

French teachers' strike threat against premature end to lockdown;  
South African and Zimbabwean nurses protest lack of PPE

## Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

1 May 2020

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

### Protest by Greek hospitality workers demands personal protective equipment

Hospitality and food workers held a strike and protest in the Greek capital, Athens, on Tuesday. They marched to the Greek parliament where they held a rally. They were demanding the conservative New Democracy government provide personal protective equipment (PPE) against the coronavirus pandemic. Their other demands were for improved pay and job security.

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

### Greek students and teachers protest education law

High school students and teachers demonstrated April 24 in Athens against the new Greek Education Law.

The protesters, many wearing masks and gloves, said they fear the law means an increase in class sizes in preschool and primary schools, will limit the age for accessing upper secondary vocational education schools and make it harder for students to move up from classes. Students' behaviour will also be marked. The demonstrators also called for better online equipment to aid pupil learning.

Schools and universities have been in lockdown since March 6.

### Strike threat by French teachers ahead of return to work

The French teachers' union Fnec FP-FO issued a strike notice prior to the planned reopening of schools in France on May 11. The notice, which runs until May 30, calls on the Macron government to provide PPE and measures to protect against COVID-19 infection.

While a call to support the strike gathered signatures of over 40,000

teachers, the union is attempting to pressure the government to bring in safeguarding measures, but is accepting the return to work in principle.

The Stalinist CGT union has similarly issued a strike notice covering 85,000 French workers calling for protective measures to be brought in prior to a return work.

### German doctors protest online over PPE

German general practitioner (GP) doctors held an online protest over the lack of PPE in the current COVID-19 epidemic. The doctors posed online in various states of undress, meant to symbolise how exposed they feel.

Their online campaign said, "In order to safely treat you, we and our team need protective equipment." At the beginning of the month, two organisations representing GPs issued statements calling on the German government to supply adequate PPE.

### Protest by Debenhams retail staff in Irish capital

Around 30 workers held a protest outside Debenhams retail store on Patrick Street in Dublin Wednesday. The Mandate union members were protesting the non-provision of a redundancy package after the UK-based retail store went into administration.

The troubled chain called in receivers after going into lockdown following a decline in sales last year, which saw some of its stores close.

The company has 11 branches in the Irish republic, employing around 1,500 directly and 500 at in-store concessions. The staff are currently on a 12-week coronavirus furlough, but when that ends staff will be unemployed.

Irish police broke up a similar protest in Dublin last week citing COVID-19 social distancing regulations.

### Protest by pizza takeaway staff in London

Workers employed by Pizza Hut demonstrated outside one of the chain's outlets in south London April 22. They were protesting the non-

payment of two months' wages of some staff at six outlets.

### **UK protest in south London over non-essential work**

A protest was organised by the Lambeth coronavirus action group on April 18 against plans by the Labour-controlled council to demolish one of its properties, Olive Morris House in Brixton, so a newbuild project can go ahead. The protesters highlighted the non-essential nature of the work in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Iranian coal miners' strike**

On April 26, around 3,000 coal miners in the Kerman region of Iran began striking. Among the issues at stake are working conditions, job insecurity and the use of temporary contracts. For toiling in the deep mines of the Kerman region they are paid only around \$700 a month.

### **Protest by Iranian gold miners**

Miners at the Sari Guni mine in northwest Iran demonstrated on April 23 against the arrest of two village council members. The councillors were protesting the laying off of workers at the mine. The mine produces gold and silver.

### **Iranian farmers in water protest**

Farmers in the Isfahan province in central Iran held a protest April 25 over access to water from the Zayandeh Rud river. Illegal projects on the river course and siphoning off of water by officials have left farmers with insufficient supplies to meet their needs. The farmers in the region have a history of fighting for water rights.

### **Minute's silence for Israeli nurse, COVID-19 victim**

Health care staff across Israel held a minute's silence on Monday to honour Israel's first health worker to become a victim of COVID-19. Suzy Levi, 65, died on April 26. She had worked as a nurse for more than 40 years. Prior to her death she had been working on a COVID-19 ward at Sheba hospital.

The head of Israel's National Union of Nurses told Israeli news website Davar, "This illustrates once more that nurses are on the front lines. Suzy and her colleagues are there to answer the call. In the beginning they weren't protected, they were told they didn't need masks, yet today people are fined for not wearing masks."

Without accepting any responsibility on the part of the union for the lack of protective equipment, she continued, "Medical teams should have shouted out that there was no protection."

