

Thousands of West Bengal textile workers locked out; New Zealand nurses union cancels planned strike

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 June 2018

### India: Jaya Shree Textile workers locked out in West Bengal

Jaya Shree Textiles (JST) locked out thousands of workers after the Aditya Birla Group, which owns the company, claimed employees had taken “illegal strike” action.

JST employs 5,700 workers. Its textile plant is the largest in West Bengal and one of the biggest in eastern India. The workers struck on May 31 and then on June 4 after management suspended 14 employees for alleged violence.

Negotiations between management, the state government and union officials broke down when the company said it would only reinstate 12 workers. “We told the management that they could give a warning to employees, but couldn’t terminate jobs,” a union official told the media. The locked-out workers are opposing the company’s productivity demands. They want better pay and the reinstatement of all victimised employees.

### Indian merchant seamen hold hunger protests at ports

Hundreds of merchant seamen began an indefinite hunger strike protest at all of India’s major ports on Monday over a series of long-outstanding wage demands. About 150,000 seamen and workers are employed in the industry, which transports about 95 percent of India’s foreign trade by volume, and 68 percent by value.

Organised by the Forward Seamen’s Union of India (FSUI), the protests are being held in Mumbai, Kochi, Chennai, Kolkata, and all ports in Andaman, Goa, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh states. The media has reported that seamen on board 43 ships at sea are also involved.

FSUI general secretary Naresh Birwadkar denounced India’s shipping ministry and told the media that workers’ families would join the protests if the government does not adhere to the Maritime Labour Convention guidelines, increase pay and improve safety.

Seafarers are currently paid as little as Rs.7,000 basic pay with additional allowances and various ex gratia amounts. The International Labor Organisation has recommended a monthly basic wage of \$614 (about Rs.41,500).

Workers also want a Rs.5,000 per month pension for all retired seafarers and the restoration of the seamen’s employment roster system which was scrapped in 1994 when India’s Congress government restructured the industry.

### Handloom workers still on strike in Indian state of Rajasthan

About two hundred National Handloom Corporation (NHC) workers remain on strike after walking out almost three months ago to demand higher wages and a reduced working week. Strikers have accused the privately-owned outlets of forcing them to work 12–13 hours a day, all year round and without any holidays.

According to media reports, the company employs about 3,500 employees who are only paid 5,000–6,000 rupees (70-90 USD) per month. Strikers say they have been consistently subjected to repressive measures by the state’s BJP-led government, but will continue their fight until the current working day is reduced to eight hours.

Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje Scindia has changed previous labour laws, making the closure of bigger factories easier, and banning unions that do not have the support of 30 percent of any company’s workforce. The previous limit was fixed at 15 percent.

### Pakistan: Karachi port workers strike

Port workers at the South Asia Pakistan Terminal in Karachi walked off the job on Monday to demand the reinstatement of sacked co-workers and to press for long-standing demands for a wage rise.

Cargo handling at the busy port terminal, which normally delivers about 1,500 containers per day, was brought to an immediate halt. The Hong Kong-based Hutchison Ports, one of the world’s largest stevedoring companies, runs the terminal.

The strike began after four permanent workers, and up to five contract employees, were sacked two months ago by the operators on “disciplinary” grounds. The union called off the strike on Tuesday evening following negotiations with management. It was agreed that the sacked workers would be immediately reinstated, and a pay increase provided during the next financial year.

### Bangladesh health employees demand salaries

Former Barisal Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital (SBMCH) workers demonstrated on Monday on the hospital’s premises to demand

unpaid salaries and outstanding dues.

The 215 workers were hired by the hospital in December 2015, but their was employment suspended by the health ministry in January 2016. While the health workers eventually won High Court legal action against the decision, the hospital has refused to abide by the ruling and pay the outstanding amounts to its former employees.

The demonstrators threatened to begin an indefinite hunger strike in July if their salaries were not paid by June 30.

### **Taiwanese workers denounce regressive labour laws**

Several dozen workers protested on June 23 outside the American Chamber of Commerce in Taipei in opposition to a proposed amendment to the Labor Standards Act.

If passed, the legislation would make working hours more “flexible” to boost the productivity and the “international competitiveness” of Taiwanese business—i.e., to cut costs and increase workers’ exploitation. Previous amendments have served to extend the maximum number of consecutive working days to 12 in a row and have reduced minimum breaks between shifts from 11 to 8 hours.

### **Protest in Taiwan over attacks on migrant workers**

About 20 people demonstrated outside a meeting of HTC Corporation’s shareholders in Taoyuan last Tuesday. The action was led by Lennon Wong, director of the Serve the People Association’s Service Center and Shelter for Migrant Workers.

