

# Indian autoworkers strike for COVID-19 safety measures; Thousands of Bangladeshi garment workers demonstrate Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

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## **India: Hyundai autoworkers strike to demand COVID-19 safety measures**

Hyundai assembly line workers at the Irungattukottai plant near Chennai in Tamil Nadu state, downed tools for an hour on May 24 to demand decontamination of work areas and testing for all employees. The workers at Assembly Shop 1 had begun a lunch break boycott two days earlier.

Hyundai resumed production at the plant on May 8, after obtaining permission from the District Revenue and Disaster Management authorities to operate with 50 percent of its workforce. During the first week of operations three workers tested positive for COVID-19 and were removed for medical attention. Hyundai management, however, kept the assembly line operating.

On May 24, management of the Maruti Suzuki India plant in Chennai revealed that an employee had tested positive for COVID-19 and a second person could be infected.

## **Workers protest Karnataka state government order for extended working hours**

Workers and union members protested across Karnataka on May 26 against a state government order allowing employers to extend the working day. The government claims it will assist industry to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The protest, which was organised by the Joint Committee of Trade Unions of Karnataka, saw workers in Bengaluru burn the government order.

Karnataka employers can now extend day shifts from 8 to 10 hours and the total working week to 60 hours, for a three-month period. The decision is in line with similar orders by other states including, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. Some states had increased the working day to 12 hours.

## **Migrant workers in Kerala demand passage home**

A gathering of about 100 laid-off migrant workers, mostly from the states of Bihar and Jharkhand, gathered at Kannankara town in Kerala state on Monday in an attempt to arrange transport back to their home states. State police intervened to disperse the group, telling the workers they had to return to their accommodation camps.

After hearing reports that workers had approached a travel agency in town to arrange buses, the police took the travel operators into custody, accusing them of encouraging an “illegal”

gathering.

## **Mumbai hospital workers protest over co-worker’s death**

King Edward Memorial hospital (KEM) workers in Mumbai protested on May 26, following the death of an ill 32-year-old colleague. The deceased worker had been on duty in COVID-19 wards until May 18 before developing a fever. He was receiving treatment from a local doctor but his condition worsened and he died in the ambulance while being transported back to the hospital six days later, on May 24.

The workers, who complained that he had not been tested for COVID-19, demanded that his family be paid full insurance benefits. The municipal workers’ unions, which led the protest, said that 18 employees at the hospital, including helpers, ward boys, and morgue attendants, have died from the virus.

## **Sri Lankan coconut coir factory workers’ strike in fourth week**

Coconut coir workers at a Dummalasooriya factory, which is owned by the global conglomerate Hayleys PLC, are maintaining strike action they began on May 4.

The walkout was in protest against the company’s decision to cut their April salaries by between 5 and 30 percent and impose increased production targets. Management claimed that the wage cut was due to the COVID-19 lockdown during April.

Most employees at the factory, which is 80km from Colombo, are contract workers and only paid 1,200 rupees (\$US6) per day. The workers also complained that they had not received a pay increase for several years or granted permanent jobs despite their long service to the company.

## **Sri Lankan government hospital workers protest over pay cut**

Balapitiya base hospital non-medical staff, including attendants, drivers, telephone operators and tailoring workers, picketed the Southern province hospital on May 23 to demand last month’s overtime payments. The workers are paid a basic monthly salary of just 24,500 rupees (\$US 132) and rely on earning an additional 10,000 rupees working overtime.

Workers said that a considerable amount of their pay is deducted for loans and they needed the overtime payment to buy household necessities. They also complained that they have never been provided enough Personal Protective Equipment, despite working

in a dangerous COVID-19 environment.

Another group of 400 workers from the base hospital in Gampaha, which is next to the Colombo district, protested on the following day over the same issues.

### **Nationwide protests by Bangladeshi factory workers**

Thousands of workers from factories in industrial estates across Bangladesh are maintaining protests that began on April 4 because their factories remained closed despite the government lifting its national coronavirus lockdown.