### **South African nurses threaten walkout to protest lack of COVID-19 protection**

Nurses in South Africa are threatening to stay away from work from May 1 over the lack of PPE.

The Young Nurses Indaba Trade Union (YINITU) members say the R500 billion government coronavirus package introduced April 21 neglected nurses' interests. They are calling for six months of tax relief, PPE and an agreed pay increase. The African National Congress (ANC) government led by Cyril Ramaphosa has also reneged on a commitment to provide special transport for nurses travelling to and from work in response to the pandemic.

The union president, Lerato Madumo-Gova, applauded the government's economic package.

The Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA) also condemned the government but is not calling for industrial action.

The government admitted there is a shortage of PPE, claiming it has been ordered but not delivered.

### **South African miners' unions refuse to mobilise members against coronavirus dangers when lockdown ends**

With the complicity of the unions, around two-thirds of South Africa's 450,000 mineworkers returned to work to face the dangers of coronavirus on pain of starvation when the first stage of lockdown ended April 16.

During the first 21 days of lockdown employees were paid, but when it was extended a further 14 days the employers in the Mineral Council refused to extend wage payments.

Mine owners say they have "plans" to operate safely at the pits. Work conditions in the pits, however, preclude social distancing. Workers go down into the pits packed in cages and work closely in teams at the face without visors or facemasks.

At Harmony Gold, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) also refused to mobilise its members against a premature return to work, instead only advising them not to return to work until safety conditions were in place.

NUMSA officials approached the local police station to instigate criminal proceedings against the mining company under the Disaster Management Act, saying the company was breaching safety regulations covering maintenance workers, who had been exempted and allowed to work to secure the pits under lockdown.

Cases brought by unions to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) have dropped off by 25 percent. The CCMA awards strike certificates based on their appraisal of cases brought by unions against companies.

South Africa has 4,996 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 93 fatalities.

### **South African unions complicit in pharmaceutical workers' return to work despite coronavirus danger**

The pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) Cape Town, closed after an outcry by workers when 99 tested positive for coronavirus,

has been reopened.

A worker at the company, speaking anonymously, said the company was allowed to reopen even though only one department had been tested for the infection. The Confederation of South African Trade Unions, on behalf of the ANC government, are sending a delegation into the factory to give it a supposedly clean bill of health.

### **South African retail workers at Shoprite expose coronavirus checks as a fraud**

South African employees at international retailer Shoprite have exposed the fraudulent screening of the workforce for coronavirus. Workers have been infected at some stores, and two staff members lost their lives at the Checkers Table View store, Cape Town.

Others have been sent home on public transport, by bus or taxi, infecting the public and their families. Stores with more than one infection close briefly and then reopen.

IOL reported an infected worker saying, “They [the company] lied to the media and everyone else, claiming when they reopened all employees were screened. Most of us were screened, while others carried on working without being screened. ... They don’t care if we infect people in our informal settlements.”

The South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers’ Union do not protect their members, but have only complained that union officials are not deemed essential workers.

### **Zimbabwe nurses’ wildcat strike for PPE at infectious disease hospital**

Nurses at Zimbabwe’s Beatrice Road Infectious Diseases Hospital walked out in wildcat action Tuesday demanding risk allowances and PPE.

The Z\$100 a day allowance and PPE had not materialised six weeks after the government’s promise. An anonymous worker said they would stay out until their demands were met, including subsidised mealie meal and a promised food hamper.

The Zimbabwe Urban and Rural Council Nurses Workers Union (ZURCNWU) had written to authorities with the hospital workers’ demands but refused to back the nurses’ walkout.

The NewZimbabwe.com website reported ZURCNWU saying, “From the union, we never declared that we are downing tools, but those who feel that they are fed up are free to stay at home if they feel they have to.”

Zimbabwe now has 40 coronavirus infections and four fatalities.

### **Zimbabwe nurses oppose return to normal working hours that would increase their exposure to coronavirus**

Zimbabwe nurses are protesting the provincial health director imposing a return to normal working hours at the Marondera Provincial Hospital.

The Zimbabwe Professional Nurses Union (ZPNU) members oppose management ending a flexible working 12-hour day, two days a week, introduced to reduce travel time. With inflation hitting 700 percent, workers could not afford to travel to work.

Returning to normal shift patterns will increase nurses’ exposure to coronavirus because they lack PPE.

Zimbabwe is facing the pandemic combined with a water shortage—with some residents of Bulawayo going a week without water. Residents have appealed to President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who now prefers to be called His Excellency, for the shortage to be designated a national disaster. Some councillors have suggested a return to rain-making rituals.



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