

Worker revolt spreads, demanding protections from coronavirus

Marcus Day
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Strikes and demonstrations continue to break out internationally, as expanding layers of the working class are drawn into the struggle for adequate resources to combat the coronavirus pandemic and protect themselves from the disease.

The total number of COVID-19 cases neared 1.5 million Tuesday night, with over 80,000 deaths. Officially reported cases in the US comprise over a quarter of that number, at roughly 400,000, with new infections surging in a number of major urban areas, including New York City and Detroit.

Doctors, nurses, emergency medical technicians and other healthcare workers are facing horrific conditions, desperately trying to save as many lives as possible, while they themselves are deprived of adequate protective equipment, necessary medical resources, or in some cases even paid sick leave.

While the Trump administration has worked with congressional Democrats to bail out the major corporations and banks with trillions of dollars, they have simultaneously carried out a policy of deliberate neglect of the measures needed to combat the pandemic and protect the population. In just one example, the American Hospital Association, representing multibillion-dollar health systems, lobbied Congress last month to kill language in a bill that would have mandated stricter protections for health workers, according to *Mother Jones*.

At the same time, highly exploited and impoverished workers now deemed essential—including grocery, meatpacking and food service workers, Amazon and other delivery workers and public transit workers—continue to labor in crowded workplaces themselves, almost universally lacking basic protections such as face masks and gloves.

The result is predictable, with a rapidly growing number of cases and rising death toll at workplaces that continue to operate, and ominous consequences for the further spread of the disease. Thousands of workers at two of Michigan's largest health systems, Henry Ford and Beaumont, have tested positive or are exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19, and fatalities have been reported at Walmart, Trader Joe's, Giant, and UPS.

Strikes to protest these conditions are frequently emerging as wildcat actions, launched independently of the trade unions, which are earning the ire of workers for their apologetics for the companies' inaction and their own indifference.

Healthcare workers

Around 30 healthcare workers demonstrated outside Harlem Hospital in New York Monday to protest the lack of protective equipment. The action followed a sit-in by nurses at a Detroit hospital early that morning.

"If we are not provided with sufficient PPE, we're going to be spreading this disease to our loved ones, to other patients and it's going to be a vicious cycle and you're never going to be able to control it," said Ania Binkowska, a respiratory therapist, to the local press.

In western Pennsylvania, dozens of nurses walked out at a rehab center last Thursday, protesting management's refusal to provide them with N95 masks to wear around senior residents.

In Pakistan, doctors launched a strike Tuesday in noncritical wards in Balochistan, the country's poorest province. The strike was launched in response to the arrest of nearly 70 protesting physicians in Quetta, the province's capital, on Monday.

"In the trauma centre, before the coronavirus, we had enough kits that if we were operating in the operation theatre, we had a surgical mask and cap," one doctor from a public hospital said. "Now we don't even have that."

In Lesotho, a small landlocked country in Africa, doctors and healthcare workers struck Monday, protesting the government's stonewalling of demands for protective gear. Despite being surrounded by South Africa, which has the largest numbers of COVID-19 cases in Africa, Lesotho has yet to report any cases, due to its absence of testing capabilities.

Delivery workers

Amazon workers at New York's JFK8 facility on Staten Island struck for the second straight Monday, following other walkouts at Amazon locations in Chicago and Detroit over the last week. Chris Smalls, a worker at the fulfillment center in New York fired by the company after organizing an initial

walkout, told *Vice* that he estimates nearly 30 cases at the site. In a widely reported leaked memo, Amazon's general counsel discussed the company's PR strategy to combat the growing worker protests, snidely calling Smalls "not smart or articulate."

At major retail and supermarket chain Target, gig workers for its delivery service, Shipt, refused to take assignments Tuesday, demanding hazard pay, protective equipment, and strengthened sick time policies. Workers for Shipt have said that even as their work has grown more dangerous, a change in the company's compensation algorithm has lowered their pay.

Target spokesman Joe Poulos denounced the strikes, saying, "It's unfortunate that a very small number of people were communicating there was this big strike."

Grocery and food service

In Boston, grocery store workers from a number of chains, including Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, Stop & Shop, and others, demonstrated Tuesday. "There's always a level of fear," Lisa Wilson, a worker at Shaw's and an organizer of the protest, said to the *Boston Globe*. "Is today going to be the day that I get sick?"

On Sunday, workers at a McDonald's location in Los Angeles walked out after learning that a coworker had been diagnosed with COVID-19, following walkouts at McDonald's in a number of other cities in recent weeks.

"We've been pleading for protective equipment for more than a month now, but McDonald's is putting its profits ahead of our health," Bartolome Perez, a cook at the location, told local news. "We don't want to die for McDonald's burgers and fries."

Manufacturing and construction

Also in Massachusetts, thousands more construction workers, members of the Painters and Allied Trades Union, stopped work Tuesday, joining some 13,000 carpenters who began to strike on Monday, responding to the state governor's refusal to shut down nonessential construction sites.

Sheet metal workers also stopped work on construction on a casino, police administration, and other projects in South Philadelphia. Construction at the casino had previously been halted after a drywall finisher was confirmed to have COVID-19 earlier in March.

In Romeoville, Illinois, some 20 workers at the auto parts manufacturer Midwest Air Tech walked out Monday morning,

also after a worker was confirmed to have contracted the coronavirus. Management reportedly had sought to persuade workers with a bump in pay to clean the plant themselves, rather than hiring a professional cleaning firm.

After more than a week of angry protests by GE Appliance workers demanding the closure of the giant Louisville, Kentucky, facility, the company announced a deal with local union officials from International Union of Electrical Workers-Communications Workers of America to give workers a \$2 raise and grant a leave of absence to workers with underlying health issues, or childcare and eldercare issues. After making noises last week about calling a strike, the IUE-CWA announced it had to abide by Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear's decision that the appliance maker was an "essential business."

Workers are livid about being kept at work despite the threat. In a Facebook video, one worker said, "I just don't understand the mind-frame and the thought process of why building a washer, a dryer, a dishwasher, or a refrigerator is worth putting people's lives at risk. Not only their lives, the workers, but then their families when they go home to them."

The major automakers have idled most of their main assembly operations following a wave of wildcat actions, but some are seeking to restart as early as the beginning of May, even as the number of COVID-19 deaths among autoworkers continues to rise. Meanwhile, a number of auto parts firms, along with agricultural and heavy equipment firms such as Deere, Inc. and Caterpillar, are still operating, with increasingly vocal protests from workers over the lack of protections.



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