

Strikes, protests continue against unsafe working conditions amid coronavirus pandemic

Marcus Day
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With increasing forcefulness, workers around the world are demanding adequate workplace safety measures, an end to nonessential work and the resources needed to combat the coronavirus pandemic. Strikes and protests by those who are providing critical services with virtually no protection, including nurses and health care workers, Amazon and postal workers, and grocery, food processing and service workers, have continued to erupt in country after country.

At the same time, the Trump administration and its global counterparts are seeking to lay the groundwork to force a return to work, even if it means even more catastrophic death rates among workers and a further spread of the pandemic.

At his White House press conferences Saturday and Sunday, Trump warned that the coming week would see “a lot of death,” but nevertheless revived his demand for the US economy to be quickly “opened up.” Complaining that “we’re paying people not to go to work,” he said. “We have to get back to work.”

While Trump and the world’s capitalist governments are preoccupied with planning how quickly they can restart production and renew the flow of profits to the corporations and banks, workers are increasingly asserting their own interests and demands through walkouts and protests, many of them wildcat actions:

- In Belgium, 10 supermarkets in the Carrefour chain were closed Friday after workers walked out over low pay and inadequate protection against the coronavirus. Workers at a Carrefour in southern France previously walked out in late March.

- Royal Mail workers at a sorting facility in Kent in the United Kingdom walked out last week to protest the lack

of hand sanitizer and other safety measures. The Communication Workers Union called off a strike earlier in March despite Royal Mail’s intransigent opposition to implementing more safety precautions.

- Postal workers in the United States started an online petition last week to demand hazard pay. The petition, which had garnered nearly 500,000 signatures by Sunday night, denounced the postal workers union, stating: “The union is no help to employees during this time at all. They should be fighting for this hazard pay or threatening another shutdown. We have to get louder, post office!!”

- In the Bahamas, emergency medical workers staged a sickout late Friday to protest the lack of safety measures. In response, the country’s health minister promised a payment of up to \$5,000 for frontline health care workers.

- In Massachusetts, over 10,000 construction workers, members of the North Atlantic States Regional Council of Carpenters, plan to strike today over worksite safety concerns. The governor has thus far left the decision to local governments on whether to allow construction to continue, while issuing toothless guidelines for safety practices.

- Nearly 1,000 meatpacking workers at JBS, a major pork and beef processor, stopped work in Colorado last Monday. Much of the heavily immigrant workforce at the plant, who speaks 27 different languages, refused to report to work after as many as 10 workers tested positive

for COVID-19. The job action was not organized by the UFCW, the local union president said.

- Amazon workers at a delivery facility in Chicago demonstrated Friday and Saturday after two of their coworkers tested positive. This followed strikes by Amazon workers in Detroit and New York earlier in the week.

- On Thursday, dozens of workers walked out at a Hershey's food packing plant in Palmyra, Pennsylvania operated by logistics giant XPO. "We demand an explanation of why they did not close the factory since there was an infected person, and they kept it quiet," a worker at the plant told the local press.

- Over two dozen poultry workers at a Pilgrim's Pride plant in Timberville, Virginia walked out to protest the lack of information after a person at the plant tested positive for COVID-19. "They worked us all day. They didn't tell us, and we didn't know how long that they have known," a worker told local news.

- In Louisville, Kentucky, baristas at the coffee shop chain Heine Brothers carried out a sickout Friday demanding better protective measures and hazard pay. Hannah Jones, a shift lead, told local media, "This entire COVID-19 outbreak [the company has been saying], 'Wait and see, wait and see, wait and see. We hear you, we hear you. We're nervous too.'" She added, "They aren't coming into contact with 200 people a day."

The Trump administration, after saying the economy needed to be "raring to go" by Easter, temporarily retreated in the face of widespread anger and mounting protests by workers, combined with an accelerating wave of infections and deaths. It is nonetheless seeking to develop a narrative, with support from a pliant corporate media, that it will be possible to safely restart economic activity and a large-scale return to work in the near future.

At Saturday's press conference, Trump's Food and Drug Administration commissioner, Stephen Hahn, said that antibody tests "will be a tool to help us get people back to work," despite the lack of scientific evidence that the presence of antibodies guarantees immunity to the virus that causes COVID-19.

The automakers, which lobbied to be designated "essential critical infrastructure" by the Department of Homeland Security, remain largely shut down, primarily in response to the wave of wildcat strikes that erupted in late March. Although autoworkers continue to succumb to the pandemic, with at least 11 Fiat Chrysler workers and six Ford workers having died, the auto companies are nevertheless floating the possibility of a restart later in the month.

"General Motors stated that it would take the situation 'day by day' and would not reopen until April 14," a veteran GM worker in Indiana told the WSWS. "But after that, what's going to be different? Are we going to be tested for the virus and get our temperatures taken?"

"At the very least, before we return everyone should be tested once and have their temperature taken at the gate before entering the plant. But if we have a stay-at-home order in the state that goes past April 14, I don't see how they can legitimately open again. I understand that some jobs are essential, but not making new cars. This is getting out of control."

The worker denounced the criminal lack of preparation by both the Republicans and the Democrats, saying it demonstrated the government's hostility to workers. "This virus has really showed that both parties are incapable. If anything good has come out of it, it's that most people will know that our government values profit over lives and thinks that we are expendable."

Agreeing that the working class has to lead the fight against pandemic, he concluded, "If we don't do it, no one else is going to. I believe in strength in numbers. For so many years we have been complacent. Now we need to stand up for the future generations."



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