

More than 3,000 striking employees shut down Sri Lanka's international airport

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Striking workers shut down Sri Lanka's main airport

More than 3,000 workers from Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) in Katunayake walked out on strike and protested outside the airport on April 3 for higher wages and other demands.

The strike included management, engineering, security and power sector workers. They want their wages increased by a minimum of Rs 10,000 per month, disaster loan payments, proper insurance procedures and disciplinary action taken against the head of security. Radio transmission station workers at Mattala and Attidiya and radar station workers at Pidurutalagala also walked out in support of the BIA strikers.

The workers blocked the entrance to the airport and protested inside the facility, taking control of water and all power supplies. Airport authorities mobilised police and Special Task Force (STF) officers, as well as anti-riot squads, in an attempt to intimidate the striking workers.

The strike ended later that evening after Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation officials promised to grant workers' demands. Strikers said they had been promised various allowances over the past three years but nothing had been paid.

Sri Lankan university non-academic workers to continue strike

The University Trade Union Joint Committee (UTUJC) announced on April 4 that 15,000 university non-academic workers would continue their indefinite strike because government authorities had failed to institute a deal reached between the union and the higher education and highways minister. The five-week strike has brought academic activities to a standstill at some 15 state universities and higher education institutions that function under the University Grants Commission.

The non-academic university workers are demanding a 20 percent wage rise, a language-proficiency allowance, increased concessionary loans and the introduction of medical insurance and a pension scheme.

The UTUJC leadership claims that the education minister has agreed to grant the union's demands but his instructions are being delayed by ministry officials.

India: Thousands of rural health care workers continue strikes and protests

Rural health care or anganwadi workers in the Indian states of Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir and Haryana have been holding strikes and protests over the past two months demand higher pay.

According to official estimates, there are 60,000 anganwadi women workers and helpers in Jammu and Kashmir, 54,000 in Punjab and about 50,000 in Haryana. The workers provide basic antenatal and postnatal health care and immunise children under six years old in rural areas.

This week anganwadi workers from Jammu and Kashmir, who have been on strike for more than 60 days, rallied outside the state parliament to demand honorarium payments be increased from 3,600 to 10,000 rupees for all anganwadi workers and from 1,800 to 6,000 rupees for their helpers. They also want payment of outstanding wages and retirement benefits totaling 200,000 rupees to anganwadi workers and 100,000 rupees for helpers.

Jute mill workers hold one-day strike in Andhra Pradesh

Hundreds of workers from the privately-owned Sri Krishna Jute Mill held a one day strike in Eluru on March 31 to demand a wage rise and the payment of outstanding salaries. The workers are also calling on management to pay a bonus granted by the company in 2015. The striking workers blocked the road outside the mill during the walkout.

Pakistan: Punjab health workers end demonstrations after government agrees to demands

A five-day protest by more than 250 employees of the government-run Lady Health Workers (LHW) and Lady Health Supervisors (LHS) program was called off on March 30 after the government said it would accept workers' demands.

The day and night demonstrations were held in the Mall Road, a busy thoroughfare in Lahore near the Punjab parliament complex and other government facilities, and upscale businesses.

The health workers have not been paid for the last five months or granted a pay increase or promotions since 2012. Wages range across 10 pay scales with lower paid workers only receiving 7,000 rupees per month (\$60.48) and those on higher scales receiving 15,000 rupees. The Lady Health Workers are also demanding permanent jobs.

The National Program Health Employees Association, which covers the workers, called off the protest after the government issued a statement claiming it would allocate funds to pay the increases during April. Fifty percent of the lowest paid employees, however, will not be promoted or receive a pay increase.

Peshawar engineers demand a service structure

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Association of Government Engineers members from across the Pakistani province protested on Monday in Peshawar over lengthy delays in implementing a basic service structure. The engineers, who marched from the Civil Secretariat to Peshawar Press Club, also demanded professional allowances and higher pay.

Engineers from a range of government departments, including communication, irrigation and public works, warned that they would take industrial action if their demands were not met.

Australian tribunal terminates Port Kembla Coal Terminal work agreement

The Fair Work Commission (FWC) last week approved an application by the Port Kembla Coal Terminal to terminate an existing work agreement covering around 60 workers on the New South Wales (NSW) south coast. The ruling means workers can be forced onto the minimum industry award, clearing the way for sweeping wage reductions and the elimination of conditions.

While the company has locked out workers three times this year, the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) has restricted opposition to token stoppages and work bans.

