UK postal workers in Peterborough walk out; unions back reopening of French Amazon; Belgian medics protest

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

22 May 2020

Walkout by postal staff in Peterborough, England, over COVID-19 fears

Royal Mail workers at Peterborough delivery office walked out on May 16 after a line manager tested positive for COVID-19.

The Communication Workers' Union (CWU) members were concerned that the manager was operating in the delivery office while failing to abide by social distancing. Following the walkout, several other staff were tested and found to be positive for the disease.

In March, the CWU cancelled proposed national industrial action to oppose attacks on jobs and working conditions, despite a near 95 percent vote in favour. Within hours of the result, the CWU announced it would not call its 110,000 members out. Instead, it offered the workforce as an "additional emergency service" during the coronavirus pandemic, despite a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other safety measures.

On May 1, the CWU agreed to allow Royal Mail to end Saturday mail delivery, threatening 20,000 job losses.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, there have been actions by postal workers to protect themselves. In March, walkouts took place in Southwark, London, and Bridgwater in the south west, and on April 17, by postal workers at Bury St. Edmunds delivery office, Suffolk, for 90 minutes.

Also in April, postal workers took unofficial action over safety at Chatham, Southampton, Stoke-on-Trent, Warrington, Didcot, Edinburgh, Alloa and Fife.

UK Dyson engineering workers defy back-to-work order

Management at the Dyson engineering firm were forced to rescind a back-to-work order sent out Friday after a revolt by its UK workforce. The action took place independently of the Unite trade union.

Owned by the UK's richest man, Sir James Dyson (total wealth £16.2 billion), the company order breached government guidelines "to work from home, if you can." Workers were expected to return to Dyson's Wiltshire factories in Hullavington and Malmsebury from Monday on a two-shift rotating pattern.

A worker told the *Guardian*, "Everyone was very unhappy. ... As a company we were pretty proud of James [Dyson] a few weeks ago, trying to make a difference with the CoVent project [a plan to manufacture ventilators].

"…in a few weeks it's all turned around. If they'd had their way, there would have been 2,500 people in the office and I'd estimate 60% of those could work from home."

The campus stayed open during the pandemic, with 450 employees working on the Dyson CoVent (ventilator). The Johnson government initially ordered 10,000, before informing Dyson last month that they would not be required.

Walkout by Belgian postal workers to protest workloads

Postal workers at Belgium's national post company, Bpost, stopped work Wednesday in the Ixelles area of Brussels in protest at workloads. There has been a near doubling of parcel volume as the use of online shopping has shot up due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Following meetings between Bpost and union representatives, the company agreed to hire additional temporary staff from Monday next week. Some workers who had stopped work returned to duties, hearing the news. Other workers said they would wait until Monday to see if the additional staff materialise.

Last month, a 25-year-old Bpost employee died from COVID-19. The worker was at the time the youngest victim of the coronavirus pandemic in Belgium's Limburg province.

Belgian health staff turn backs on prime minister in protest

On Saturday, doctors and nurses at Saint-Pierre university hospital in the Belgian capital, Brussels, turned their backs on Belgian Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès.

Wilmès was making an unofficial visit to the hospital. Scores of medics and nursing staff lined the road leading up to the hospital. One by one, the workers turned their backs on the prime minister as her car entered the hospital grounds. After coming to a stop, Wilmès quickly alighted from the car and went into the hospital building without attempting to speak to health staff.

The health care staff were protesting the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Belgium, with 55,000 confirmed cases and over 9,000 deaths, has one of the worst mortality rates in the world.

Workers were particularly angered by legislation brought in May 4

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whereby unqualified staff could perform nursing duties during the pandemic. Nurses are calling for the legislation to be overturned, backed by the General Union of Belgian Nurses.

Belgian airline unions support wage cut proposal

Belgium-based Brussels Airlines, facing a financial crisis over COVID-19, is proposing to cut 1,000 jobs. Talks are currently under way between Lufthansa, the German airline parent company, and the Belgian government. Three airline pilots' unions issued an open letter proposing pay cuts of 45 percent to avoid job losses.

French unions do deal with Amazon to reopen

Amazon was due to reopen its six warehouses in France on Tuesday after the company did a deal with the unions.

Opposition by Amazon workers internationally against unsafe working conditions led to the French court ruling April 14 against Amazon in support of protecting workers against the coronavirus. In the action brought by the SUD trade union against the company, the court ruled Amazon should only deliver essential items. In retaliation, Amazon shut down its French warehouses.

