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With 30,000 dead in Europe from COVID-19: Workers strike to demand safe working conditions

The worsening coronavirus crisis has taken the lives of over 30,000 people in Europe. This is accelerating the class struggle, as workers strike and protest to demand safe conditions.

With employers breaching social distancing measures and often not supplying even the most rudimentary personal protective equipment and hygiene supplies such as sanitisers and soap, strikes and protests have been mounted by Italian and Spanish auto and steel workers, Amazon workers, postal workers, bus drivers, supermarket staff and local government workers.



The Colosseum, that will be closed following the government's new prevention measures on public gatherings, is reflected in a puddle where a face mask was left, in Rome, Sunday, March 8, 2020. . (Alfredo Falcone/LaPresse via AP)

In **Italy**, the death toll reached 12,428 Tuesday as another 837 died. The number of infected rose by 2,107.

On Monday, 300 workers, mostly drivers, at Amazon's Calenzano warehouse near Florence walked off the job, demanding a new face mask each shift, reducing deliveries to essential goods, and regularly sanitising all work areas and trucks. Protests continue in Amazon's facilities in Piedmont, Lazio and Lombardy.

The heightened class tensions were expressed in a widely shared video of a father in lockdown beside his young daughter, who is eating a slice of bread. He tells Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, "We've already been inside for 15 to 20 days and we are at our limit. Just like my daughter, other children in a few days won't be able to eat this slice of bread. Rest assured you will regret this, because we are going to have a revolution."

In the **UK**, after the largest daily rise in deaths was reported, 381, it was announced that a 13-year-old boy who tested positive for coronavirus has died. He was the youngest to perish in Britain, following news that a 12-year-old girl had died in Belgium—the youngest in Europe.

On Monday, 80 postal and administrative staff at a sorting office in Alloa, Scotland, walked out in an unofficial strike. They refused to work in unsafe conditions in the sorting room and have not been given sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE). They also have grievances over delivering junk mail. Fifteen postal workers walked out of another Royal Mail, depot, Lochgelly in Fife, for a second day Tuesday. There were strikes last week over the same issues at Southwark in London and Bridgewater in Somerset.

Warehouse and distribution workers have struck and protested at several sites. On Saturday, 500 warehouse workers employed by British fashion retailer ASOS walked out in Barnsley, South Yorkshire, to protest unsafe conditions. Around 500 staff work each shift at the warehouse where 4,000 people are employed.

The GMB union commented, "The warehouse is now processing orders from the company's German warehouse—which has closed—and hundreds of extra staff have been drafted in to deal with the million online orders Asos received over the weekend." ASOS is owned by Scotland's biggest private landowner, Anders Holch Povlsen, who has an estimated wealth of £6.1 billion.

Images have been widely circulated on social media showing workers going to the warehouse on public transport, with no social distancing, and then clocking in with large

numbers gathered in a small area. The warehouse canteen serves hundreds of staff breaking at the same time.

One worker tweeted a message to company CEO Nick Beighton, “I am telling you me and my colleagues we are really afraid to go to work, it is impossible to keep a safe distance inside the warehouse. They told us [is] not [allowed] to wear mask because [this is] not part of our uniform. We gonna die there.”

Just days after issuing a call for workers to inform if their firms were still working without good reason, the Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham received more than 300 email complaints from staff at 150 different companies.

The most basic health and safety measures are being flouted on building sites. *Construction News* (CN) reported, “Operatives on sites, which have not been adhering to two-metre distancing rules, are having suspected COVID-19 cases retrospectively confirmed by management, having discovered the information via word of mouth. On one site in the north of England, workers were not told that one of the team who they had been in close contact with was self-isolating because their relative had died from the illness. ... There is currently no requirement from government for employers to inform staff if there is a suspected case of coronavirus in their workplace.”

The article states, “All the sources CN spoke to were terrified about losing their jobs, being docked pay and blacklisted from future work.”

In **France**, another 499 deaths were reported Tuesday, the biggest rise in deaths since the start of the pandemic. The virus has claimed 3,523 lives in total, with 22,757 still in hospital and 5,565 of these in critical condition.

After workers walked off the job at PSA, Renault and Toyota auto plants last week, strikes are continuing. Workers struck March 18 at Amazon’s distribution centre in Montélimar to demand safe working conditions. Now a nationwide sick-out is underway. Half of the firm’s workforce is now calling in sick, according to union officials, although Amazon management in France claimed that only 20 percent were refusing to work.

Workers at the Carrefour supermarket chain in Vitrolles, near Marseille in southern France, walked off the job Monday after two colleagues were diagnosed with COVID-19. They demanded an end to sales of non-food items and the disinfection of the facility before returning to work. Fati Poucel, a trade union official, said workers refused “to continue going to the front lines, risking their lives.” The action forced the company to

issue a statement Monday that all its employees nationally will receive protective masks from a batch of 2 million it has ordered.

In **Germany**, 37 new deaths were reported yesterday, bringing the total to 682.

Workers of FraCareServices, a joint subsidiary of Lufthansa and Fraport, are opposing the lack of PPE at Frankfurt airport. One said, “The conditions at the airport are a scandal and incompatible with the country’s pandemic rules.” The 800 employees take care of passengers who need special help and support including the elderly, children or people with disabilities. One of their tasks is to help people with walking disabilities, something that cannot be done without physical contact.

“We are not provided with any disinfectant, no face mask, not even gloves,” a worker said, “although we naturally have more frequent contact with customers—it is often impossible to maintain the prescribed distance. Actually, the wheelchairs should be disinfected after each guest.” He complained, “There is no crisis management team, and a pandemic plan is not being followed.”

As flights from China, Iran and Italy still arrive in Germany, the worker had not observed any special measures for passengers from these risk areas. “Neither fever is measured on arrival, nor is particular attention paid to the safety distance.”

Truck drivers in Germany are protesting conditions at work. Due to the spread of the coronavirus, restaurants are closed along the motorways. If at all, only snacks are offered. The condition of the sanitary facilities is often horrendous, with showers and toilets not properly cleaned. Truck driver Bernhard Schumann told radio station NDR 1 Lower Saxony, “Before corona we were treated disrespectfully, now we are treated disrespectfully and inhumanely.”

A worker at stainless steel group Outokumpu in Krefeld, who wanted to remain anonymous, told the WSWS, “I know from my own experience that German companies are exploiting the coronavirus pandemic to make a profit at the expense of their employees. They want to profit from closed competitor factories in the Asian region and, with full order books, even let their employees work overtime without regard for their health.” He counts himself among the risk group and complains that there are no disinfectants or other effective precautions to prevent the spread of the virus.

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