

Maltese doctors' action against spread of COVID-19; Iranian oil workers continue strikes; Zimbabwe doctors' and nurses' stoppage spreads.

## Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

7 August 2020

### Maltese doctors' industrial action for COVID-19 safety measures

Maltese doctors began industrial action on Thursday. The Medical Association of Malta (MAM) members are opposed to the government's refusal to ban events with more than 15 people, ignoring the advice of the superintendent of public health.

MAM says such events are helping fuel the explosion in COVID-19 cases on the island. A MAM statement read, "Malta is currently in the thick of a new epidemic caused by mass events which is leading to around 15 new cases per day among the local population and has already been blacklisted by 4 EU countries."

Doctors are refusing to carry out routine duties, only offering emergency cover, up to August 12, impacting hospitals and health centres. The action, due to begin August 3, was postponed for talks between MAM and the health authorities. The talks failed to reach a resolution.

### German bus driver assaulted for asking passenger to wear mask

A female bus driver in the city of Darmstadt near Frankfurt, Germany was assaulted July 28 after asking a young woman boarding her bus to wear a face mask. The wearing of face masks on public transport is mandatory as an anti-COVID-19 measure. The woman, part of a group with a child, attacked the driver, hitting her several times before fleeing the scene.

On July 5, a bus driver in France, Phillippe Monguillot, 59, was attacked after asking passengers to wear face masks as legally required. Four male passengers dragged him off the bus and kicked him in the head. He was left brain-dead and died after his family took the heart wrenching decision to turn off his life support. Bus drivers in London launched a fundraising appeal for his family.

On July 22, a bus driver in Bournemouth UK was assaulted after refusing to let a male passenger on the bus because he was not wearing a mask. The man forced his way on and assaulted the driver with a beer can.

### London Tower Hamlets council workers to take further strike action

Around 1,500 UK council workers at Tower Hamlets council in London are to take further strike action on August 13, 14, and 17. The Unison members have already taken six days of strike action in June and July.

The workers include social workers, housing and homelessness support workers, library staff, youth services, drug and alcohol services, teaching assistants, special educational needs teachers, refuse collectors and street cleaners. They are opposed to the new contract imposed on July 2 by the Labour-controlled council. Under the "Tower Rewards" contract, pay will be cut for new employees, with reductions in night-working supplements and promotion-linked pay increments. It will mean redundancy pay cut by 80 percent. Workers fear the changes are a precursor to job cuts.

The workers voted by a near 90 percent majority to strike in February with action planned for March, which was cancelled due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

### Drug and alcohol support workers in northwest England to vote on further strike action

Drug, alcohol, and mental health support staff working for the charity We Are With You, in Wigan and Leigh in northwest England, are to be balloted for further strike action. The 29 Unison members could walk out in September.

The workers took 16 days of strike action in a fight to bring their pay and work conditions in line with those of NHS staff. The rehab workers previously worked for the NHS and were promised their previous terms of employment would remain when they transferred to the charity.

### Irish airline workers face attacks on jobs

Irish airline Aer Lingus is looking to lay off 500 of its 4,500 staff as it faces a financial crisis due to the pandemic. The airline has already negotiated a deal with the Air Line Pilots' Association (ALPA).

Members of the Services Industrial and Professional Trade Union (SIPTU) voted in July to reject the company's recovery plan by a 55 percent to 45 percent majority. SIPTU is appealing to the government for financial support to prevent the airline going bankrupt.

Around 870 staff working for the DAA (Dublin Airport Authority) have applied for voluntary redundancy. The DAA, which runs both Cork and Dublin airports, is involved in talks with unions over changes to work practices.

### **Workers at Trump's Scottish hotel golf resort face job losses and attacks on conditions**

The 300 workers at US President Donald Trump's golf hotel resort, Turnberry, are facing an attack on jobs and conditions. The hotel management is currently in negotiations with the Rail Maritime and Transport union, due to end August 16.