Under the deal, weekly meetings between management and workers are supposed to take place and shift times shortened to allow safe distancing at shift changeovers.

Amazon employs 10,000 workers in France, including more than 3,000 temporary staff.

Strike threat by tram drivers in Swedish city of Gothenburg

Swedish tram drivers in Gothenburg threatened to walk off the job at 3 p.m. Tuesday over concerns about insufficient protection from coronavirus infection. Cabs are not sealed off, allowing contamination to take place.

Following intervention by the drivers' union, the stoppage did not go ahead. The union and management of the transport company plan talks.

Icelandic airline cabin crew reject contract offer

The Icelandic airline Icelandair is currently in contract negotiation with its pilots, mechanics and cabin crew. While the pilots and mechanics have accepted the new contract, it was rejected last week by the Cabin Crew Association members.

Icelandair, like all airlines, has been badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is operating only a skeleton service with the Icelandic government offering financial support to maintain the service until June 27. The company laid off 240 of its 3,400 staff at the end of March, and a further 2,000 in April. Remaining staff have had pay or hours cut.

Angry Norwegian nurses demand more than applause for their efforts

Norwegian nurses are demanding that the government offer a realistic pay deal. The government budget shows not the expected 3.6 percent pay increase this year, but just 1.5 percent.

The newly appointed NSF union leader said that talks over a pay deal postponed until after the summer holiday would result in a settlement. She stressed strike action would be a last resort.

Strike by Tunisian garment workers

Workers at the Gartex factory in the Tunisian capital, Tunis, held a two-day strike May 13 and 14 against sackings.

The FGTHCC-UGTT textile union members also want Gartex to address issues stretching back two years. In 2018, two union leaders were sacked after organising a meeting in the factory to discuss grievances.

Gartex, which employs around 1,000, produces clothes and is owned by German manufacturer Gardeur, part of the Dutch Duijndam group.

Health inspectors visited the factory in June and raised concerns. In December, workers submitted a list of demands to management that were not addressed. In February, 56 workers, including the union leadership at the factory, were dismissed.

Strike over unpaid wages in UAE

Striking migrant workers clashed with police in the Musaffah industrial area in United Arab Emirates capital Abu Dhabi on Tuesday. The police arrested dozens of protesters. The employees of the Sawaeed Holding company have not been paid for three months.

Migrant workers, who make up most of the working population in many Gulf countries, are often exploited on low pay and mistreated.

Protest by migrant Bangladeshi workers in Lebanon

On May 12, dozens of Bangladeshi workers employed as janitors by the Lebanese refuse collection company protested outside the company's premises in Metn near Beirut. They were protesting the erosion of the value of their wages.

Ramco won a five-year contract for waste collection in 2018. Of its 400 staff, 250 are Bangladeshis. Under their contracts, they should be paid in US dollars. Because of the country's financial crisis, leading to a shortage of dollar currency, the company switched to paying them in Lebanese lira. The lira has lost 50 percent of its value over the last few months, depreciating the workers' pay.

Migrant workers in Lebanon are employed under the Kafala system. The sponsorship system ties workers to their employer—they can only leave their employment with the permission of the employer. Workers are open to abuse including stoppage of wages.

South African health workers in wildcat strike to demand safe

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working conditions

An unknown number of South African health workers took wildcat action demanding better protection against the life-threatening coronavirus, according to the Hospera trade union.

In South Africa's Western Cape province, a health worker died on Sunday, following two recent deaths of nurses from the COVID-19 virus. Western Cape, with 156 deaths, remains the epicentre of the virus in the country.

The health department is waiting for the cause of death, but another source said the woman had tested positive for COVID-19.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union bemoaned the lack of adequate personal protective equipment at health facilities but could only "encourage" members to refuse to work.

South Africa has 17,200 confirmed infections of coronavirus and 312 fatalities.

Mineworkers call for mine to be closed until they are safe from COVID-19 infection

South African workers at the Marula platinum mine in Limpopo Province on Monday demanded the workplace be closed indefinitely after 19 workers tested positive for COVID-19.

The mining sector has emerged as the main source of the pandemic in the province, where cases rose to 76. A government-appointed local health official said that number was expected to rise as more people returned to work in the mines after the relaxation of anti-coronavirus restrictions.

The mine workers' union representative blamed government inspectors for not enforcing employers to observe safety regulations.