HTC has been accused of forging workers signatures on “voluntary” resignation letters, aimed at forcing them onto regressive new contracts, and of forcing other employees to sign the documents. The protest followed a similar action targeting HTC management by over 60 Filipino migrant workers on June 3.

### **South Australian mill workers begin industrial action**

Mill workers in the South Australian town of Millicent began industrial action this week in response to stalled negotiations for a new enterprise agreement. The site is owned by US-based personal care manufacturing company Kimberly Clark.

Talks between management and the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining Energy Union (CFMMEU) have dragged on since the previous work deal, which covers 265 workers at the mill, expired in 2014.

The delay in reaching an agreement has allowed the company, with union support, to impose a four-year wage freeze. The CFMMEU has not publicly released its claims, but has politely called for a “modest wage increase and improved redundancy provisions.”

Workers are concerned about the mill’s future after the US-based parent company announced in January that it plans to close 10 plants internationally and shed over 5,000 jobs. There are over 400 workers at the 58-year-old Millicent mill, which is the largest employer in the state’s southeast region.

The CFMMEU issued a statement this week signaling its willingness to assist the company cut costs and “ensure the ongoing viability of the

mill.” The union, the statement said, “has already proposed significant long term saving measures.”

### **New Zealand nurses union cancels strike**

In a blatantly anti-democratic decision, the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) announced on Friday that it has cancelled a planned 24-hour nationwide strike scheduled for July 5. The union’s 29,000 members in public hospitals, including nurses, healthcare assistants and midwives, had voted overwhelmingly in favour of two strikes on July 5 and 12. There has been no national nurses’ strike since 1989.

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The NZNO claims to have reached an agreement with the country’s District Health Boards for an improved pay offer. Details of the offer, however, will not be released until Monday afternoon. Many NZNO members expressed outrage on Facebook, denouncing the union bureaucracy for cancelling the walkout before they could read and vote on the new offer. Voting will take place from July 3 to July 9.

Nurses are engaged in a bitter fight over pay and conditions, including staffing levels. The health system is grossly under-resourced and nurses have not had a significant pay rise in over a decade.

Since late 2017, NZNO members have rejected three separate offers presented to them by the union and have staged nationwide protests. The latest offer was for a 9 percent wage increase over two years, plus 2 percent more staff. After this offer was rejected this month, the Labour Party-led government insisted that it could not be increased.

### **Over 4,000 New Zealand public service workers ready to strike**

The Public Services Association (PSA) has confirmed that an overwhelming majority of the 4,000 workers at the Inland Revenue Department (IRD) and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) have voted in favor of a strike.

The workers are opposing low pay offers and frustrating organisational changes. IRD’s technological upgrade has been poorly implemented and will result in lengthy manual entry for a tax credit system that will drastically increase workloads.

This will be the first strike at IRD in 22 years, and the first coordinated public services strike in many years. The PSA has limited industrial action to a couple of two-hour work stoppages on July 9 and 23.

### **New Zealand tug-boat workers’ union withdraws strike notice at Port Nelson**

On June 19, the Merchant Service Guild (MSG) cancelled a scheduled week-long strike to be held between June 22 to 29. Tug workers at Port Nelson were planning to stop work for better working conditions. According to the union, the tug operators are on call 24 hours for 14 continuous days.

## **New Zealand bacon workers take industrial action**

Around 150 workers at Beehive Bacon in Carterton are refusing to work overtime until a pay dispute is resolved. Workers are demanding a pay rise of 75 cents per hour and an extra day of sick and bereavement leave.

The E Tu union says the company is completely dependent on its staff doing overtime. The union assured the company that the worker's demands would only cost \$180,000. Beehive made \$5 million in profits last year.

## **New Zealand teachers discuss strike action**

Primary and secondary teachers throughout the country are still voting on a government pay offer. While teachers have asked for a 16 percent increase over two years, the ministry of education has offered just 2.2 to 2.6 percent, for three years.

The New Zealand Institute of Educators (NZIE) have proposed a three-hour strike on August 15. A mass meeting of West Auckland teachers on June 22 called for a one-day walkout. Results of the final ballot will be known on July 4.

## **New Zealand: Bus drivers strike in Auckland**

On Thursday morning, around 70 bus drivers from the Ritchies Murphy company held a two-hour stoppage during morning peak time. The stop-work is a continuation of industrial action by drivers from the same company in May, and a wave of strikes at other bus companies throughout the country over the preceding months.

First Union transport organiser Graham McKean said that drivers from the company earn \$1.50 an hour below the market rate. Drivers also have to work split shifts and are not paid for the long periods of time they spend at the depot in between shifts.

The union has held extended negotiations with the transport company since September 2016.



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