

India: Wage Cuts, Sexual Harassment: Why Sanitation Workers Protested at a Delhi Govt Hospital

Sunday 4 February 2024, by [MAHAPRASHASTA Ajoy Ashirwad](#) (Date first published: 28 January 2024).

Labour rights activists and the workers believe that the contractual nature of their employment, through a company, means they are left with little opportunity to voice their concerns.

New Delhi: A shocking demonstration in which three sanitation workers got their heads tonsured in protest while their colleagues organised a *faux* funeral procession for chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's effigy has put the spotlight on the abysmal conditions in which the sanitation staff at Delhi government-run hospitals work. Following a 10-day-long strike at the Burari Hospital in January 2024, Delhi health minister Saurabh Bharadwaj has assured the protesting workers he will look into their concerns.

The latest strike was triggered by threats the workers allegedly faced when they asked their supervisors at Global Ventures, a contract firm that handles sanitation at the hospital, to release their wages on time. Their salaries were eventually released on January 19, 2024, much beyond the stipulated time, after they demonstrated. According to the Payment of Wages Act, 1936, the previous month's salary should be paid up to the 7th or 10th of every month.

"This was not the first time when the workers had to struggle to get their wages on time. Workers are at the mercy of the supervisors of the company who act like overlords," said Harish Gautam, one of the trade union leaders at the hospital.

Gautam told *The Wire* that sanitation workers who are women have to constantly face abuses. "They are asked for sexual favours very often and told by the company staff that if they do not heed to their demands, they will lose work," Gautam said.

All the sanitation staff at the hospital have been hired by the contract firm and should get a minimum of a little over Rs 17,000 per month as salary. However, workers complained that their salaries were abruptly cut by the contract firm almost every month. "Even the basic demand to release salaries on time is taken as an affront by the supervisors. As many of these workers are not very well educated, they are marked absent, or on sanctioned leave, by the company very frequently. These mostly work as threats to workers in reality, who feel that they are at the mercy of the company," said Maya John, a Delhi University professor who has been helping the workers organise.

Gautam said that most months, workers are unsure about the amount that will be credited in their bank accounts. "One can get any amount. It is sometimes Rs 8,000, sometimes Rs 11,000, much lower than the prescribed minimum wage. Complaints by workers are used by the company on most occasions as a reason to fire them on some illegitimate ground," said Gautam, alleging that the supervisors often tell the workers to not reveal that they have received an amount lower than the

minimum wage of Rs 17,000.

There have been at least two FIRs filed last year against the sanitation supervisors by women workers who alleged that they were either sexually assaulted or asked for sexual favours. However, John said that not much was done by the Delhi Police to keep a check on the supervisors. "Usually, the supervisors ask for sexual favours from women who are widowed or unmarried," Gautam said.

Curiously, the hospital didn't have the mandatory Internal Complaints Committee that looks into allegations of sexual harassment at the workplace. The FIRs and a letter by some women's organisations to the medical director of the hospital forced the hospital management to hastily put together an ICC unit in December 2023. Yet, women's organisations said in the letter that the only ICC meeting last month that was held to inquire about some cases of alleged sexual harassment did not have any representation from the women sanitation workers. The ICC meeting, moreover, was convened not because of the complaints but on the direction of the medical director and Delhi government's health secretary.

A majority of these workers belong to the Dalit Valmiki community. Their living standards are low and they have historically been pushed down in the socio-economic ladder as 'outcastes' meant to do only sanitation work. "Often these workers have to face casteist slurs by their employers," John said.

Gautam said that such exploitative practices are not unique to the Burari Hospital, as most hospitals of Delhi employ their sanitation workers through a contracting firm, which in this case is Global Ventures.

"The lack of job security as contract employees is the primary problem. Despite all protests, the workers remain at the mercy of the firm and its supervisors. Usually, these firms run a nexus with hospital management to employ many corrupt practices and also deny workers their rights," Gautam said.

Similar strikes, Gautam said, happened thrice last year when workers had to protest to get their salaries. "The hospital administration has been witness to these strikes and exploitative practices happening under their supervision. Yet, it hasn't taken any action against the contract firm. This may only mean that both the firm and hospital management work in tandem," he said.

A few workers also alleged that many of these contract firms take a bribe of anywhere between Rs 30,000 and 40,000 to employ them. "That is unaccounted accumulation of wealth by these firms. If you don't pay the amount, you will not get a job. The practice is prevalent across Delhi hospitals at the time of employing contract workers," said Gautam.

The workers' demonstrations both at the hospital site and the chief minister's residence were met with police action. The police lathicharged some of the striking workers and detained them, but they were later released.

Delhi government labour minister Gopal Rai had acknowledged the hire-and-fire practice among contracting firms. He passed an order that even when the government bodies hire new firms, it is mandatory to retain 80% of the contract workers. However, Gautam said that the rule is rarely implemented, and that the problem lies in the whole contract system itself where the workers have no say at all.

The protesting workers called off the last round of demonstration at the Burari Hospital on January 25, when Delhi's health minister met a delegation of workers and, following a high-level committee meeting, assured them that their problems will be addressed. "Saurab Bharadwaj assured us that the contract with Global Ventures will be cancelled, as it has been a repeated offender. He also said

that the complaints of sexual harassment will be immediately discussed with the hospital management and an inquiry committee will be set up,” said Gautam.

Bharadwaj hasn't passed an order. The assurances, however, came as a relief to the workers. Both the hospital management and the contracting firm Global Ventures haven't issued any clarification from their side.

Ajoy Ashirwad Mahaprashasta

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

P.S.

The Wire

<https://thewire.in/labour/wage-cuts-sexual-harassment-why-sanitation-workers-protested-at-a-delhi-govt-hospital>