

Strikes and workers' protests mount against "back to work" campaign

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As governments all over the world attempt to force a premature return to work, strikes and protests are continuing on the part of workers determined to resist the attempt to make them put their lives at risk for corporate profits.

Total global COVID-19 infections are fast approaching 4 million with 275,000 deaths. New cases are surging in a number of countries including Brazil, India, Britain and Russia. The rate of new infections continues to be high in European countries already heavily impacted by the pandemic including Spain and Italy. Britain now has the second highest total number of COVID-19 deaths, over 31,000, second only to the United States with near 78,000.

The incompetence and callous disregard for human life by the capitalist authorities in country after country is fueling an upsurge in the class struggle. In waging their fight, workers have largely had to go outside of the corrupt, pro-business unions and take matters into their own hands. In country after country the unions are working hand in glove with governments and employers to beat down opposition to a premature return to work.

Among those resisting the drive back to work are more oppressed layers of workers including immigrant workers, service workers and other exploited layers. While many of these actions are small, they are symptomatic of a broad determination of workers to fight the attempt to sacrifice lives for the sake of corporate profits.

According to the website paydayreport.com there have been 173 strikes across the United States since March 1 in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. With the drive to reopen that number is likely to rise.

On Wednesday Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer gave the green light for auto plants to begin to reopen May 11 across the state. Michigan, a center of auto manufacture, has also been one of the centers of COVID-19 infections in the United States and the city of Detroit has been particularly hard hit. A wave of wildcat strikes at auto plants in the US and Canada in March forced the shutdown of most North American auto production. Opposition remains strong among workers in the US, Canada and Mexico to a premature return to work.

In Mexico, where a wave of strikes halted production at many

maquiladora plants along the US-Mexican border, the government, under pressure from the automakers, is pushing for a restart of production. General Motors said it hadn't fixed "an exact date" for reopening its plant in Silao, but some workers have reported getting notices to report for work on May 18.

In Spain auto production has already been resumed under orders of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) government in defiance of the recommendations of health experts. On Monday workers struck the Nissan press shop in Montcada forcing the closure of the large Nissan plant in Barcelona that had just reopened. Nissan employs about 4,000 in Spain and workers are concerned about job losses.

Over the last week, strikes and protests in the US targeted a wide range of industries and occupations. On Thursday, truck drivers at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, California, protested outside the Los Angeles Port Administration Building in San Pedro to demand better COVID-19 protection.

More than 30 vehicles circled the building some with signs reading, "Enforce your laws, Port of Los Angeles," and, "We are essential workers and deserve PPE."

In Palo Alto, California, healthcare workers at Stanford Hospital staged a protest over management's recent decision to impose a 20 percent pay cut. The pay reduction began April 27, but the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), delayed in action until this week.

There are continuing protests at US meatpacking plants that have seen a wave of infections. In a report posted May 1 the US Centers for Disease Control said there had been 4,913 cases and 20 deaths at meatpacking plants through April 20. That figure has undoubtedly risen sharply. On Friday it was reported that 1,031 workers at the Tyson Foods plant in Waterloo, Iowa, have tested positive for the virus, double the number that Republican Governor Kim Reynolds had reported a day earlier.

In Canada, the United Food and Commercial Workers blocked action this week against a forced return to work at the giant Cargill meat plant in Alberta, which had been temporarily closed after over 900 workers were infected with coronavirus. Eighty-five percent of workers said they were fearful of returning to their jobs.

President Donald Trump issued an order on April 28 ordering

US meatpacking plants to stay open, despite COVID-19 infections, as “critical infrastructure.”

On Wednesday about 20 workers at the Raeford chicken processing plant in West Columbia, South Carolina, walked off their jobs to protest working conditions. Workers said there was a lack of social distancing, mistreatment and they wanted hazard pay.

One worker told the local media, “We should feel appreciated seeing as how we’re essential workers... If we’re so essential, we need to feel essential and we need to feel appreciated.”

On Friday dozens took part in a caravan protest outside the Bell & Evans poultry processing plant in Lebanon County, Pennsylvania. There are 1,800 workers at the plant, mostly immigrants, and two have died of COVID-19. Workers want the plant closed and cleaned before resuming operations.

In Monmouth, Illinois, Smithfield Foods workers wearing face masks and carrying handwritten paper signs held a protest May 2 in advance of the planned reopening of the pork processing plant after a temporary closure due to COVID-19 infections.

Protesters chanted together and held up signs reading, “We want screening to return to work.”

On May 1, for the second weekend, children of Smithfield Food workers in Crete, Nebraska, held a spirited protest calling for the closure of the facility after 50 workers were infected with COVID-19.

Signs read, “Our parents are essential not disposable.” One young protester told the local news, “When are we going to stop, when 300 workers are sick?” Another added, “We would rather not eat meat for weeks or even months as long as everyone’s safe.”

Other US workers staging protests this week included workers at Chipotle restaurants in Manhattan who stood outside the chain’s Empire State Building location Thursday demanding “respect for essential workers” and an end to poverty wages. Caribou Coffee workers also staged a protest for better pay and safe working conditions. Workers at Hood River Distillers in Oregon walked out Wednesday after management imposed an inferior medical plan. The company, a maker of gin, had begun producing hand sanitizer in response to the pandemic.

On Saturday, 70 truck owner-operators protested in Washington, D.C., outside the White House to protest rate cuts for truckers stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Workers at Allan Brothers Fruit company in Naches, Washington, have gone on strike demanding management give them better working conditions and hazard pay. They say that social distancing is impossible. The company had offered five weeks unpaid leave, which workers rejected. In Providence, Rhode Island, workers at the Groden Center, who care for children with autism, staged a protest for hazard pay.

In Africa, nurses, clinical officers, medical lab technicians, pharmacy technicians, nutritionists and other health workers in

Kenya are threatening to strike over lack of protective gear. Several unions under the Kenya Health Professionals Society issued a 14-day strike notice May 4. Twelve infected workers are currently hospitalized with severe symptoms.

Nurses at the Baba Saheb Ambedkar Hospital in New Delhi, India, walked off the job May 4 to protest against unsafe conditions at the facility where a large number of doctors, nurses and other health workers have been infected with COVID-19.

Some 3,500 coal miners in Kerman in south-central Iran struck Monday demanding a pay increase and improved pensions. On Monday, rallies took place in the city of Ahvaz in southwest Iran. Municipal workers protested outside the provincial government building to demand wage arrears going back to February and to protest the non-payment of their New Year bonus.

In Britain, a drive-by car protest was held this week in support of refuse workers suspended for demanding PPE. The workers, employed by Norse Medway, provide refuse services to Medway council. The company had earlier agreed to provide protective gear, but later reneged.

On Monday, Egyptian migrant workers in Kuwait staged a protest to draw attention to their dire situation. Their work permits have expired, but they can’t leave the country because flights to Egypt have been halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thousands of Egyptian migrant workers are based in Kuwait.

The growing opposition to the reckless resumption of production is a reflection of a fundamental clash of class interests. On the one side, workers seek to defend the lives of themselves, family and coworkers, and on the other the insatiable markets demand ever greater profit. The opposition of workers must be given a conscious and organized expression through the development of rank-and-file factory workplace committees independent of the pro-big business unions. This fight must be guided by a socialist program and perspective of placing the giant transnational corporations and banks under the public ownership and control of the working class.



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