The CFMEU described the FWC ruling as a “welcome step in the right direction” because it would not come into effect until March, 2019. The South Coast Labour Council declared that the delay would assist the Labor Party in forthcoming NSW state and federal elections. The unions are campaigning for the election of more pro-business Labor governments.

Victorian smelter workers voting on industrial action

Australian Workers Union (AWU) members at Alcoa’s aluminium smelter in Portland, Victoria are currently voting on proposed industrial action over a new enterprise agreement. The ballot concludes next month.

The AWU has claimed that the main obstacle preventing them from finalising a new four-year work agreement is the company’s refusal to continue a 30-year practice of paying for a full-time AWU site convenor.

The union offered a wage freeze for the current financial year, and meagre increases of just 2 percent over the following two years and 2.5 percent in the final year, if the company agrees to pay for a full-time AWU convenor. It has ditched its original claim for a three-year agreement with two annual 5 percent pay rises and a 6 percent increase in the third year.

In May last year the AWU imposed a one-year agreement that froze wages, saving the company \$1.5 million. The deal was negotiated in order to assist Alcoa to secure a \$230 million government subsidy.

Ten-day strike at Yakult drink-maker ends in Victoria

A dispute over wages and conditions involving 30 workers at probiotic drink manufacturer Yakult’s plant in Dandenong South, an outer-Melbourne suburb, ended on March 28 after the company agreed to a 3 percent pay increase. The workers walked out on strike on March 19 and maintained a 24-hour presence outside the plant after negotiations with the company broke down.

Yakult previously offered just 2 percent and then 2.5 percent. It was also looking to end the practice of the company deducting union dues directly from workers’ pay. The 3 percent raise, touted by the National Union of Workers as a victory, is barely in line with the official rate of inflation and well below real cost of living increases.

Water delivery workers strike in New Zealand

A group of Just Water workers struck from 4:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. on March 29 over pay and working hours.

The average wage for employees at the company is \$NZ20 an hour or less and they often work in 12-hour shifts with no overtime bonuses. The strikers were asking to be paid \$25 an hour for shifts over 9 hours. The gruelling delivery job involves carrying 15kg bottles of water, up to 200 bottles a day during the summer.

Just Water has refused to grant any wage increase. First Union, which covers only 10 of the company’s 120 employees, has responded with only vague statements about further industrial action.

New Zealand: Bus drivers in Wellington preparing to strike

Bus drivers are preparing for industrial action, including strikes, depot pickets and protests. The Tramways Union said the action could occur sometime in June or July.

Last year, the Greater Wellington Regional Council transferred the majority share of Wellington buses from NZ Bus to private operator Transiti. Around 240 NZ Bus drivers will be made redundant and will need to reapply for their jobs at Transiti. The contract with Transiti cuts weekend and penalty rates, effectively resulting in a wage cut of up to \$200 a week.

As in the case with the Wellington rail dispute, the unions are doing everything they can to prevent a strike. Richard Wagstaff of the Council of Trade Unions has stated that they have advocated for an “orderly transfer” from NZ Bus to Transiti.

Lyttleton Port workers in New Zealand to strike again

Further negotiations over pay and rosters between Lyttleton Port Company (LPC) and the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) failed this week, prompting the union to call for five days of strikes, starting on April 20.

Around 200 workers, half of the LPC staff, are represented by the

RMTU. The other workers are members of the Maritime Union NZ (MUNZ). Last year, MUNZ workers accepted flexible working hours and a 4 percent pay rise. RMTU have rejected LPC's demands for flexible working hours. The company wants a flexible roster in order to run the port on a 24/7 basis.

The RMTU have sought to suppress strikes throughout the dispute. They have prolonged negotiations with LPC and deferred strike days on numerous occasions, cutting the total number of strike days in half.

Wendy's staff in New Zealand could strike over outstanding entitlements

Workers at the fast food chain Wendy's are preparing to take industrial action after the multi-million-dollar company refused to give "days in lieu" for employees working on public holidays.

The call for strike action came after a three-year campaign to win their entitlements. A Unite Union member from the chain's Hornby restaurant eventually complained to the Employment Relations Authority (ERA), which found last November that Wendy's was in breach of the Holidays Act 2003. ERA ordered the company to award the days in lieu, or equivalent payment, dating back to July 1, 2012 or whenever the restaurants opened.

The Unite union, which covers the worker, estimates that it will cost Wendy's \$1.6 million to pay back employees' lieu days. The union refused to organise any national industrial action during the three years since the original complaint and is now calling on the company to negotiate a deal to prevent any future walkout.



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