

UK refuse collection workers strike over protective gear and sick pay; South African waste collectors strike in defiance of union's call to work unprotected against COVID-19

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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Europe

The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Greek health workers protest

Health workers in Greece protested outside 28 hospitals across the country Tuesday against the right-wing New Democracy government's failure to provide adequate protection against the coronavirus pandemic. Worker demands include increased funding for hospitals, personal protective equipment (PPE), access to free medical treatment and tests, no redundancies and special sick leave for health workers.

At the beginning of the month, staff at the Sotiria public hospital in Athens issued an open letter to the government complaining they had been supplied with defective masks for use against coronavirus.

The government is continuing the attacks on public health care imposed by the previous pseudo-left Syriza government that inflicted brutal EU austerity measures for four years from 2015.

Refuse collectors in Wirral, northwest England, walk out over coronavirus concerns

UK refuse collectors employed by waste management company Biffa in the Wirral, Merseyside, walked out on Tuesday. The Unite trade union members were protesting the refusal of management to provide adequate safe-distancing measures during the coronavirus pandemic. They opposed the employer's demand that three workers share the small confined space of the refuse collection lorry cab.

The workers collect domestic waste on behalf of Wirral council. They have been demanding Biffa take action over the last two weeks and finally walked out when their appeals were ignored.

Refuse collection workers at UK councils force concessions over COVID-19 sick pay

Refuse collection workers employed by outsourcing company Amery at various local authorities across the UK forced concessions over sick pay. The GMB and Unite union members will be able to claim full sick pay for 7 or 14 days if self-isolating over coronavirus. Workers with underlying health conditions will be able to claim full sick pay for 12 weeks.

Initially, Amery claimed COVID-19 was not a severe illness and workers would only be entitled to statutory sick pay. The resulting outrage voiced by the workers led Amery to revise its stance.

Waste disposal workers in southeast England given protective equipment after strike threat

Refuse collection and street cleaning staff working for subcontractor Norse Medway threatened strike action if they were not given protective equipment against the coronavirus. The company, which provides services to Medway council in Kent, provided the equipment following threats of industrial action by the Unite union members.

Walkout over coronavirus fears at distribution warehouse in Swindon, UK

Around 80 staff, GMB members at retail Marks and Spencer's Swindon warehouse distribution centre, walked out on April 2 over safety concerns relating to the coronavirus. They had walked out on two previous occasions in March.

The warehouse is run by logistics company DHL. Management has refused to listen to workers concerns over protective equipment and safe-distancing measures.

Strike by Belgian supermarket workers over COVID-19 fears

Supermarket workers at six branches of the Carrefour supermarket chain in Belgium held a strike during the morning of April 3. Carrefour is a

French-owned multinational retail outlet.

The CSC union members are demanding more protection during the COVID-19 pandemic and a pay rise. All supermarkets are seeing a rise in revenues as a result of bulk buying in the lead-up to the imposition of lockdowns in most European countries.

Maltese pilots threatened with sack after refusing pay cut when planes grounded

Air Malta is threatening to make 108 out of its 134 pilots redundant after they refused to accept a pay cut of €1,200 a month. The pilots are Airline Pilots Association members. Captains normally earn a €140,000 annual salary, first officers €80,000.

Air Malta shuttered its passenger operations due to the coronavirus pandemic, just running cargo flights. Cabin crew also refused to accept the pay cut, but airline engineers, members of the Association of Airline Engineers, accepted it.

Middle East

Israeli trade union federation agrees to wage cut for airline pilots during coronavirus outbreak

The Israeli Histadrut trade union has agreed to a 50 percent pay cut for 60 pilots working for Israir Airlines. The airline has seen a reduction in demand because of the coronavirus pandemic. Under the agreement, pilots' wages will be reduced until the end of May, and then reviewed.

Africa

South African waste disposal workers strike, defying union calls to work unprotected against coronavirus and without pay

South African workers at Nokeng Gundo Waste Management, contracted to the City of Ekurhuleni, went on wildcat strike March 31 and demonstrated in Palm Ridge over unpaid wages.

The waste collectors were offered food parcels instead of wages by the company, which claims the authorities have not paid them for March. Though designated essential workers under the government's Disaster Management Act, they are not supplied with gear to protect them against COVID-19 or the putrid and poisonous waste contents.

Workers maintaining anonymity for fear of reprisals explained in the *Citizen*, "We work overtime, without ablution facilities to wash and change clothes. We work without dust masks and other protective clothing. There is no medical aid, funeral cover, increase in salaries. ... We daily inhale a strong stench from the waste and most of us are quite sick."

