

Belgian bus drivers' wildcat; South African bus drivers walk out over conditions; daily protests in Israel over government response to pandemic

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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Unofficial strike action by bus drivers in Belgian capital over COVID-19 fears

As shops reopened Monday in Brussels, Belgium, and passenger numbers surged after the lockdown, bus and tram drivers took wildcat strike action.

The strikers fear the current COVID-19 safety measures are inadequate—face masks, disinfectant and the sealing off of seats adjacent to the driver. They are demanding passengers also wear masks, a limit to the number of passengers on any one bus and the right to abandon the bus if they feel unsafe.

The MIVB public transport service was forced to cancel around a third of scheduled buses. The drivers' union denounced the unofficial action.

Education protest in Greek capital

Greek teachers joined by pupils protested outside the Greek parliament in Athens on Wednesday.

The Greek primary teachers' federation, the secondary teachers' union and the federation of private school teachers members are opposing plans by the Greek government to bring in remote teaching by use of a camera in the classroom streamed to pupils at home—measures which are part of the government response to the COVID-19 crisis. Teachers say it would compromise the privacy of pupils who are present in the classroom as the lesson is broadcast.

The teachers were also opposing government plans to bring in teacher evaluation measures, increase class sizes and push through school mergers.

Social media protest by Turkish supermarket staff

Employees of Turkish supermarket chain SOK took to social media to protest the imposition of a 14-hour work shift. The chain, which employs 29,000 staff across more than 7,000 stores, extended shifts following the ending of a nationwide temporary curfew on April 26. Workers also

protested the lack of adequate protection against coronavirus infection.

The 14-hour shift is in contravention of Turkish labour law limiting the length of the working day to 11 hours. SOK subsequently abandoned the shift but the workforce fears it could be re-imposed following the ending of a three-day curfew in major cities on May 3.

Distribution workers in north-west England to ballot for strike

UK workers belonging to the Unite union at Unilever's Great Bear Distribution logistics plant in Port Sunlight on Merseyside are to ballot for strike action. The ballot decision was unanimously agreed at a workplace meeting last Saturday. They are angry at the dismissal of a Unite union representative at the plant.

Strike ballot of medical couriers at UK firm

Medical couriers employed by medical diagnostics company The Doctors Laboratory (TDL) are to be balloted for strike action. The Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain members, who transport medical samples including COVID-19 samples, are protesting plans by TDL to impose 10 redundancies.

TDL, the UK's largest private medical diagnostic provider, is part of the Australian medical services company Sonic Healthcare.

High levels of COVID-19 infections in German meat processing plants exposed

High levels of COVID-19 infection have hit German meat processing plants. Over 200 cases were recorded at a slaughterhouse in Coesfeld in the west of the country. Infections were recorded at two other sites.

Many workers in the plants are migrants from Romania and Bulgaria on low pay. They are often employed by subcontractors, living in communal accommodation, sharing bedrooms and transported to their workplaces in

communal transport. Such working conditions make social distancing impossible and increase the dangers of COVID-19 infection.

Multiple protests in Israel over COVID-19 crisis

Since March 30 protests by workers across all sectors have taken place almost daily in Israel over the government's inadequate response to COVID-19.

In the last week there was a protest by stage sound and lighting technicians on May 7 with their equipment trucks at Hayarkon Park in Tel Aviv. On the same day hundreds of students demonstrated in Habima Square in Tel Aviv. They were protesting the stoppage of their grants while they are still being charged for tuition and housing.

On May 9 around 2,000 medical interns demonstrated against their working conditions. They called for the length of their work shifts to be cut from the current 26 hours to 16 hours.

May 10 saw a demonstration of around 500 El Al workers in front of the Finance Ministry in Jerusalem. El Al is seeking a \$400 million loan to secure the future of the airline as it responds to the COVID-19 crisis that has hit airline travel all over the world.

