

India-wide protests by military armament and power industry workers; Australian airport workers demand JobKeeper pay

## Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

6 June 2020

### Military armament factory workers in India hold nationwide protests against corporatisation

Tens of thousands of workers from over 40 government-owned arms manufacturing plants across India stopped work on May 29 to protest the Modi government's decision to corporatise the Ordnance Factories Board (OFB). The OFB has a total workforce of 82,000 and is the 37th largest defence manufacturer in the world.

The Modi government claims that the corporatisation is necessary in order to attract investment in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government intends to allow up to 74 percent direct foreign investment in the OFB, up from the current 49 percent limit.

The protest was called by the All India Defense Employees' Federation, the Indian National Defense Workers' Federation and the RSS-affiliated Bharatiya Pratiraksha Mazdoor Sangh. The unions have threatened to call an indefinite strike if the government does not reverse its decision. A union ballot of OFB workers will take place between June 8 and 17.

### Power sector workers across India protest against privatisation

Thousands of power workers and engineers protested nationally on June 1 against the Modi government's Electricity Amendment Bill 2020. The bill allows the privatisation of electricity distribution in all India's states and territories. Workers wore black badges and demonstrated outside depot gates in most states.

Workers alleged that the bill is anti-farmer and anti-domestic consumer. Power generation and distribution in India operates via a cross-subsidisation system. Under this scheme richer states that make a profit subsidise the power distribution costs of poorer states and territories ensuring that power prices are kept relatively low.

### India: Tyre factory workers in Tamil Nadu strike

MRF tyre factory workers at Thiruvottiyur in Chennai, Tamil Nadu downed tools on May 28 after a co-worker tested positive for COVID-19. The workers demanded decontamination and sanitation of various departments, systematic contact tracing, testing of all workers and isolation of those showing signs of being infected.

The workers also rejected recent management demands that all permanent floor-level technicians report for work. The tyre workers said

the management directive was in violation of the government endorsed standard operating procedures and ignored an agreement between management and the union prior to restarting work.

### Maharashtra hospital workers in walkout over unpaid salaries

Around 450 workers at the Kashibai Navale Hospital and Medical College in Pune, Maharashtra state, walked out on May 30 and protested outside the hospital over non-payment of wages of over 1,200 workers for six months.

Most of them were non-teaching staff, including nurses, ward boys, multi-purpose workers and lab technicians. Workers from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) facility remained at work during the protest.

Hospital management claimed that the pay delays were due to loss of income caused by the coronavirus lockdown. Workers rejected this, pointing out that management often delayed salary payments.

Protesters also complained that over 230 hospital workers stranded in the home villages because the national coronavirus lockdown had been terminated by hospital administration.

### Bangalore construction workers protest

Construction workers protested outside the Karnataka State Building and Construction Workers Welfare Board on May 28 to demand 2,000 rupees (\$26) per week financial assistance for all construction workers badly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic lock-down.

### Maharashtra garbage truck drivers protest against pay cut

Garbage collection service drivers in Nagpur, Maharashtra demonstrated on June 1 against salary cuts that management claimed were the result of economic difficulties caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. Workers complained that the company, which is owned by the Bharat Vikas Group India, had paid only 15 days' wages last month for newly-hired workers. As part of the protest several workers refused to collect garbage and others refused to dump collected garbage.

## **Kerala spice farmers demand government assistance**

Cardamom spice growers and farm workers in Idukki, Kerala state held a silent protest on May 31, complaining that the state government financial assistance and essential goods were inadequate and was preventing them from harvesting. The farmers told the media that the cardamom plants had been hit by pests and that the government assistance was to allow them to purchase sufficient amounts of pesticides.

## **Bangladeshi water and sewerage utility workers demand job permanency**

Hundreds of Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (WASA) workers began an indefinite protest outside the WASA building at Karwanbazar in Dhaka on Monday. They were demanding permanent jobs for 1,500 workers hired under the “muster roll” system, payment of COVID-19 risk allowance and doubling of overtime pay rates.

Trade union officials accused WASA management of planning to keep the employees permanently on the “muster roll” and said their protest would continue until workers’ demands were met.

## **Bangladesh: Dhaka workers demonstrate against extended hours**

Hundreds of Tanaz Fashion factory workers in Gazipura in Dhaka, and the Bay Creation factory in Rupganj near Dhaka, demonstrated this week against layoffs and extended working hours but without any extra pay.

Both factories were due to reopen on May 30 after the government ended its national coronavirus lockdown.

However, soon after the Tanaz Fashion workers arrived at the plant on Monday morning management closed the factory and did not pay any of the outstanding wages or allowance.

Management simply declared that the workers were sacked and falsely claimed that entitlements for all 3,000 workers had been cleared before the Eid religious festival.

Workers rejected this and began blocking the nearby Dhaka-Mymensingh highway. The demonstration ended after the police intervened, claiming that negotiations with management to reopen the factory would be made.

On Sunday, Bay Creation workers blocked the Dhaka-Sylhet highway in protest against factory management demanding that they work an extra 150 hours without pay. Police were deployed to the scene but failed to convince workers to end their protest, forcing management to withdraw its demand.

## **Pakistan: Sindh government hospital nurses demonstrate in Karachi**

Sindh Young Nurses Association members are maintaining a protest they began on International Nurses Day outside the Karachi Press Club on May 12.

Government hospital nurses are demanding personal protective equipment (PPE) as COVID-19 infections increase throughout Pakistan and under conditions of a premature lifting of lockdown measures.

The nurses’ other demands include implementation of a service structure, timely promotions, the provision of health professional payments and health risk allowances, promotions and benefits for contract-based nurses and compensation to the families of nurses who have died of COVID-19.

## **Malaysian police break up hospital protest**

About 20 non-medical workers from the HRBT hospital in Ipoh, a city 180 km north of Kuala Lumpur, protested outside the hospital on Tuesday to demand personal protective equipment. Police were mobilised to break up the protest, arresting five workers.

Workers complained that their employer, Edgenta UEMS, forced them to clean COVID-19 wards without supplying them with PPE. They were also protesting over victimisation of union activists through arbitrary changes to their hours and shifts or transferring them to distant hospitals.

While the protest was conducted in accordance with COVID-19 procedures, the five workers were arrested under a 1988 prevention of infectious diseases law and the Criminal Procedures Code. Three of those arrested were hospital union office holders and two were members of Malaysian Socialist Party.

## **Airport workers protest in Australian capital cities**

Laid-off aviation workers demonstrated at all of Australia’s major airports on Thursday to demand JobKeeper COVID-19 welfare payments. The Transport Workers Union (TWU), which covers the workers and organised the protests, called on the federal Liberal-National government to reverse its decision to exclude workers at foreign-owned companies from the \$1,500 fortnightly JobKeeper subsidy. Over 5,000 workers are affected by the government decision.

According to a recent survey of over 1,000 aviation workers, almost 40 percent have had no income since being stood down; 70 percent said they were worried about losing their position permanently; 30 percent had been forced to use their superannuation to cover living expenses and 20 percent said they were worried they might default on mortgages and lose their home.

The TWU and other unions covering these destitute workers have refused to call industrial action by other airline industry workers. Instead all action is restricted to irregular protests at airports or outside the offices of federal government ministers and mouse-like appeals to the government.



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