

To
Mr Pinarayi Vijayan
Chief Minister of the State of Kerala
Kerala Government Secretariat, Thiruvananthapuram

Sub: Nurses strike at KVM Hospital, Alappuzha

March 2018

Dear Chief Minister Vijayan

We, the undersigned organisations and individuals, are writing to you about the six months long industrial dispute at the K Velayudhan Memorial (KVM) Hospital, in Alappuzha, Kerala. We are appalled at KVM managements refusal to come to the negotiation table, despite repeated attempts by your Government and the United Nurses Association (UNA)

The long drawn out dispute at KVM is creating immense hardship for workers of the hospital as well as the public. Every year, the hospital provides out-patient care to around 2,58,000 and in-patient care to close to 30,000 people. Today, it is running at less than 15% of its capacity.

Despite KVMs high profile, working conditions at the hospital have fallen short of basic legal requirements for many years. Working hours are nearly double the statutory requirement at 350 hours per month. The hospital illegally uses a 10 hour day and 14 hour night shift. There are even instances of nurses being asked to perform shifts of up to 20 hours, as the hospital is short-staffed. Irregularities at KVM affect both workers and patients as the standard requirement of 1:6 nurse to patient ratio in general wards and 1:4 in special wards are not followed. Workers report that in a ward with 25 beds, only three nurses are posted for the day shift, and one for the night shift. Further, workers report that there are no proper fire safety equipment, waste disposal systems and water treatment plants in the hospital.

Wages also fall short of statutory requirements. Despite the 2013 revision of wages to Rs 11,500 per month, the actual payment received by nurses at KVM ranges from Rs 6,000 to 9,000. To justify wages below the statutory minimum, the KVM management deploys nurses as 'trainees' even after several years of experience. Statutory Employees' State Insurance (ESI) and Employee's Provident Fund (EPF) are also denied. Not only is the trainee system used to engage in wage theft, it creates job insecurity that can readily be used to fire without due process, including those that engage in industrial action to demand implementation of the law.

It is in this context that UNA asked for negotiations with KVM, in July 2017. It was only the intransigence of the KVM management in meeting their just demands that forced UNA to start an indefinite strike from August 2017. UNA's demands are related to the terms of service, especially the implementation of a three-shift system of 8 hours, payment of the 2013 wages and statutory benefits and an end to the misuse of the 'trainee system'. UNA is also demanding the unconditional reinstatement of 112 workers who were unfairly dismissed.

We look forward to a fair and just outcome from the mediation process instituted by the High Court of Kerala. In case of a failure of that process due to the KVM Management, we hope that your Government will intervene to appoint a care-taker management as an interim measure to ensure that the rights of the workers and the public interest is protected.

To sign on to the open letter, contact: sbarria@phmovement.org / susana.barria@world-psi.org