This week the chief executive of El Al dismissed the terms of the loan agreement with the government. He claimed it would lead to the collapse of the airline. The airline has said it would have to cut a third of the airline's 6,000 jobs to meet the loan's terms. Any settlement agreed would have to be signed off by unions at El Al.

Moroccan utility workers strike

Hundreds of workers employed by Amanor, a Moroccan subsidiary of the French Veolia company, have been on indefinite strike since January 20. Amanor provides water, waste management and energy services.

Warning strikes took place at the end of last year against the breaking of a collective bargaining agreement related to payments for rotating shifts. The company dismissed 500 UMT union members, including 10 UMT representatives. Protests took place at Amanor sites across the country, including an ongoing protest outside head offices in Tangier-Tetouan and Rabat.

The Moroccan government has a scheme to pay workers under COVID-19 epidemic provisions. However, because the company refuses to register the 500 dismissed workers with the national security office, they are being refused payments.

South African bus workers strike to demand coronavirus safety training and protection

South Africa's Golden Arrow bus drivers walked out May 7 over lack of protection from contracting COVID-19. Around one hundred drivers picketed the bus depot in Montana in Cape Town demanding safe conditions at work.

On May 1, an extended lockdown ended in South Africa and 1.5 million workers returned to work.

The bus company employs around 2,900 workers throughout the country and 12 engineers were infected with coronavirus at the central engineering

depot. One engineer died and at least five others became infected over the last fortnight at various depots.

The 159-year-old company is contracted to carry essential workers to work. Golden Arrow employees complain that they have had no instruction on safety during the pandemic and want a representative from the health department to train them. They also say they hear about infections at other depots, but the depots are not closed or cleaned and the workforce is not tested, leaving them and their families in fear. The pickets moved to another depot to speak to fellow bus workers but were dispersed by the police.

There are 11,350 confirmed coronavirus cases in South Africa with 206 fatalities.

Nurses' demands force infected South African clinic closure

Nurses forced the closure and cleaning of Zwile Clinic in Port Elizabeth, South Africa after one nurse died from COVID-19 and 11 tested positive.

Staff previously forced management to bring in a cleaning company on May 2-3. They later learned that only the pharmacy, where the deceased nurse worked, had been cleaned. The health authority said it was unclear when the clinic will reopen, but probably after 42 staff test results are returned.

The staff also lack adequate personal protective equipment (PPE). Nurses are expected to make one face mask last all day.

Two nurses died from the COVID-19 infection at the Tygerberg Hospital in Cape Town. The Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa said infected nurses are expected to go into isolation at their own expense by using up holiday days. While nurses are risking their lives, pay progression and payment for overalls agreed with the government have not materialised. Management also demand sick staff prove they became infected at work.

Workers walk out at South African private hospitals demanding PPE

South African health staff walked out at two private hospitals in Durban over lack of PPE.

At St. Augustine's on the outskirts of Durban 45 staff became infected, with overall infections above 66, and at Kingsway hospital in Amanzimtoti an unspecified number are sick. The National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union members say they cannot be expected to work without protection.

South African biscuit workers demonstrate to demand insurance pay during lockdown

South African workers demonstrated outside Unibisco Biscuits in Devland Johannesburg, Gauteng province this week as the 300 staff have not been paid.

The government claims it transferred the unemployed insurance fund (UIF) money to the company on April 24 to cover wages during lockdown, which began the end of March.

The government says it has disbursed R10.7 billion in UIF overall, but

many sectors complain they cannot access it.

Employees at prestigious restaurant Ravioli Contemporary Italian in Johannesburg have not been paid for March although they worked throughout the month. When questioned by a worker, the manager suggested she apply to the government for food parcels. The owner of the company said he did not have money as the restaurant had been struggling before the pandemic. He said he attempted to apply for UIF on his workers' behalf without success.

