

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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

## South African nurses stay away from work demanding personal protection equipment

On May 1, as extended lockdown ended in South Africa and 1.5 million workers returned to work, nurses and health workers began a stayaway to demand personal protection equipment (PPE).

Several nurses who had tested positive in hospitals around the country had to work without being isolated. A case of 60 people infected in one hospital is being investigated.

The Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa is appealing to hospital management to take necessary precautions to ensure that healthcare workers are safe.

South Africa has the highest coronavirus infection rate on the continent, with 7,572 reported cases and 148 fatalities.

## South African paramedics strike for PPE at Cape Town hospital

Emergency Medical Service (EMS) workers walked out at the Khayelitsha District Hospital, Cape Town South Africa, May 4. The thirty paramedics are demanding they are provided with adequate PPE as they deal with possible COVID-19 patients. They also want patients and themselves to be tested.

Testing of EMS staff is only carried out when symptoms of COVID-19 are manifest, and then the infected are quarantined.

An EMS picket said sometimes workers are only issued gloves and a mask, to last for a week. She said she and her daughter suffered from asthma and are vulnerable to the disease. The district suffered 319 infections as of May 3.

The National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) were to meet with management, May 4.

## South African health and community workers strike threat for personal protective equipment

On May 1, South African health and community care workers demonstrated at the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto. The workers are threatening strike action unless staff in contact with

COVID-19 patients are supplied with PPE.

A spokesperson said at least one hospital threatened to send workers, in various trade unions, home without pay if they refused to work without PPE. Workers have given management five days to comply.

## South African miners' union accepts dangerous return to work ruling

The Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union have accepted a court ruling that enables Mineral Council employers to resume production in the mines, despite the dangers from coronavirus. The so-called Standard Operating Procedure is an interim measure until May 18, which the employers say was already in place.

Miners will be returning to work under conditions where it is impossible to maintain social distancing at the pit face.

Iron ore mining has continued since the onset of the pandemic with 50 percent of the workforce producing 100 percent capacity. Similar production increases were expected after lockdown ended April 30. An increased shake-out of jobs is on the cards in a country with one of the highest unemployment rates in the world—around 30 percent of adults are without work—due to the downturn in world trade.

## South African teacher hospitalised with COVID-19 calls for opposition to premature return to work

A South African teacher hospitalised for 30 days with COVID-19 appealed to fellow teachers from his sick bed not to return to work.

As reported in the *IOL*, he described his struggle against the virus. “I have been on the oxygen concentrator machine since these two days of cold weather. I am lying on my tummy with heat bags on my back.

“The body needs warmth, the lungs need extreme repair. I sometimes go without sleep for an entire night, trying to endure pain in my chest and controlling my breath.”

He said being on high maintenance meant that every 15 minutes he had to drink a hot liquid or a natural remedy, which were followed by hot and cold sweats.

“I know that if others were in my shoes they would give up. I have contemplated giving up myself a few times. My faith and prayers from people restore me each time I am at a low. How will you cope and how will your kids cope if you are placed in this situation?”

Teachers oppose the African National Congress government plans to reopen schools at the beginning of June. They are demanding precautions for those over sixty and with morbidity issues, repairs to vandalised and in

some cases destroyed schools, and the sanitisation of schools. Clerical staff at the schools came back this week and head teachers next week.

The Educators' Union of South Africa (EUSA) among others plans to take the government to court, stating, "The interdict would culminate in a charge of attempted murder and contravention of the lockdown regulations as part of the Disaster Management Act."

### **South Africa Union proposes counselling for COVID testing teams without PPE rather than stay away**

Many of South Africa's COVID-19 testing teams working in the community have been infected with coronavirus. NEHAWU says 300 health workers have the disease.

When a team member of Gauteng health department became ill with the virus, work was suspended. NEHAWU said its members feared becoming infected and called on the government to provide a counselling service. Frontline workers are concerned that their PPE is inadequate, and their masks easily tear.

### **Zimbabwe: unions collaborate with lockdown end for industrial workers without safety measures in place**

With the support of the trade unions, the government ordered industrial workers back to work on Monday, without either testing for coronavirus, contact tracing and quarantining in place, or PPE. The five-week lockdown was extended for a further 14 days for other sectors.

The return to work overwhelmed the ZUPCO buses provided by the government, with some workers having to walk to work. ZUPCO was introduced as workers' starvation wages are eaten up by 700 percent inflation so they could not afford to travel. Many workers are turning up for work exhausted before they start their job. One worker had to walk 15 kilometres to get to work in Bulawayo central business district.

Hospitals are ill-equipped and in some cases without running water. There are 34 reported coronavirus cases in Zimbabwe with four fatalities. The appearance of coronavirus coincides with an outbreak of malaria, which caused 205 deaths in the first quarter of the year—an 85 percent increase on the same period last year. Malaria causes similar symptoms to coronavirus.

Health workers are resorting to home-made, cloth face masks. Masks and testing kits are unaffordable for most, yet the wearing of masks and testing are supposed to be compulsory for workers resuming work. The penalty for being caught outdoors without a face mask is twelve months in prison.

