

## Workers in India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan strike to demand coronavirus-safe working conditions

# Workers Struggles: Asia

9 May 2020

### Burma police use coronavirus laws to break workers' strikes

On May 4, police at Dagon Seikkan township in Yangon, Burma's largest city, arrested six union members amongst a group of 100 workers blocking the entrance to the Blue Diamond bag factory.

The six strike leaders were charged with violating COVID-19 orders and jailed for three months by the local town court. Workers began the strike on May 2 to demand full payment of their April wages, including from April 19 to 30 when the plant was shut down following government orders.

Prior to the 10–17 April Thingyan (new year) holiday, Blue Diamond workers had walked out on strike to demand management close the factory for one month on full pay to stop the spread of COVID-19.

On Monday, police also arrested five workers who had led strikes at the Rainwear House and Brightberg factories in the same district. On April 22, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi warned that the government would use its ban on gatherings to prosecute union members taking industrial action.

### India: Punjab bus workers demand COVID-19 insurance

Contract workers from the state-owned commuter bus company Punbus/Punjab Roadways demonstrated at several locations in Jalandhar district on May 5 over several demands, including insurance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The protesters burnt effigies of the Punjab's chief minister.

Workers alleged that they had been forced to keep working during the coronavirus lockdown without any health insurance or benefits. Drivers and conductors who had been quarantined claim that they did not receive proper medical treatment at the quarantine wards.

Workers want 5 million rupees (\$US66,500) insurance cover, like other front-line workers, as well as gloves, masks and PPE kits for all workers deployed on COVID-19 duties and to be given full-time jobs. The workers are members organised by the Punbus/Punjab Roadways Contractual Workers Union.

### De-addiction centre staff in Punjab on strike

Contracted and outsourced staff at state-run drug and alcohol de-addiction centres across Punjab struck work on May 4 to demand

permanent jobs. The strike, called by the Government De-addiction and Rehabilitation Employees' Union, was observed at de-addiction centres in Phagwara, Nurmahal, Nakodar and Phillaur.

Strikers said they had been working at the centres for years alongside permanent employees for a meagre monthly salary of between 10,000 rupees (\$US132) and 12,000 rupees. They also demanded health insurance for their family members.

### Tamil Nadu sanitation workers demand promised COVID-19 bonus

Around 1,800 sanitation workers from the Tiruppur [municipal] Corporation wore black badges to work last week to demand a special one month's salary payment as promised by the state government. The limited protest was part of a state-wide action by members of Tiruppur District Conservancy Workers Association, which is affiliated to the All India Trade Union Congress.

Workers said that the Tamil Nadu chief minister had already announced a one-month special payment for doctors, nurses, medical staff and sanitary workers to honour their contribution in the fight against COVID-19 but nothing had been done to fulfil his pledge.

### New Delhi hospital nurses strike over unsafe conditions

Nurses at the Baba Saheb Ambedkar Hospital in New Delhi walked out on strike on May 4 in protest against unsafe conditions at the facility where a large number of doctors, nurses and other health workers have been infected with COVID-19.

### Migrant workers across India demand to be given passage home

Unemployed migrant workers, mostly from Bihar, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, held a sit-down protest at the Khammam police station in Telangana state on May 5 to demand immediate arrangements to send them back to their village homes. The destitute workers, whose jobs have been affected by the COVID-19 lockdown, are from various granite factories and allied industries in Khammam division.

Workers denounced alleged delays in sending them back home despite the home ministry's fresh guidelines permitting inter-state movement of

stranded migrant workers. They displayed makeshift placards saying “Allow us to return to our homes.”

On May 4, large numbers of construction workers at Suncity in Gurugram state demonstrated to demand that they be returned to their home villages and towns. Similar protests have been held across India this week, including in Chennai, Hyderabad, Bangalore and Surat after the Modi government decided to extend its coronavirus lockdown for a second time.

