

Bangladesh steel workers demand wage rise; Australian coal haulage workers continue strike action; New Zealand bus drivers hold wildcat strikes

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 February 2019

India: Childcare workers protest in Pune

Anganwadi (childcare) workers demonstrated in the western Indian state of Maharashtra this week to demand an increase in their honorarium, a threefold increase in the lump sum retirement fund and a monthly pension. The protests, which were organised by the Maharashtra Rajya Anganwadi Kruti Samiti, were held in different parts of the state, including outside the Pune Collectorate on February 11 and in Mumbai on February 12.

Anganwadi workers in Maharashtra are only paid about 7,000 rupees (\$99) as a monthly honorarium compared to 12,000 rupees paid to the same workers in Kerala and some other Indian states. While the central Indian government last year increased the amount paid to anganwadi workers by 1,500 rupees, the workers are yet to receive the increase.

The protesting workers allege that the state wants to close down anganwadis that have less than 25 clients. The anganwadi workers provide care for babies, infants and children up to the age of five, as well as assistance to pregnant women and lactating mothers.

Gandhi Hospital contract nurses in Telangana strike over unpaid salaries

About 100 contract nurses from the state-owned Gandhi Hospital have held protests and a two-hour sit-down strike in the past week over the non-payment of salaries for last three months. The demonstration was organised by the Telangana State Medical Contract Employees & Workers Union.

While the nurses said they were reluctant to strike because it would impact on emergency services, management had ignored their appeals. The nurses have threatened indefinite strike action if their salary arrears are not paid.

Tamil Nadu: Madurai corporation workers hold sit-in protest

Madurai corporation workers in Tamil Nadu staged a sit-in protest on the premises of the Sandhapettai pumping station on February 5 over the

victimisation of fellow workers.

The protesters, who have also taken sporadic strike action since February 5, were demanding action against an assistant engineer who sacked five drainage cleaning workers without warning on January 30. The cleaners, who were union members, had been employed at the facility for the past 13 years. They were sacked by the assistant engineer on the first day that he took charge of the area.

India: Punjab sewer workers demand permanent jobs

Scores of Sewerage Workers' Union members demonstrated outside the Bathinda Municipal Corporation office, in the southern part of Punjab, on February 11. They were demanding permanent jobs for 48 contract and outsourced workers who have been employed by the Sewerage Board since 2001.

Protesters chanted slogans against the Punjab state government and accused it of not granting workers' long outstanding demands. They said that although resolutions supporting their demands had been passed by General House meetings of the municipal council, the civic body has not taken the issue seriously.

Pakistan paramedics protest for service structure, benefits

Paramedical staff at government hospitals in Multan demonstrated on February 7 to demand a new service structure, health professional and risk allowances, job permanency for those performing special services and the withdrawal of the government's privatisation plans.

The demonstration was called by the Allied Health Professional Association and included paramedics from Nishtar Hospital, Childrens Complex, Chaudhry Pervez Elahi Institute of Cardiology, Fatima Hospital and Mian Shahbaz Sharif Hospital, as well as departmental employees. The workers have threatened to strike on February 19 and 20 if their demands are not addressed.

Bangladesh steel workers demand wage rise

Several hundred workers at PHP Steel Mills struck for four hours last Sunday demanding a salary increase. The factory, which employs about 1,600 permanent and casual workers, is located at Sitakunda in Bangladesh's Chittagong district. The walkout began at 7 a.m.

According to the police of Sitakunda Police Station, owners had assured the workers that they would take steps to meet their demands next month, and later workers called off the strike.

One worker told the media that the monthly wage of newly-appointed or trainee workers ranged from 3,000 taka (\$US36) to 4,000 taka and that the average wage of an experienced worker was no more than 7,000 taka. There are no government-mandated wage guidelines on the Bangladesh steel industry.

ATG Ceylon strike continues in Sri Lankan free trade zone

Around 500 ATG Ceylon workers in the Katunayaka free trade zone remain on strike after walking out on January 11 over the sacking and victimisation of five fellow workers. Strikers protested near the Colombo railway station on February 14.

ATG Ceylon employs about 1,200 workers and is one of Sri Lanka's leading glove manufacturers. The victimised employees were office bearers in a union formed by the workers to fight against the harsh conditions in the factory. Management has filed a bogus case with the police, claiming that the workers "misused" company property.

Taiwan pilots end seven-day strike

China Airlines management and Taoyuan Union of Pilots officials struck a new workplace agreement on Thursday after a fourth round of negotiations. The deal ends a week-long strike involving some 600 pilots and which impacted on more than 200 flights and almost 50,000 passengers. The stoppage resulted in \$NT500 million (\$US16.2 million) in losses on the carrier.