The garbage collectors' lungs and general health were compromised prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus.

While the South African Municipal Workers Union advises its workers to walk out if companies breach the Occupational Health and Safety Act, they refuse to call action. Instead, they ask workers to sacrifice their lives.

Union spokesman Papikie Mohale declared, "We further thank municipal workers for rolling up their sleeves and putting service delivery before their health and safety, including those of their families."

While Mohale noted that while workers had been working without pay

and there was no commitment by management for hazard pay, he concluded, "We have therefore advised our members that they should continue working and that these items would be negotiated with affected municipalities as soon as normality returns."

At the time of this writing, there were 1,749 confirmed cases of the infection in South Africa, with 13 fatalities.

South African unions renounce industrial action as coronavirus spreads

Since the South African government imposed its Disaster Management Act because of the spread of coronavirus, the unions have renounced industrial action.

The National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) is instead taking the Health Minister to court over at least 26 health facilities having to work without PPE.

At the Sizwe Tropical Diseases Hospital, Johannesburg, staff do not have gloves or masks. Babies are delivered without gloves, masks or sanitisers at the Rahima Moosa Mother and Child Hospital.

NEHAWU, with 275,000 members, is affiliated to the Confederation of South African Trade Unions, which is partnered with the African National Congress government.

South African ShopRite workers win demand for protective gear

International retailer Shoprite has conceded to workers' protests over the lack of protective gear.

ShopRite employs 147,000 in Africa as a whole, with 2,800 outlets. The company has provided workers with face shields, gloves and daily temperature checks.

ShopRite regards this concession as giving them a competitive edge against rivals such as Pick n Pay in response to customer concerns amid the prospect of rising profits from panic buying.

Nigeria's largest company calls on workers to flout coronavirus lockdown while union appeals to government

The Dangote Group, one of the largest companies in Nigeria, employing 30,000 workers, is continuing production despite the government lockdown, imposed March 31.

Owner Aliko Dangote is the richest man in Africa, worth between \$7.7 billion and \$16 billion. Managers are calling on workers to continue construction at the oil refinery Dangote Lekki Project irrespective of the threat to life from the coronavirus.

The National Union of Civil Engineering Construction Furniture and Woodworkers is appealing to the federal and Lagos state government based on its agreement with the Nigeria Employers Consultative Association that only essential workers should work in Lagos and Abuja, the most populated cities in Nigeria.

There are 254 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Nigeria, with 7 fatalities.

Lesotho health care workers strike for protection against pandemic

Health care workers at Lesotho hospitals walked out Monday as the government ignored their plea for PPE.

They decided to deal with emergencies only, but not COVID-19 patients, until they get PPE. The nurses, doctors and lab technicians are also demanding training, a bonus for dangerous work and sick pay.

Officially there are no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the country, as testing is being not carried out, but the government has nevertheless imposed a 21-day lockdown.



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Zimbabwe unions suspend claim for a living wage

The Zimbabwe civil service unions, alongside the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, have suspended the campaign for a living wage until after the coronavirus pandemic subsides.

Mines in South Africa are in lockdown in response to the pandemic, but in Zimbabwe, mining companies received an exemption from the government's 21-day lockdown, including Zimplats mining, the world's largest producer of platinum.

Zimplats, which operates out of South Africa, is owned by Anglo American Platinum Limited and the Zimbabwe government.

Runaway inflation of 700 percent has destroyed wages. The World Food Programme (WFP) designated Zimbabwe as one of the bottom 18 of countries that will be worst impacted by the pandemic.

The WFP says 4.3 million people are facing severe acute food insecurity, and the figure is expected to rise through to March 2020. Residents of the capital, Harare, and hospitals face lack of water, with some residents digging their own wells to source water.

Malawi health workers threaten strike to demand protection against coronavirus

Malawian health care workers have threatened a stoppage unless they are provided with protective equipment.

The Medical Doctors Union of Malawi sent a letter to the Special Cabinet Committee on Coronavirus and the prime minister threatening strike action if they do not respond by April 10, recruit 168 doctors and increase risk payments by 70 percent of their wages.

Malawi's government declared a national disaster last month before any cases had come to light. According to official figures, on April 8 there were eight infections and one death.

Botswana government claims it cannot afford personal protective equipment

The Botswana government is providing no resources to deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

Six unions negotiated for a week with the Directorate of Public Service Management for PPE, a government-financed insurance fund and a risk allowance. The government agreed to only a lockdown.