### **Nigerian doctors strike over pay and conditions**

Doctors went on three-day warning strike at Nigeria's Olabisi Onabanjo University Teaching Hospital in Ogun state. The Association of Residential Doctors (ARD) members are demanding a fair welfare package and condemned the offer of N5000 to N10,000 as a charade.

The ARD has exempted doctors at the hospital's COVID-19 isolation centre from the strike. A letter sent by ARD to the state government complains that no regard was given for appropriate remuneration at entry

level, the new minimum wage and hazard allowance or life insurance for their members.

### **Nigerian doctors refuse pay cut**

Nigerian doctors have rejected appeals by the Kogi state to accept a pay cut. The Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) says its members already suffered a 50 percent wage cut due to an unimplemented pay deal given to others but not them. Poor pay has driven doctors out of the country.

The NMA called on the state government to implement the monthly hazard allowances introduced by the federal government and stop making wages an issue when they are in a war against the pandemic.

There are 2,950 confirmed cases of coronavirus in Nigeria with 98 deaths recorded.

### **Health workers in Kenya threaten stoppage over PPE**

Kenya's nurses, clinical officers, medical lab technicians, pharmacy technicians, nutritionist and other health workers are threatening a stoppage to demand adequate PPE against the coronavirus.

Several Kenya Health Professionals Society (KHPS) umbrella unions issued a 14-day strike notice issued on May 4. The demands are the equalisation of hazard allowances across the board at Sh30,000 rather than the divisive Sh3,000 to Sh20,000. The lack of face masks has left 12 workers infected, with four fighting for their lives.

Kenya has 535 confirmed coronavirus cases and 24 fatalities.

### **Kenya's medical research workers threaten walkout over pay and conditions**

Kenya's medical research workers are threatening to walk out over unpaid allowances and working conditions. Some of the Research Institute workers are already on a go-slow.

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The medical researchers are critical workers at the frontline in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. They analyse the test swabs from suspected infected people. The entomologists, immunologists and parasitologists complain that doctors are getting danger money allowances while they are not. The government is looking at their case.

### **Protests by workers across Iran**

On Monday, teachers from across Iran held a demonstration outside the parliament building in the capital, Tehran. They protested government policies obliging teachers to take tests to continually prove their competency. Other demands included full time posts and to be allowed to teach in universities.

In Kerman in south central Iran, 3,500 coal miners walked out Monday. They were demanding a pay increase and improve pension provision.

They had previously been on strike in April over the same demands.

Also on Monday, rallies took place in the city of Ahvaz in south west Iran. Municipal workers protested outside the provincial government building. They were demanding wage arrears going back to February and protesting non-payment of their new year bonus.

On the same day in Ahvaz, workers from the National Iran Drilling company protested the dismissal of 100 of their colleagues with plans to lay off a further 500.

### **Rally by Israeli museum staff opposing unpaid leave**

A rally was planned for Thursday outside Israel's Regional Labour Court in Jerusalem by workers from the Yad Vashem holocaust memorial museum. Over 100 workers at the museum have been laid off with no pay since March 15 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Protests by Egyptian migrant workers in Kuwait**

On Monday, Egyptian migrant workers in Kuwait protested to draw attention to their dire situation. Their work permits have expired but they have been unable to leave because return flights to Egypt have been halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thousands of Egyptian migrant workers are based in Kuwait.

Many of those trapped are forced to exist in squalid shelters. Kuwaiti riot police confronted the protesting migrant workers. Following the protests, the Egyptian ambassador to Kuwait announced repatriation flights would be arranged at the end of this week.

### **Protest in south-east England in support of suspended refuse workers who demanded PPE**

A drive-by car protest convoy took place this week in support of refuse workers in south-east England, suspended for demanding PPE. The workers are employed by Norse Medway, which provides refuse services to Medway council. The company is jointly owned by Norse and Medway council.

On March 30, refuse workers walked out over lack of PPE in view of the COVID-19 pandemic. The company agreed to provide PPE but then reneged. Workers organised a drive-by protest past the council offices, after which eight of them were suspended and the rest put under investigation. The company also derecognised the Unite union, which issued a notice to hold a strike ballot.

### **Housing association staff in south west England threatened over COVID-19 safety fears**

Maintenance workers employed by Vivid housing association based in Hampshire in south west England have been threatened with disciplinary action after raising concerns over social distancing and exercising their right to refuse to work in an unsafe environment.

### **Dutch primary school teachers oppose premature return to work**

In a survey of 1,250 Dutch primary school teachers, a third expressed concern that primary schools are to reopen on May 11.

In the survey, carried out by the National Institute for Public Health and Environment, half of the teachers questioned agreed with a return to work but thought it too soon. Four percent said they would refuse to return to work.

The results of a study of contamination risk posed by COVID-19 to children and young people has yet to be published.

The number of strikes by teachers and health care workers in the Netherlands last year was at a 25-year high. Over 300,000 workers took part in 26 separate strikes. Around 90 percent of all those on strike in the Netherlands last year were teachers or care workers.



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