

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 July 2020

## India: Private transport operators strike in Kolkata over increased fuel prices

Thousands of private transport operators in Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, stopped work and demonstrated at various locations in the city on Wednesday over rising fuel prices. A representative from the West Bengal Bus and Mini-Bus Owners' Association told the media that fuel prices had increased for the 22nd time on Monday in just over three weeks. He claimed only 10 percent of operators could afford to keep operating.

The protest also included the Cab Operators and Drivers Union, Ola and Uber App affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU).

Demonstrations over fuel increases were also held in the Kerala state capital Thiruvananthapuram involving members of the Autorickshaw Federation and the Taxi and Light Vehicle Association. Transport operators in Kurnool and Hyderabad also protested.

## West Bengal tea plantation workers protest demanding wages

Tea workers protested at Chamurchi tea garden in Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal on June 25. The workers were demanding payment of coronavirus lockdown wages, regular supply of food and fuel and retirement benefits.

Non-payment of wages during the coronavirus lockdown has been rampant in tea plantations across India. Tens of thousands of tea plantation workers in the north-eastern state of Assam staged protests at the end of April over the issue.

Workers on tea estates throughout the region say they have not received their wages, despite government guidelines that they should be paid in full during the lockdown period.

## India: Hospital nurses in Odisha locked out of accommodation

Nurses from the government-run Acharya Harihar Postgraduate Institute of Cancer (AHPGIC) in Cuttack, Odisha state demonstrated outside the hospital's administrative office on Monday demanding hospital management provide accommodation on the premises during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The nurses allege that their landlords have blocked them entering their rented accommodation, citing increased COVID-19 infections amongst health workers. Nurses said they wanted accommodation on hospital premises so they can undergo quarantine.

## Jammu and Kashmir government workers demand permanent jobs and pay rises

Hundreds of casual and daily wage workers from various government departments protested outside their respective offices across Jammu and Kashmir state valley on Tuesday demanding permanent jobs and implementation of the Minimum Wages Act.

A spokesman from the J&K Casual and Daily Wagers Forum said many of these exploited low-wage employees had 25 years of service but suffered irregular payment of wages. The union has warned that protests would be stepped up if the workers' demands were not granted.

## Punjab and Haryana media workers oppose job cuts

Journalists and other media workers involved in the production of English, Hindi and Punjabi newspapers demonstrated in Chandigarh, the joint capital of Punjab and Haryana states, on Monday to oppose the mass retrenchments and forced resignations. A memo listing their demands and signed by the protesting workers was later handed to the governors of Punjab and Haryana.

## Bangladesh: Jute mill workers demonstrate against privatisation

Over 30,000 jute mill workers in Khulna's Atra industrial area and Jashore protested in Khulna city on Monday and Tuesday against the government's decision to close down and privatise 25 state-owned mills. The mills, which are operated by the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC), employ nearly 50,000 people who are expected to lose their jobs in the industry if it is sold off.

The closures will have a severe impact on the millions of people involved in the jute industry. Most jute mill workers live in abject poverty with monthly wages as low as 4,150 taka (\$US48).

In a "golden handshake" deal accepted by the unions, the government has committed to pay arrears to 9,000 retired workers owing since 2014, and pay outstanding wages and other payments owing to current employees. The government claims that these amounts will be delayed because of the coronavirus pandemic but has not announced any payment date.

## Trainee doctors strike at a major Dhaka hospital

Trainee medical officers at the BIRDEM General Hospital in Dhaka walked off the job and demonstrated outside the building on Sunday over several demands, including restoration of full pay, PPE and permanent jobs. The doctors returned to work on Tuesday evening, after the hospital administration declared that the doctors were only temporary and threatened to terminate their jobs.

At least 90 doctors are still working in trainee positions, some of them for up to three years. They complained that they were recruited as resident medical officers and not told that they were temporary until after they began working. The doctors said that their monthly salary for the last two months has been cut by 10,000 taka (\$US117), supposedly due to the COVID-19 lockdown, and that they were not paid the Eid festival bonus.

One doctor said that about 20 of them tested positive for COVID-19 because they were supplied low-quality PPE and that the hospital did not arrange their treatment. They demanded treatment for infected doctors and their families, and one million taka compensation for the families of doctors who may die of COVID-19.

### **Bangladeshi garment workers demonstrate in Gazipur**

Hundreds of Alif Casual Wear factory workers from Gazipur blocked the Dhaka-Mymensingh Highway on June 27. The workers were protesting over the non-payment of wages for March and April during Bangladesh's official coronavirus lockdown. The demonstration was organised after factory authorities failed to honour a promise to pay the outstanding wages by June 26.

### **Pakistan: Sindh water purification plant workers demand wages**

Workers from the government-owned reverse osmosis water plants in Sukkur, on the Indus River in Sindh province, held a demonstration outside the district collector's office on Monday to demand seven months' outstanding salaries.

The workers had been employed for several years by a private contractor but after the contract with the government expired in October they decided to keep working and ensure the plants remained operational even though they were not being paid. The protesters have threatened to shut down the plants if either the government or the private contractor fail to pay the overdue wages.

The failure of government departments to pay salaries is widespread in Pakistan. Workers of the municipal administration in Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, went on strike on Tuesday to demand two-months of non-paid salaries and other entitlements.

### **Cambodian textile workers demand unpaid wages**

More than 50 workers from the New Best Global Textile factory in the Samraong Tong district travelled over 70 km on Monday to demonstrate outside the Labour Ministry office in Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital. The workers were demanding the government act to secure unpaid wages and other benefits that were not paid after their employer fled the country in March.

The textile workers told the media they had waited for three months for

the Labour Ministry to honour its promises to help the low-paid workers. The demonstrators said that they would stage another protest with more of the 763 sacked workers if there is still no action by the government.

### **Six COVID-19 case at Victorian supermarket distribution centre**

The United Workers Union (UWU) reported on Thursday that six workers at the Coles Laverton Distribution Centre, 17 km south-west of Melbourne's Central Business District, have tested positive to Covid-19. The union has put several demands to the supermarket giant but has not called or threatened industrial action.

Workers have been directed to take at least two weeks' pandemic leave and the site will be closed for 72 hours while it undergoes deep cleaning. Temporary workers will be employed at the distribution centre until permanent workers end their two-week isolation.

Workers initially stopped work demanding a safe workplace on March 27, forcing Coles management to supply PPE, do regular thermometer checks, provide hand sanitisers and wipes and implement social distancing work practices.

### **Melbourne construction workers protest over bashing of union officials**

About 250 workers from various construction sites in Melbourne demonstrated outside a Hawthorn East building site early Wednesday morning to oppose the violent bashing of two union officials the day before when they tried to enter the premises. Dozens of police were deployed to the protest and closed down the site. The protest ended at 9 a.m.

According to the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU), two officials had given prior notice that they were visiting the Toorak Road building site but were met by unidentified persons who attacked them. One union official was knocked unconscious after he was hit in the head with a length of timber.

### **Solomon Islands university staff threaten to strike**

Lecturers and general staff at the Solomon Islands National University (SINU) in Honiara announced this week that they would walk out on Friday if their demand for the removal of the vice-chancellor Dr. Ganesh Chand from Fiji was ignored.

The Lecturers Association and General Staff Association had previously issued a letter giving the SINU council chair seven days to act on their demand. SINU staff accused the vice chancellor of financial mismanagement and abuse of procurement and recruitment processes.



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