warders in South Africa’s jails threatened a stoppage from Monday over lack of protection against the coronavirus. The warders preside over 154,200 inmates in 240 jails.

### South African public sector strike called off in response to coronavirus lockdown

A one-day strike and demonstration by South Africa’s public sector workers set for March 30 was called off after the government declared a 21-day lockdown from March 27.

The NEHAWU and Public Services Union members were to protest the government’s reneging on a three-year pay deal, agreed in 2018 covering 1.3 million public sector workers, with the final year’s increase of around seven percent threatened.

An alternative position was put by government for a 4.4 percent increase for workers from grades one to eight, with none for grades nine to sixteen. This deal would be financed by scrapping an agreement on a 1.5 percent performance-related increase for 2021/2022.

The Confederation of South African Trade Unions, affiliated to the governing ANC, has called on its trade union affiliates to cooperate with government institutions during the lockdown. The labour courts are also shut.

## workers

### South African retail workers speak out against having to buy their own virus protection

South African workers employed at Bellville Shoprite retailers, Cape Town spoke out after they were told by management to buy their own PPE when they raised the dangers of COVID-19.

A store worker said, "We are exposed to this disease because we deal with people every day and you never know if the person you are helping has it or not and we are always in close contact with customers. Our health is at risk."

The store manager replied saying masks are ineffective and gloves retain the virus and they should wash hands regularly. Shoprite is the largest retailer in Africa, with 2,934 outlets in 15 countries.

### Kenyan Nurses protest strike over lack of protection from COVID-19

Kenyan nurses protested in Nairobi and walked out of at least two hospitals in Kakamega and the coastal town Kilifi when COVID-19 infected patients arrived.

For the last two weeks nurses have stayed away from work or gone on go-slows over the lack of PPE. A Kenyan National Union of Nurses spokesperson said only a tiny fraction of the 100,000 health care workers has had any training to combat the disease, besides not being provided with PPE.

Paramedics refused to attend calls where a virus infection is known. Hospital workers are to strike in Meru County, April 3, if their February wages are not paid.

### Zimbabwe public sector workers strike over lack of protection against coronavirus

Doctors, nurses and custom officials are some of the workers out on strike in Zimbabwe demanding running water, protective equipment, COVID-19 training and a risk allowance. Many hospitals in Zimbabwe do not have running water.

Doctors and nurses walked out at the Parirenyatwa Group of Hospitals in Harare last week as rumours spread that some nurses infected by the coronavirus had died.

A strike at Harare Central Hospital last week saw patients discharged as doctors and nurses demanded PPE. A Zimbabwe Hospital Doctors Association spokesperson said they would not return until they are protected.

Nurses were stranded when specially provided transport for critical staff at the Kwekwe General Hospital did not arrive Monday night at the end of their shift. The state-owned bus company Zupco provides free transport for critical workers who cannot afford the travel expenses as their wages have been destroyed by 600 percent hyperinflation.

The government has imposed a 21-day lockdown.

### Lesotho courts reject appeal against sacking of 700 striking textile

Seven hundred Lesotho textile workers have had their appeal against sacking rejected by the courts last week.

Workers in the textile industry walked out for a living wage of US\$277 a month, as opposed to the existing US\$117, in March 2019. They are demanding a higher pay grade for heavy lifting work.

The Taiwanese textile company, Nien Hsing, which dominates around 25 percent of the countries textile industry, sacked the strikers.

Textiles are the largest industry in the country, employing around 40,000 workers, creating 20 percent of national GDP. The products of these low paid workers are sold under the high-priced fashion labels of Gap and Levi Strauss in the US, Europe and around the world.

### Unofficial strikes by postal workers in Scotland over coronavirus

This week, postal workers walked out of the Royal Mail delivery office in Alloa in Clackmannanshire, Scotland. The Communication Workers Union (CWU) members were protesting the lack of protective equipment and failure of Royal Mail to ensure safe social distancing of workers in the office. They were also protesting having to deliver unnecessary junk mail leaflets, increasing their risk and that of the public to coronavirus exposure.

One striker talking to the *Daily Record* explained, "We work on top of each other in the sorting office and it hasn't got any better since the outbreak. The managers don't seem to be bothered by it and just want us to continue working as normal..."

Fifteen postal workers at the Lochgelly delivery office in Fife went on strike over the same issues.

### French lorry drivers threaten walkout over coronavirus

From Monday, French lorry drivers may walk out because of fears around the coronavirus outbreak.

The CFDT, FO and CFTC union members are concerned over lack of facilities to eat and clean up, as many roadside service facilities have closed as a result of the infection. They are also worried about not having protective clothing when carrying out deliveries. To date, only a few drivers have refused to take out their lorries.

### Health staff at Spanish coronavirus hospital speak out against lack of resources

Staff at a 6,000-bed capacity field hospital set up at the Ifema convention centre in Madrid to deal with coronavirus patients have spoken out over conditions at the site. They told *El Pais* newspaper there is inadequate protection equipment and patients are confined within less than two metres of each other.

A nurse explained, "The patients are overcrowded ... there are barely two steps between beds... There are no stands to hold up drips, we are using broomsticks."

The health and administrative staff at the field hospital have voluntarily

offered to work there rather than their usual workplaces. However, many are now reconsidering their decision, alarmed at the terrible conditions.

A doctor said, “[The] first day was devastating ... it is a sad site, a grey concrete hangar ... We are all volunteers except for the internists who coordinate ... we came to give our all.” A nurse added that “enthusiasm doesn’t protect you and willpower doesn’t cure.”

### **Portuguese medics coronavirus concerns**

Portuguese doctors are concerned at the level of coronavirus infections among health staff. According to a *theportugalnews* website article of April 1, 853 Portuguese health professionals, including 209 doctors and 177 nurses, have contracted the disease. There are also concerns over the lack of PPE.

The National Federation of Doctors (FNAM) and the Independent Doctors Union (SIM) have requested an urgent meeting with the Health Minister to raise the medics’ concerns.

### **Italian supermarket workers stressed out over coronavirus**

Supermarket workers in Italy are worried over conditions as they try to cope with the impact of coronavirus. The virus claimed the life of a 48-year old cashier at a supermarket in Brescia in northern Italy last month. A 33-year-old supermarket guard has also died.

Some supermarkets have now installed Plexiglass shields and dispensed disinfectant gel and gloves, but workers know more should be being done.

Reported in the *AFP/The Local* news website April 1, a Rome supermarket cashier explained, “We’re also stressed out, but we can see they’re [the customers] pretty stressed too... You start thinking Oh God I have just touched my face, you get kind of paranoid.”

The report noted staff numbers at some supermarkets had been cut by a third because of sickness.

### **Protest in Tunisian capital over coronavirus measures**

On Tuesday, hundreds of Tunisian workers marched through a poor working-class district of Tunis. They were demanding the government make good their promise to support those hit by the consequences of the coronavirus outbreak. They also protested the lockdown, which has disproportionately hit the poor.

On Monday, protesters marched to the local government office to demand welfare payments and to be given permits allowing them to leave their homes.



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