

Tea estate workers in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, as well as medical workers in India and Papua New Guinea strike over COVID-19 dangers

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 April 2020

Bangladesh tea estate workers strike over coronavirus dangers

Over 550,000 tea estate workers in the Moulvibazar and Sylhet districts downed tools on March 27, 30 and 31, in protest against dangerous and unsafe working conditions.

The tea estate workers said that although the government had declared a 10-day holiday, starting on March 29, for all government and private sector workers and employees in non-essential services, tea estate employers demanded that they keep working. The workers threatened to walk out for 10 days if the estate bosses failed to declare a holiday.

The highly oppressed estate workers live in badly overcrowded, unhygienic dwellings without basic facilities making them highly vulnerable to COVID-19.

India: Medical staff in Punjab protest against lack of safety equipment

Nurses and paramedical staff at the government-run Rajindra Hospital in Patiala, Punjab protested on Tuesday denouncing the government for failing to provide basic safety gear for treating coronavirus patients. Nurses demonstrated outside the office of the Medical Superintendent at 11 pm the previous evening.

The nurses told the media that the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits were only provided to staff in isolation wards and that the kits were faulty. Emergency department workers, the first to make physical contact with patients, they said, had not been given any PPE.

An isolation ward nurse explained that she was handling the COVID-19 positive patients but the PPE kits provided by the hospital do not cover the entire body and exposed health workers to the virus. She accused authorities of compromising the lives of nurses.

Telangana coal miners' strike over police assault on fellow worker during COVID-19 lockdown

Workers from the government-owned Singareni Collieries boycotted work and protested in Bhupalpally on Monday after a co-worker was severely beaten by the police as he was returning home after a late shift on March 28. The injured worker said that he produced his Identity Card, which clearly stated that he was on emergency duty but the police snatched the card, threw it away and then beat him up. His fellow workers demanded action against the police and paid leave during the lockdown period.

Kerala: Migrant workers detained amidst lockdown

Thousands of migrant workers trapped in Kerala by the Indian government's sudden COVID-19 national lockdown demonstrated on the Changanassery-Mallappilly Road in Payippad, Kottayam district on March 29. They were demanding arrangements be made to allow them to return to their home states.

Around 10,000 construction migrant workers, mostly from West Bengal and Assam, are housed in labour camps in Payippad Panchayat. The workers told the media that they had little food because of the lockdown and that water quality in the camp was very poor.

Pakistan: Locked out government workers demand outstanding salaries

Former Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) workers protested through digital and online platforms on March 26 to demand full payment of their salaries which were stopped when

the government disbanded the PMDC last October.

Some 220 workers were sacked without notice when the PMDC was replaced by the Pakistan Medical Commission (PMC). The government continues to defy a High Court ruling which declared that the government's actions were illegal.

The government's arbitrary action has also impacted on 15,000 students awaiting registration as medical doctors after qualifying and 50,000 doctors who need their registrations to be renewed.

Sri Lankan plantation workers demand shorter working day

About 150 workers at the Selvakanthan estate, which is owned by the Bogawantala plantation in Hatton, protested before work on March 28 to demand management allow them to leave early in order to buy household items before the national coronavirus curfew was imposed. The curfew is only lifted 6 a.m. and 2 p.m. to allow people to buy essentials.

Melbourne dock workers refuse to unload Chinese ship

More than 60 dock workers at the DP World terminal at the Port of Melbourne were stood down on Tuesday after they refused to unload a Chinese container vessel which had docked before the end of the federal government's mandatory 14-day coronavirus quarantine period.

The Xin Da Lian left Shanghai on March 17, which according to the Australian Border Force and DP World, would be cleared for berthing in Australia on Tuesday evening.

The dock workers, who are members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA)—a division of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union—claimed that the vessel had visited a Taiwanese port on March 19 so was still in quarantine and refused to board the vessel. A MUA spokesman said the vessel would be unloaded when the 14-day quarantine period was reached.

Meanwhile, three container ships—the Kota Harum, Antung and ANL Dili Trader—that departed foreign ports in recent days docked in Darwin this week despite failing to undertake the 14 day coronavirus quarantine period.

Mater Hospital management ordered to negotiate enterprise agreement

The Fair Work Commission (FWC) on Monday ordered the Mater Hospital in Brisbane, the Queensland state capital, to resume enterprise agreement (EA) negotiations with health workers unions. The ruling was in response to an application from the Together union.

Hospital management attempted to push through its demands by balloting workers on a previously rejected agreement offer with a below inflation 1.5 percent pay increase and establish lower wages rates for new staff.

Allied health staff, which includes pathologists, occupational therapists and medical laboratory scientists and others covered by the Together union and Professional Pharmacists Australia (PPA), reject Mater's proposal to introduce an award that would spell cheaper wages for new staff.

Union members began low level action in December and have since escalated that by refusing to update patient medical records.

Doctors and other health workers strike in Papua New Guinea

Doctors, nurses and allied health workers from the Angau Memorial General Hospital in regional Papua New Guinea, struck on April 2 to demand the removal of the chief executive officer of the Morobe provincial health authority.

The workers, who boarded up the doors of the CEO's office, said they did not have the right personal protective equipment (PPE) for dealing with COVID-19 and denounced management's "lack of urgency" over the pandemic. The strikers also raised concerns about patient welfare, staff allowances and entitlements and a lack of medical supplies, materials and resources.

Angau Memorial General Hospital's accident and emergency unit was closed indefinitely this week following a report that a patient had died from COVID-19.

Last week, 600 nurses in Port Moresby, PNG's capital, staged a protest over the lack of PPEs at the city's health facility.



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