

Bangladeshi and Cambodian garment workers strike against COVID-19 job cuts; Pakistani medical workers demand safe working conditions

## Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

25 April 2020

### Protests continue in Bangladesh over wages and factory closures

Tens of thousands of workers from 770 factories, including 280 garment plants, in industrial estates at Gazipur, Mymensingh, Narayanganj, Dhaka and Chattogram are continuing protests since early April.

The demonstrations erupted after workers found their factories shuttered on April 4, following the lifting of the government's coronavirus lockdown. The protests escalated after April 16, the day the government claimed that factory owners would pay all outstanding wages.

Last Sunday, about 400 Mars Design workers in Hemayetpur demonstrated demanding between two and four months' unpaid wages, whilst in Dhaka some 2,000 workers from six garment factories, a spinning mill and a cable plant protested their layoffs and demanded their March salaries. In Narayanganj, workers from three apparel factories protested to demand three months' unpaid wages.

The next day about 25 workers were violently beaten and 10 injured by a local administrator's goons when they demanded their unpaid wages from the Elaine Apparels factory in Ashulia's Charabagh area. Police also attacked and injured over 10 workers protesting outside Consist Apparels in Gazipur. On Wednesday, about 150 garment workers from Eton Fashions in Paltan, Dhaka protested after management announced that it was laying off 500 workers.

### Bangladeshi crab farm workers protest for wages

Dozens of workers from the Shakib Al Hasan Agro Farm in Shyam Nagar, Satkhira district blocked a nearby road and demonstrated on Monday demanding four months unpaid wages. The farm is a crab and swamp eel facility partly owned

by national cricketer Sakib al Hasan.

Workers said that they were told wages were delayed because demand for their product had fallen due to the coronavirus pandemic. A local administrator intervened and claimed he had been told by farm management that the overdue wages would be paid by April 30.

### India: Hospital cleaners in Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh demand wages

About 200 cleaners from the Karur Government Medical College Hospital in Tamil Nadu staged a sit-in protest on April 21 to demand payment of their March salaries. Protesters said that the workload had doubled because of increased cleaning work in the hospital where many COVID-19 patients had been admitted.

Meanwhile another group of sanitation workers at the King George Medical University in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh struck on April 17 claiming that their salaries had been deducted. Several workers claimed that they had not been paid since January. Workers told the media that they had been paid 8,800 rupees (\$US116) per month up until December but this year their wages had been reduced by almost one third to only 6,000 rupees.

### West Bengal jute mill workers demand wages during lockdown

Thousands of jute mill workers demonstrated outside their factories in Kolkata on April 17 to protest against non-payment of wages during the COVID-19 lockdown.

There are 43 composite operational jute mills employing a

total of 150,000 workers in West Bengal. Only two mills have paid their workers during the lockdown period. Protesters have threatened to hold a hunger strike if their wages are not paid.

### **Pakistan: Protests continue over lack of PPE for frontline health workers**

Hundreds of hospital health workers demonstrated outside the Punjab Health Secretariat in Lahore on April 17 to demand the government supply them with adequate personal protective gear (PPE). The protest was called by the newly-formed Grand National Health Alliance (GNHA). The alliance includes six unions—the Young Doctors Association, Young Pharmacists Association, Paramedics Association and the Pakistan Drug Lawyers Forum.

The health workers are also demanding the immediate reinstatement of doctors and medical staff suspended for organising protests against the government and demanding additional incentives for all medical workers. The GNHA has written to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court accusing the government of publishing false data about coronavirus testing facilities.

As of Thursday evening, Pakistan has recorded over 10,500 positive cases of COVID-19 and 235 deaths. More than 100 doctors have tested positive for coronavirus and two have died.

The Lahore protest followed a demonstration in early April by doctors and healthcare workers in Quetta demanding they be provided with PPE. Police violently dispersed protesters and arrested 150 health workers. The government claims the medical workers were arrested for violating Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, which bans gatherings of more than five people and holding a march.

### **Cambodian garment workers protest sackings**

Over 300 workers at the Hulu Garment factory in the Por Senchey district of Phnom Penh protested outside the plant on Thursday over the sacking of 1,020 factory workers without proper compensation. Management suspended production for over two months and claimed that the workers had resigned.

This ploy is a legal loophole which allows employers to pay only 40 percent of workers' wages and not provide seniority payments as required in all dismissal cases.

The workers are among 500,000 of the country's 750,000 garment workers immediately facing job losses as export orders dry up due to COVID-19 pandemic. The national garment manufacturers organisation says that 60 percent of garment

factories have been severely affected.

### **Frontline health workers in the Philippines demand PPE**

Fearing for their lives, frontline health workers in the Philippines over the past months have been demanding better personal protection equipment (PPE), regular staff testing and more trained staff in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Protests have taken place at various locations, including the National Children's Hospital in Manila in February.

Health workers account for 16 percent of all positive COVID-19 tests in the country. Over 60 of 75 confirmed cases at the National Centre for Mental Health were staff members.

Figures from the John Hopkins University and Medscape this week revealed Philippines health care professionals have the highest death rate from COVID-19 in the world. Twenty five doctors, nurses and other health professionals have died from the virus, equal to 5.72 percent of all recorded deaths.

### **Sydney bus drivers demand better protection against COVID-19**

Sydney bus drivers are calling on the New South Wales Liberal government to give them better personal protective equipment and working conditions. While management has provided drivers with hand sanitiser and disinfectant wipes they have not been given facemasks. Their demand was made after a passenger allegedly spat in the face of a bus driver this week. Drivers said they have been forced to purchase masks at their own expense.

Transport NSW has refused to issue drivers with masks, claiming they were not necessary as various measures had already been implemented to ensure driver safety.

While the Rail, Tram and Bus Union alleges that the government was hiding the fact that there were mask shortages, it has not called on drivers to take industrial action, despite the fact that under Australia's repressive industrial relations, workers have a legal right to strike over occupational health and safety issues.



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