

Workers protest lack of personal protective equipment as unions support premature back to work drive

## 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.

### Italian unions sign agreement with Fiat Chrysler to restart production in middle of pandemic

On March 9 in Rome, the FIM, UILM and FIOM unions at Fiat Chrysler Italy signed an agreement to restart production, to begin in May, even as the number of coronavirus cases continues to rise.

The Italian government ordered car production to be closed on March 23.

Under the agreement, production will be phased in and initially did not include all sites. It includes some very token safeguard measures that will run until the end of July. These will include one metre social distancing rather than the accepted norm of two metres.

The workforce will not be paid in full, as initially production will only be partial. The unions have agreed to a rotating furlough system to spread the reduced pay conditions among the workers.

### Belgian doctor's open letter to government over poor-quality personal protective equipment

Dr. Van Looy, a trainee consultant working on COVID-19 wards at a Belgian hospital, has written an open letter to the Belgian government over the poor-quality personal protective equipment (PPE), including masks, he and his colleagues must use. He also informed the hospital COVID-19 coordinator.

The letter said, "It [the mask] immediately felt it didn't close tightly around chin and nose... In the course of the morning two masks tore of their own accord..."

### Nurses at private Irish hospital denied COVID-19 sick leave

According to the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, nurses

working at the Mater private hospital in Dublin are being refused special sick leave when self-isolating due to COVID-19. The hospital is also refusing to discuss implementation of pay rises bringing pay in line with public sector nurses won in Ireland following a nationwide strike last year.

The hospital, along with 18 other private hospitals in Ireland, is being financially supported by the Irish government for a three-month period because of the pandemic.

### Hungarian airline fires some staff and cuts pay of others in response to COVID-19

The Hungarian discount airline Wizz Air announced it would lay off nearly a fifth of its workforce and cut the pay of remaining pilots, cabin crew and administration staff by an average 14 percent.

The airline, which is currently only operating at three percent capacity, announced a profit of around €275 million in May 2018. The Budapest Business Journal commented this week, "For the last financial year (F20), which has ended on March 31, Wizz AIR expects to report an underlying net profit in line with the company's latest guidance range of EUR 350-355 million."

The airline is under contract to the Hungarian government to transport goods between China and Hungary.

### Maltese airline pilots job cuts as result of COVID-19

The Air Malta airline has sacked 108 out of its 134 pilots, because they refused to accept a pay cut. The pay cut would have left them earning just €1,200 a month—the same as cabin crew and engineers. The engineers' union accepted the pay cut. Air Malta pilots normally earn upwards of €80,000 a year.

### Redundancies and pay cuts at Portuguese airport

Some workers at Faro airport, which serves the Algarve region of Portugal, have been made redundant while others have seen their pay and

conditions attacked. The cuts have been imposed as the COVID-19 pandemic hits Portugal. Among the companies imposing the attack at the airport are Ryanair, Groundforce and TAP, the Portuguese national airline.

Africa

### **South African nurses in Port Elizabeth refuse to work due to COVID-19 while agency nurses left stranded**

Nurses at Veeploas Clinic in Port Elizabeth, South Africa have refused to work after a colleague tested positive for COVID-19. They have been tested, but the results have not been returned. They are concerned for their own safety and the safety of patients. The clinic serves around 3,000 households.

Around 150 nurses contracted to work across Western Cape have been stranded by employers away from home, without food or money and threatened with eviction. The agencies cannot get insurance coverage for them due to the coronavirus. The nurses are appealing to the government to provide transport home.

Meanwhile, the government is campaigning to recruit retired trained hospital staff to cope with the pandemic.

### **South African court workers threaten strike over lack of PPE**

South African court prosecutors are threatening to strike over lack of PPE.

The National Union of Public Sector and Allied Workers members were told to stay at home if they did not feel safe, though without pay.

### **South African unions refuse to mobilise members against lack of PPE**

The National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) attempted to drop legal action against South Africa's health department over the lack of PPE.