South African bread production workforce demand coronavirus testing

South African bread workers at the Blue Ribbon plant in Salt River, Cape Town South are demanding the factory is closed and decontaminated and the workforce tested for coronavirus. Around 27 workers are confirmed having COVID-19.

The Food and Allied Workers Union members demanded testing for all 1,200 workers when one worker with symptoms was found positive. Management offered a departmental check only, claiming they use a decontaminant every week with a two-week life. The company claims it checks the workforce before they enter the factory.

The union are appealing to the company rather than mobilising their members in industrial action.

South African union refuses to act on coronavirus safety concerns of retail workers

Retail workers are inundating the South African Catering Commercial Union with complaints about lack of safety measures at work. On Sunday the union said it was unable to respond due to current regulations, while admitting the retail sector is a breeding ground for the coronavirus.

A spokesman said, "The fact that we are unable to go to the source makes it difficult for us to verify the allegations."

Union umbrella organisation the Confederation of South African Trades Unions (COSATU) has supported the African National Congress government's moves to reopen the economy, even though the pandemic is just beginning. COSATU speaks for employers not workers, saying the economy cannot run on relief grants, the UIF and food parcels.

The National Council of Trade Unions also wants a premature end to lockdown and bemoans the loss of union dues. As the mining industry assumes full production the infection rate is rising.

Zimbabwean nurses reject government offer of safety allowance as lockdown ends

Zimbabwean nurses rejected a government offer of a safety allowance and tax waiver as lockdown ended May 8, sending workers back to work with scant protection from COVID-19. Face masks and testing provided by the private sector are unaffordable for most workers.

The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, while advising its members not to return to work without protection, is not organising any action.

The government also scrapped an agreement that nurses work two 12-hour days rather than attending work daily, as travel to work is

unaffordable due to 700 percent inflation eroding pay.

Social distancing, staying two metres apart, is impossible on government-provided transport, so workers either stay at home without pay or walk, in some cases many kilometres, to work.

There are 37 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe and four deaths. With the economy in freefall, the health service would be overwhelmed as soon as infection numbers rise.

Zimbabwe teachers refuse to return to work without free masks and sanitisers

Many of Zimbabwe's teachers are refusing a return to work without free masks and hand sanitiser.

The Zimbabwe Teachers Association (ZIMTA) dropped a recent call for the reduction of class sizes, particularly under the coronavirus threat, despite schools being a conduit for the spreading of infection across the country.

Mauritanian gold miners strike over lack of coronavirus protection

Gold miners in Mauritania walked out May 5 on indefinite strike over the lack of safe working conditions under the threat from coronavirus.

Miners at the Tasiast gold mine owned by Kinross Canadian Gold Corporation conglomerate are demanding the company abide by labour laws and regulations brought in to combat the pandemic, particularly a 14-day quarantine on new arrivals to worksites. The union had made several attempts to get management to comply but their appeals were rejected.

There are nine confirmed coronavirus cases in Mauritania and one fatality.

Malawi's public sector employees' sit-in strike ends

Malawi's public sector workers including firefighters on sit-in strike were ordered back to work by the courts on May 8. The workers took action to demand payment of pension arrears, COVID-19 risk allowance and the removal of the Chief Executive Officer at Zomba city council.

The unions called on workers to return to work Monday. The council said they are dealing with workers' complaints and the injunction will be reviewed after a meeting with all parties on Wednesday.

There are 63 confirmed cases of coronavirus in Malawi and three have died.

Kenya university workers reject wage cuts due to lockdown

Staff employed at Kenya's Egerton University have refused to accept a pay cut. They have not been paid for April.

The university management says it has not received the promised 70 percent subsidy for wages from central government, so they are asking staff to take a pay cut of 30 percent. The university has lost student

recruitment fees due to the closure of the campus now under lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The staff contract says wages are to be paid in full while off work due to the pandemic. There are 1,900 employees at the University.

Kenya has 715 confirmed coronavirus cases and 36 fatalities.



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