Hospital workers call on colleagues to join in protest

Health workers from Frontier Hospital in South Africa's Eastern Cape province recently protested the lack of PPE and low staffing levels, despite promises being made by the health department's superintendent-general to "deliver to the cries of the employees."

Workers went from ward to ward calling on colleagues to join them in their demands after one of their fellow workers contracted the COVID-19 virus.

A news report Sunday quoted a nurse saying staff are yet to be screened for infection and testing is available only when a person displays symptoms.

Union offers to reduce workers' pay to save troubled airline

Workers at South African Express Airways, South Africa's state-owned domestic airline, will enter their third month without pay on Monday.

Contracts have been suspended following the provisional liquidation of the insolvent company. The government has no clear plans on how outstanding salaries will be paid, nor can workers expect anything from the state Unemployment Insurance Fund.

Meanwhile, unions representing pilots, metalworkers and cabin crew at South African Airways, the government-owned international airline also earmarked for liquidation, made an offer for workers' pay to be cut by 49 percent for two months to save the company.

Kenyan labourers demonstrate against late payment of wages

More than 850 labourers from the 85 wards of Nairobi County, Kenya, demonstrated outside the City Hall against non-payment of wages. Wages have gone unpaid since 2019.

The labourers are responsible for removing garbage and beautifying the streets. They were engaged by the local government in April last year for the job of unblocking drainage at a monthly pay of 30,000 shillings.

The chief officer for finance admitted the non-payment of wages but claimed the issue had been "politicised."

Health union calls off strike in Kenya

Many thousands of health workers were preparing to strike in Kenya, until prevented by the union based on empty government promises.

Nurses, lab technicians, clinical officers, pharmacy staff, nutritionists and other workers were expected to join the nationwide strike, planned to start May 17 but now "postponed" for three weeks.

"We are giving them time to put their house in order and we are very flexible for negotiations," said Kenya Union of Clinical Officers Secretary-General George Gibore.

State-employed health workers were promised promotions and an emergency allowance while fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, but the government is foisting the charges onto local government.

The lack of PPE in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic—there are 963 cases of coronavirus confirmed in Kenya and 50 deaths—is also causing rising anger among health workers.

A nurse was recently photographed in Meru escorting a patient suffering COVID-19 symptoms with only a garbage bag as protection. The nurse had been instructed to accompany the patient in an ambulance.

Health Chief Officer Kanana Kimonye responded that there were only a few hundred PPE items in stock. There are reports that health workers buy their own equipment.

Kenya university workers face wage cuts due to lockdown

All Kenyan universities introduced a pay cut along the lines of Egerton University last week. Universities say they have lost student recruitment fees due to the closure of campuses under coronavirus lockdown.

Egerton and Kisii universities already announced salary reductions of 30-40 percent on the grounds of not having received money from the National Treasury. Neither institution paid staff salaries for April.

Maseno University asked staff to take voluntary pay cuts beginning this month. At Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, all but the most essential employees were told to go on leave until the COVID-19 pandemic was contained.

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Liberian energy workers oppose sackings

Liberian employees at energy company UTE Elecnor blocked the entrances to the company last week, preventing equipment from being moved after being sacked.

The company made “final payments” of salary to 93 employees under guard by armed Emergency Response Unit (ERU) officers. Workers accused the company of making unwarranted deductions from salaries by claiming to pay social security, income tax and the like. However, many workers were unable to find their names in social security records.

UTE is establishing power lines from the Ivory Coast to Liberia and Sierra Leone. The company expanded during a period of over two years and hired many young Liberians.

Namibian hotel workers demonstrate against job cuts

Namibian workers at the Canyon Hotel at Keetmanshoop demonstrated after being sacked. They had attended work only to be asked to sign a termination notice agreeing to the abrogation of all rights as employees.

After being confronted with questions from the media and bad publicity, the hotel owner admitted that the notice was “not correct.”

Nigerian non-academic higher education staff prepare for strike

Non-academic workers at universities, polytechnics and colleges in Nigeria are preparing to strike against underpayment of salaries.

Some staff have not received salaries and agreed allowances. The problems stem from the introduction of new payment system the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS). The issue of underpayment goes back to an agreement made in 2009.

As non-academic staff prepare to strike, the Academic Staff Union of Universities said it would call off a two-month strike by academics if “progress” was made in “key areas,” and indicated its willingness to agree to concessions. In April, the union cited “the precarious position [in which] the country had found itself” due to the COVID-19 pandemic as a justification for reaching a settlement.

Nigeria has 6,401 virus cases confirmed and 192 fatalities.

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