

19,000 ambulance workers strike in Northern India to demand protective gear

Pradeep Ramanayake
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Thousands of ambulance workers in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh walked off the job Tuesday afternoon demanding protective gear and their outstanding salaries for the last two months. About 19,000 workers, including drivers, helpers and emergency technicians employed in 102 and 108 emergency number ambulance services joined the strike, halting the operation of 4,700 ambulances.

The strike is part of an upsurge of working class struggle around the world against the efforts of capitalist governments and corporations to keep non-essential workplaces open, despite the spread of the deadly COVID-19 disease, and to demand proper protective equipment for workers in essential industries and services. Doctors, nurses and paramedics who work closely with patients infected by the coronavirus are working under the most dangerous of these conditions.

Hours after the strike began, the Association of Ambulance Workers (AAW), the trade union that organized the strike, called off the action following negotiations with the state administration. The union was determined to prevent the strike from turning into a wider struggle, attracting the attention of millions of Indian health workers labouring under the same perilous conditions.

The ambulance workers are among the tens of millions of Indian contract workers who are deprived of almost all basic rights even under normal circumstances. The state government hired them from Gunupati Venkata Krishna Emergency Management and Research Institute (GVK-EMRI), which owns a large network of ambulance services throughout the country.

Uttar Pradesh ambulance workers have taken strike action on several previous occasions as the company waived their pay for several months. Now, as they are

forced to work under hazardous conditions, both the GVK-EMRI that employed them and the state government that hired them have demonstrated their utter disregard for the workers' lives.

Speaking to the media in a video, one striking worker explained, "We do not have sanitizers, gloves or proper masks." Pointing to the mask he was wearing, he said, "15 of these have been distributed for each ambulance but we don't know when we will get new ones. You cannot wear this mask more than two hours. When we go to fill oxygen, people don't allow us inside. We told the local chief medical officer to arrange better supplies but got no response."

Workers sent a letter through union officials to the private company requesting "safety equipment like what doctors are getting" but they got no response. After the workers asked the right-wing state government to intervene on their behalf, the government dismissed their request and ordered the workers to negotiate directly with the private company. "The state government cannot provide help in this matter," it bluntly declared.

As the unions negotiated with the government, Additional Chief Secretary Awanish Awasthi threatened workers, saying, "This is an emergency situation, and going on a strike at this juncture is illegal. The issue has been resolved." The statement was meant as threat against all workers who will be demanding urgently needed equipment and medical supplies.

India's health care system is in an appalling state, especially in Uttar Pradesh. This is due to the meagre levels of spending allocated to health by successive governments at both central and state levels. The horrific state of health services in Uttar Pradesh was exposed by the deaths of at least 70 children over the

span of 10 days three years ago at the state-run Baba Raghav Das Medical College Hospital in Gorkhapur district. The fatalities were mainly due to a lack of oxygen supplies, after a private company withdrew its supplies due to unpaid bills.

The spread of COVID-19 in India is triggering a massive tragedy across the country. In addition to its criminal failure to expand testing and boost funding for hospitals and other health care services, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government responded to the pandemic by imposing a sudden, disorganized nationwide shutdown on March 24. No plan has been put in place to provide the basic necessities of life while people shelter indoors, exacerbating the hardship for hundreds of millions of migrant workers and rural toilers in particular.

Health care workers are also facing unbearable conditions. Several newspapers in India have reported how the shortages of PPE have forced some doctors to use raincoats and motorbike helmets while working among COVID-19 infected patients.

Reuters reported that although India needs at least 38 million masks and 6.2 million pieces of PPE as it confronts the spread of the coronavirus, the quantity of masks available from the companies it canvassed was just 9.1 million, while the number of PPE body coveralls stood at less than 800,000.

Like their counterparts in other countries, the Indian ruling class is incapable of providing health care workers with the protection they need. Thousands of medical professionals across Europe have already contracted the disease, and millions more are in serious danger. This is leading to growing protests and actions by health care workers, including in Papua New Guinea where thousands of nurses are striking this week to demand protective equipment.



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