### **Jammu cleaners demand protection against COVID-19**

A group of cleaners in Jammu, northern India, staged a sit-down protest on May 5 to demand better working conditions. The workers displayed placards, calling for personal protective equipment and safe working conditions to combat COVID-19. The cleaners said that they were working in unsafe conditions due to lack of masks, gloves and sanitisers.

### **Pakistan: Unions close down health workers strike**

The Grand Health Alliance-Punjab, following talks with the Punjab state government on May 4, shut down a protest campaign and hunger strike by doctors, paramedics, nurses and other medical staff at government hospitals. The protests began on April 17. The health workers were demanding personal protective equipment (PPE) amidst an escalating spread of COVID-19.

Protesting doctors in Balochistan were previously attacked by police and hundreds arrested for demanding PPEs.

The Grand Health Alliance-Punjab, an umbrella organisation formed by several unions, claimed that the government had agreed to provide necessary safety equipment and would reinstate health workers suspended for protesting. On the same day as the union was shutting down the strike, reports showed a significant increase of health workers infected with the virus with over 190 new cases added in the preceding week, bringing the total infected to 444.

### **Bangladesh: Nationwide protests by factory workers enters fourth week**

Thousands of Bangladeshi garment and other factory workers are maintaining protests sparked on April 4, after workers found their factories shuttered following the lifting of the government’s coronavirus lockdown. Tens of thousands of workers from 770 factories are demanding that the factories reopen and unpaid wages be distributed, and oppose the 35 percent cut in wages. The government is maintaining the lockdown of government and private sector offices.

Police were called to disperse several hundred protesting garment and footwear workers in Gazipur who blocked the Dhaka-Mymensingh and Dhaka-Tangail highways on Wednesday. They were protesting against lay-offs. Workers from the Deiyu Fashion factory said that after paying wages for March, factory authorities on April 16 demanded workers sign termination letters. More than 400 were informed later of their termination over the phone.

According to Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity, a garment

workers’ organisation, at least 97 garment workers have been infected with COVID-19 and 10 have died.

### **Bangladeshi bridge construction workers shot by security guards**

At least six protesting construction workers from the Padma Bridge project in Munshiganj district, near Dhaka, suffered gunshot wounds after being shot by the security guards of a contracting company. The workers were protesting against not being paid overtime entitlements.

According to the emergency doctor at a nearby hospital, of the seven workers who were admitted, six sustained bullet injuries and the other was badly beaten.

### **Bangladesh road transport workers demand relief during lockdown**

Several hundred road transport workers affected by the COVID-19 lockdown demonstrated on a highway in Dhaka on Thursday to demand relief or lifting of the ban on public transport. Workers said they were made jobless due to the lockdown and had not received any relief payments from the government. The Bangladesh Road Transport Workers’ Federation called the protest off after a local government representative intervened and distributed some relief.

### **Sri Lanka: Coconut coir factory workers protest against pay cut**

Workers at a coconut coir factory in Dummalasooriya, owned by the global conglomerate Heyleys PLC, demonstrated on April 4 against the company’s decision to cut their April salary by between 5 and 30 percent. A majority of workers at the factory, 80km away from Colombo, are hired on contract and are paid a meagre daily wage of 1,200 rupees (\$US6).

Although part of the workforce was called to work on April 15 after the plant was shut down due to the COVID-19 epidemic, management announced that wages had been reduced and production targets increased. Workers said management told them payment would be higher if they produce more.

The workers complained that they had not received a salary increase for years. They also said that no government authority, including the Labour Commissioner, was working to address their long-standing problems.

### **Sri Lankan petrol filling station workers strike**

About a dozen workers from Elpitiya Ceylon Petroleum Cooperation filling stations in the country’s Southern province struck on May 1. They were demanding an additional payment for continuing to work in the essential service during COVID-19 curfew period. Sri Lankan police said that the petrol filling services in the area were affected during the strike.



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