Workers at 26 health facilities have no PPE. At the Sizwe Tropical Diseases Hospital, Johannesburg, staff work without gloves or masks. Babies are delivered without gloves, masks or sanitisers at the Rahima Moosa Mother and Child Hospital.

NEHAWU took legal action to avoid calling its members out. When the African National Congress government said workers unhappy with the lack of PPE could go home, the union tried to abandon its legal action. Judge Benita Whitcher continued the case, however, to make an example of any opposition to the government. She claimed the union "had no evidence" to claim the government was neglecting frontline workers.

Summing up, she said, "In short, a new value system on what constitutes acceptable behaviour has been thrust upon us all."

While the court could not "dictate that a spirit of cooperation must imbue how parties conduct themselves," she said that it could "adjust the standard of what constitutes frivolous and vexatious conduct in litigation."

The court costs were paid from members' subscriptions by the 250,000 member NEHAWU.

### **South African mining unions accept government promises of PPE to force miners back to work**

South Africa's Sibanye Stillwater is set to resume production at its gold and platinum mines this week, despite the government Disaster Management Act lockdown being extended until the end of April.

The government, mine employers and National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), Solidarity and UASA met to agree a return to work after April 16. The Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) was not invited as they made demands for the compulsory provision of PPE.

The meeting resolved to only give employees "access" to masks, gloves and safety glasses, as well as infrared monitors to check workers' temperatures. The unions accepted the return to work if safe distancing can be observed.

AMCU called for a joint management/union team to oversee safe production, saying it was time to work together to ensure the sustainability of the sector. Coal production for power generator Eskom continued as an essential service.

Since the agreement, however, the company started bussing in miners from outside the area, risking spread of the virus into local villages. The police erected roadblocks to stop the buses coming in, and then the NUM renounced the return to work, saying they were not consulted on the company's actions.

Without mass testing and contact tracing, ending the lockdown will lead to the spread of the virus. There are 2,415 confirmed cases of coronavirus in South Africa and 27 fatalities.

In 2019, the AMCU called off the five-month gold miners' pay strike at Stillwater when the platinum miners were about to join them.

### **Zimbabwe workers protest wage cuts and no unemployment benefit during lockdown**

Workers in Zimbabwe's retail sector have sent a letter to the government complaining employers are using the pandemic lockdown to reduce their wages. A 21-day lockdown began on March 31.

The government said it cannot force private industry to pay non-essential furloughed workers. Retailers will not pay full wages as trade has fallen. Workers in the hotel industry had to sign up to a 50 percent wage reduction or face suspension.

The government's reply to the letter was that dialogue is taking place by the Tripartite Negotiating Forum of employers, government and unions.

Most workers' wages were well below the poverty datum line prior to the pandemic outbreak.

Zimbabwe has reported 18 coronavirus infections and three fatalities. With the economy in meltdown—inflation has hit 700 percent, probably an underestimation.

### **Malawian medical workers protest lack of protective equipment**

Malawian hospital staff, including doctors and nurses at the Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital in Blantyre and Chikwawa district hospital demonstrated over lack of PPE, with placards declaring, "We are not going on suicide mission."

The doctors also want an increase of 168 medical posts to overcome a forced 60 hours work-week due to increased workload, up from the

official 42.5 hours

The National Organisation of Nurses and Midwives of Malawi agreed to suspend strike action planned for April 13, without resolving their demands. As well as PPE, nurses want a risk allowance of 70 percent of their wages, equivalent to what the doctors are getting.

Up until April 14, Malawi had 16 confirmed cases of coronavirus and two deaths.

### **Kenyan trainee doctors oppose re-location from capital Nairobi to counties to fight coronavirus**

On March 23, Kenyan county governors demanded registrars abandon their studies in Nairobi and holidays and return to their respective counties by the end of March to join the effort against the coronavirus pandemic. They are threatening to withhold their salaries.

The medics, whose training in Nairobi is financed by the government, have been told by federal government, however, to stay in the capital Nairobi and fight the pandemic there.

Such is the shortage of doctors that there is only one for every 16,000 patients in the country. Kenya has a life expectancy of 64 years for men, and 69 for women, according to WHO.



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