Management want to make 80 redundancies, cut sick pay, freeze pay, abolish free meals for staff, reduce part-time hours, and put full-time staff on a four-day week until demand at the resort is back to pre-COVID levels.

### **Iranian oil workers strike**

Strikes by oil and petrochemical workers in Iran continued this week. Workers in the southern provinces of Iran were protesting wage arrears and working conditions, particularly having to work in extreme 50-degree heat. Recently a petrochemical worker died of heatstroke in Mahshahr in southwestern Iran.

US sanctions re-imposed 18 months ago have slashed exports of Iran's crude oil by 80 percent, leading to price increases in basic necessities and medicines.

At the weekend, around 200 workers at the Heavy Equipment Production Company (HEPCO) held protests at company headquarters in Arak, central Iran, against wage delays, working conditions and the running of the company. HEPCO was privatised in 2017 and workers accuse the owners of mismanagement.

### **Zimbabwe: Senior doctors join strike by nurses and junior doctors**

Senior doctors in Zimbabwe have joined the strike by nurses and junior doctors over low pay and lack of personal protective equipment (PPE).

This is despite the ZANU-PF government of President Emmerson Mnangagwa deploying the police and military to shut down the capital Harare, banning rallies, and arresting and torturing opponents of the regime.

The nurses' month-long strike was declared illegal by the government employer, the Health Services Board. Nurses insist that their lives are being put at risk by the lack of PPE.

With inflation at 800 percent, health workers are demanding payment in US dollars. The current minimum wage does not cover the bills and basic necessities. Nurses are being evicted from their homes because their rent is US\$40 to US\$70, while salaries are below US\$30.

### **Nationwide demonstrations by South African workers against the government**

Hundreds of workers marched through the streets of Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth, and other locations in South Africa Saturday, in a national day of protest against the ANC government's failure to protect people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Johannesburg, workers marched to the Gauteng provincial legislature demanding action to address poverty, job losses, and evictions.

In Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape, over a hundred South African Federation of Trades Unions members and other workers gathered at the city hall to demand a living wage, permanent jobs, water and land for farmers and adequate protection for health workers.

Health workers are to walk out on August 28 to draw government attention to the health and safety risks facing workers. They are demanding an increase in staff, more and better PPE, improved training, and a greater compliance with the law around the COVID-19 threat.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union members say they are being threatened with the sack if they refuse to work without PPE, with some having been suspended for questioning management about the rising rates of infection in the workplace.

### **Migrant fruit workers in Citrusdal, South Africa fight sackings and illegal eviction**

Migrant labourers from Lesotho, working at a fruit plantation in Citrusdal, South Africa, have taken owners Paardekop Vrugte to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration for unfair dismissal.

The Commercial, Stevedore, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union members, some having worked at the farm since 2008, were illegally evicted from their hostel homes. One worker said, "Even though the conditions at the hostels were crowded and unhygienic, we were grateful to have jobs and shelter."

### **Kenyan nurses and public sector workers prepare for strike**

Kenyan nurses and other public sector workers are to walk out on August 10, after the government failed to make the necessary payments to local government bodies, leaving them without pay during the pandemic.

"Our nurses and doctors are being infected by this virus and they are not even able to pay their rent or buy food because their salaries are being delayed," said Kenya National Union of Nurses Secretary-General Seth Panyako.

### **Unions call off doctors' strike in Benue State, Nigeria**

Striking doctors in Benue state, Nigeria were ordered by their unions to return to work following the resignation of the Benue State Commissioner for Health and Human Services, Dr Sunday Ongbabo, from Benue State Executive Council (EXCO).

The strike began June 18, over non-payment of salary arrears and allowances, lack of promotion and lack of adequate PPE. In July, the National Association of Government General Medical and Dental Practitioners said the strike would continue until the government met their demands. This has not happened.

## **Nigerian pilots at Air Peace are sacked for refusing 80 percent pay cut**

Dozens of Nigerian pilots employed by Air Peace have received termination notices after being faced with an ultimatum to accept a pay cut of 80 percent or lose their jobs. More than half the pilots refused to accept the pay cut.



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