Indian police detain thousands of sacked migrant workers; Pakistani health workers demand unpaid wages and allowances

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 May 2020

India police intercept and detain thousands of unemployed homebound migrant workers

As the COVID-19 death toll rises in India tens of thousands of migrant workers stranded by the national lockdown and attempting to return to their home states are being intercepted by police, placed in detention and in some cases severely beaten.

Thousands of destitute migrant workers have been protesting in different parts of India for the past months demanding that they be given passage back to their home towns and villages having been laid off or lost their jobs during the COVID-19 lockdown.

On May 16, migrant workers on bicycles and on foot were physically assaulted by police as they attempted to cross the inter-district borders of Guntur and Krishna in Andhra Pradesh.

On the same day, workers from Maharashtra were stopped by the police in Theni, Tamil Nadu as they planned to travel by lorry trucks to their native homes. Seventy-four workers travelling to Rajasthan on two trucks were intercepted by the Dharwad District Police near Dharwad and detained. Thousands of migrant workers in Coimbatore district demonstrated at 60 locations on May 19 demanding additional trains to take them home.

Migrant workers, mostly from Jharkhand, UP and MP, demonstrated in Ahmedabad, Gujarat state, demanding food, wages and rail journey back home. Their demonstration was attacked and dispersed by police using teargas shells and at least 250 workers detained. In a separate incident in Surat, Gujarat, a worker died allegedly from a severe beating by police who claimed he violated social distancing rules.

Migrant workers stranded in Nepal protest against detention

Around 880 Indian nationals previously employed at brick kilns in Nawalparasi district, Nepal, but stranded by the ongoing COVID-19 lockdown demonstrated on Thursday. They were demanding to be allowed to return home to India in the hope of finding jobs in local plantations.

The kiln owners claimed to have been instructed by the government not to allow the workers to leave their kiln premises. The workers have no income and are being fed and housed by the kiln operators. Many of the workers have threatened to walk home.

Telangana cinema theatre employees protest

Cinema theatre workers demonstrated in Hyderabad, Telangana, on May 19 over long-pending salary demands. The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which organised the protest, called for the government to initiate action against the theatre owners for not paying full wages during the COVID-19 lockdown in accordance with the government order.

Workers said they had not been paid full salaries for the past two months and it was impacting on the lives of 20,000 families. They said that theatre owners were using the coronavirus lockdown to either terminate workers or impose 40 to 50 percent pay cuts. Theatre workers are demanding the government provide them with sufficient rations and various essential items and a 500-rupee ($US6.50) payment to each family during the pandemic crisis. They have threatened to step up their protests if their demands are not granted.

Andhra Pradesh commuter transport workers protest sackings

Public transport workers from the Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation (APSRTC) demonstrated in Maddilapalem and Visakhapatnam on May 16 against the corporation’s decision to lay off 6,257 outsourced contract workers. The contract workers have not been paid their April wages. Workers alleged that depot managers have instructed drivers and conductors to do the duties of the sacked workers.

The protest was coordinated by the CITU and the transport unions who sent a timid appeal to the state government to follow a central Indian government directive ordering private and state sector organisations not to lay off workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The unions have not organised any industrial action in support of the sacked workers.

Pakistan: Sindh hospital workers’ protests

Young Doctors Association (YDA) and Young Nurses Association (YNA) members from state-funded hospitals held separate protests this week against the government’s failure to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) and to demand payment of all outstanding allowances.

According to YDA, the government has only provided 20 percent of the

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required PPE to hospitals. They also claimed that, despite repeated government promises, doctors at the Larkana and Sukkur hospitals have not been paid for 13 months. After continuing its protests for more than a week, the YNA has warned that it would hold a provincial-wide hospital strike if its demands are not met before the weekend.

Sindh community health workers oppose widespread job cuts

Workers from the government-run, community-based vaccinators program demonstrated on Monday outside the Karachi Press Club to demand reinstatement of over 4,900 workers fired during the COVID-19 lockdown.