Garment workers from Gazipur, Savar, Ashulia and six other plants from Dakshinkhan area in Dhaka continue to hold street demonstrations. The workers want their April wages and full payment of the annual Eid holiday bonus.

The low-paid, mainly female workers are also concerned about the spread of COVID-19 in their workplaces. As of May 24, 170 workers from 77 operating factories have tested positive for the virus, 500 more have been placed in isolation and at least ten have died.

Union officials claim more than 5 percent of factories have not paid workers' April wages and according to government's Industrial Police more than 1,200 out of 7,600 factories have not paid the Eid bonus.

### **Bangladeshi journalists protest unpaid wages and job cuts**

Dhaka Union of Journalists (DUJ) members demonstrated at SAARC Fountain in Karwanbazaar, Dhaka on Monday for unpaid wages, festival allowances and the reinstatement of journalists sacked during the COVID-19 shutdown. Six journalists from an online news portal and other news reporters were dismissed on the day of the Eid festival.

### **Cambodian garment workers demand outstanding wages**

Over 600 workers demonstrated outside the shuttered Quality textile factory in Phnom Penh's Sechey district on Tuesday to demand their April wages. The company had failed to pay these wages on May 25 as promised.

Hundreds of factories in Cambodia have suspended production or closed, employers blaming the fall off in orders from Europe and the US because of the coronavirus pandemic.

### **Airline catering workers denied JobKeeper allowances**

Hundreds of stood-down employees from Dnata Catering, which provides inflight catering for the airline industry, demonstrated at capital city airports around Australia this week demanding the federal government's JobKeeper allowance. The \$1,500 fortnightly government allowance is paid to employers and then passed on to employees who would have lost their job due to the economic downturn caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

The 5,500 Dnata workers were informed on May 1 that the company is not eligible to receive the allowance because it is part of the Emirates Group, which is owned by the Dubai government. Most of the workers have been stood down with no income since March 30, unless they took annual leave or worked the small number of shifts on offer.

The low-key demonstrations organised by the Transport

Workers Union and the Australian Services Union consisted of useless appeals to the Australian government to reverse its decision. Despite the huge membership of the two unions they have refused to mobilise workers to support the Dnata employees.

### **Sydney public transport workers concerned over state government's return-to-work policy**

Rail Bus and Tram Union (RTBU) union members in Sydney have spoken out against the New South Wales Liberal government's instruction about this week's mass return to work following the easing of the coronavirus lockdown.

The NSW government has announced that a standard Sydney bus can only carry 12 passengers, a train carriage 32, and a Freshwater Ferry 245. Passengers are to be kept 1.5 metres apart with green dots placed throughout buses and rail carriages to alert individuals to where they can safely sit or stand.

While the government has admitted that social distancing on public transport is impossible to enforce, bus drivers have been told they cannot deny service to passengers when the bus is full or leave a school student at a bus stop.

According to the union, the government has been slow to provide adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) and refused to provide bus and tram drivers with face masks claiming this "would not necessarily benefit." Drivers have to provide their own equipment.

### **NSW public sector workers reject pay freeze**

The NSW Liberal-National government announced this week that it will freeze public sector pay rises for 12 months because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The cost-cutting exercise is expected to reduce the state government's annual wages bill by \$3 billion.

The freeze will apply to almost 410,000 public sector workers, including teachers, nurses, paramedics, transport workers and more, who were expecting a 2.5 percent rise within the next twelve months. These workers will now effectively suffer an average \$2,000 annual pay cut. Nurses and other frontline fighters against COVID-19 said the move was an insult.

None of the unions covering the affected workers have called for industrial action but claim that opposition MPs—Labor, Greens, the Animal Justice Party, and the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party—can be pressured into blocking the pay freeze in the state's Legislative Assembly.

The Queensland state Labor government has already announced that the already agreed 2.5 percent pay rise for the state's 224,000 public servants would be frozen.

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