These vital but low-paid health workers provide essential vaccinations to the population, and especially in rural areas that lack permanent health facilities. Their work has been crucial in battling outbreaks of polio and other diseases. The workers are only paid 17,500 rupees ($US109.06) a month.

Karachi police open fire on protesting apparel workers

The police baton-charged and opened fire on hundreds of demonstrating denim factory workers on Tuesday in Karachi's Korangi area. The workers were protesting layoffs and the non-payment of wages.

One worker was injured in the police attack. According to the National Trade Union Federation of Pakistan, the plant produces cloth for H&M and other international retailers.

Nationwide protests by Bangladesh factory workers enters sixth week

Tens of thousands of workers from hundreds of companies across Bangladesh are maintaining protests they began on April 4 when they found their factories were still shut down after the government officially ended a national coronavirus lockdown.

The workers want the factories reopened, payment of all wages during the lockdown, full payment of the annual Eid festival holiday bonus—which was cut by half—and total restoration of all pay rates—which were cut by 35 percent in April, and outstanding overtime payments.

On Monday, thousands of garment workers from over two dozen factories demonstrated blocking roads in Dhaka, demanding unpaid wages and festival bonus. Some of the factories have not paid wages since February. About 141 workers from 70 factories in five industrial zones have tested positive for coronavirus.

On Tuesday, thousands of workers protested for full payment of wages and festival bonuses. This included workers from the Opex Group and Fakir Knitwears.

On Wednesday, thousands of garment workers from at least 40 garment factories in Ashulia, Gazipur, Narayanganj, Chattogram and Dhaka city demonstrated demanding their wages, festival bonus and other unpaid arrears. The protest included at least 15 factories from Gazipur and 10 from Ashulia.

About 500 workers and staff members from Reza Fashions in Ashulia protested over the same demands and for the plant to be reopened. The company had employed more than 1,200 workers and staff members.

Bangladesh jute workers demand full festival bonus and wage arrears

Jute mill workers of Khalishpur Jute Mill in Khulna walked out on strike on Tuesday to demand full Eid festival bonus and five weeks' unpaid wages during the COVID-19 lockdown. The strike began when workers learnt that they would not receive the full festival bonus. They protested outside the mill that day and said they would continue their demonstration until their demands are fulfilled.

Cambodian garment workers protest factory closure

More than 100 workers protested outside the Hulu Garment factory in Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh on Monday demanding the company pay their full benefits following the suspension of operations on March 24 in response to falling international orders. The factory employs over 1,000 people.

The workers have been protesting since April 22 after the company announced that the plant was closing for good. Management urged workers to quit with the promise of some, but not all, of their benefits. Protesters demanded that the factory authorities confirm whether the closure was permanent and if it was to pay full benefits, in accordance with a government order.

The Cambodian garment industry's peak body has revealed that 180 factories have suspended operations and another 80 were about to do so, leaving 150,000 employees out of work.

New Zealand primary care nurses reject pay offer

Primary care nurses who have been demanding a 10 percent pay rise since last year have rejected a management offer for less than half that amount over two years.

Primary care nurses, who work for general practitioners, medical centres and are involved in COVID-19 testing, want parity with district health board (DHB) nurses employed in public hospitals. An experienced nurse covered by the Primary Health Care agreement is paid 10.6 percent less than their DHB counterparts with the same qualifications and experience.

A spokesman for the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) said that employers had made a "final offer" based on what they claimed they could afford, but it fell "woefully short." In the 2018–19 contract settlement for DHB nurses, the union imposed a settlement of just 3 percent per year for three years, an effective wage freeze. The sell-out deal was widely opposed by nurses.

The NZNO has suggested government funding could address the disparity between the two groups, since the employers are ultimately paid by the government. Labour's Health Minister David Clark rejected the idea, declaring that nurses working in non-DHB workplaces are employed by private employers.

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