China Airlines has said it will address pilot fatigue by rostering three pilots on flights of more than eight hours, rather than two, and four pilots on flights over twelve hours, up from three. While the union claims to have extracted these concessions and that this will improve safety the deal includes a three-and-a-half year no strike pledge.

Burmese workers picket luxury hotel

On Monday workers rallied outside Hotel Tharabar Gate in the Mandalay Region of Burma to demand the right to organise and for reinstatement of union leaders and workers sacked last August.

The hotel workers have been the subject of ongoing state and employer harassment since the sackings. When sacked workers and their supporters attempted to march from the hotel to the Mandalay Region Government Office on December 13 they were attacked by police who broke up the rally and arrested thirteen protesters.

Australia: Aurizon coal haulage workers continue strikes

Train drivers and crew hauling coal on Aurizon's Pring section of the central Queensland rail network walked off the job for 24 hours on Tuesday.

The Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Employees (AFULE), which covers the workers, also notified Aurizon that its members will impose a seven-day overtime ban across the whole coal rail network on February 20.

The stoppages follow two months of limited strike action and low level work bans involving close to 1,000 members, in a dispute for a new enterprise agreement.

The unions claim that major disputes are over Aurizon's refusal to back-pay any negotiated wage increase, rostering, and proposed changes to the "voluntary" redundancy scheme and dispute procedures, including the removal of "arbitration." The AFULE said it would "de-escalate" its industrial campaign if some progress was made on rostering, shift extensions and annual leave deductions.

DP World dock workers to vote on strike action

The Construction Forestry Mining Maritime and Energy Union (CFMMEU), representing 1,800 workers at DP World ports in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Perth, has received permission from Australia's Fair Work Commission to hold a "protected action" ballot on proposed strikes.

DP World is threatening to cancel the union-owned income protection scheme if workers do not accept the company's enterprise agreement offer. The proposed deal would roll over the old agreement, capping wage rises at 2.6 percent per annum. The union wants a ban on the use of casual labour, improved leave entitlements and the conversion of unused sick leave to days-in lieu.

The Fair Work Commission accepted DP World's request that it be given five days' notice before strike action commences, rather than the legal requirement of three, giving the company additional time to minimise the impact of industrial action.

Port Kembla Coal Terminal lockout extended

Port Kembla Coal Terminal (PKCT) for the third time in four weeks locked out its 51 permanent workforce at the facility near Wollongong on February 8 in a dispute over job security provisions in a new enterprise agreement (EA). The lockouts are in response to minor strike action and bans by the CFMMEU.

The union and PKCT have been in dispute since the old EA expired in 2015, leaving workers without a pay raise for four years. The union claimed that the key sticking point in negotiations is management's refusal to carry over the previous job security clause, which prevents a sacked permanent employee being replaced by a casual contractor. The company has threatened to shut the facility if workers do not accept "flexible" conditions.

The CFMMEU has isolated the workers, refusing to mobilise any support from its thousands of members throughout the Illawarra region.

National Patient Transport workers to vote on industrial action in Victoria

United Voice and the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation will ballot their members on industrial action in a dispute with National Patient Transport (NPT) for a new enterprise agreement. Action will be limited to bans on paperwork and communications.

According to the Ambulance Employees Association (Victoria), NPT workers are only paid just \$24.09 an hour, which is paid 20 percent less than government patient transport workers who perform the same job. Workers have also complained of being called upon more frequently to assist in regular ambulance emergencies. As well as better wages, NPT's Ambulance Transport Attendants (ATA) want better training, access to sick leave and greater support from management.

Nurses in the Solomon Islands' public health system have voted to hold a nationwide strike on February 27 if their demands for better pay are not met. The Solomon Islands Nurses Association says the government failed to pay allowances that had been promised to nurses in exchange for SINA cancelling a strike last year. The union says some nurses are leaving the impoverished country in search of better pay and conditions.



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New Zealand: Auckland bus drivers hold wildcat strikes

Drivers employed by NZ Bus on Auckland's public bus routes to and from the suburb of Onehunga held a strike without notice on Friday morning. Services returned to normal by 10 a.m. The strike followed morning walkouts on February 8 and 12 at the Swanson and Glenfield depots respectively. According to Fairfax Media, the strikes were planned by drivers without the knowledge of Auckland Transport or FIRST Union and Tramways Union, which officially represents the drivers.

Drivers are angry about inadequate training and fatigue caused by rostering. A driver's work day can be as long as 14 hours. A Tramways Union spokesperson told the media on February 12 that it had advised its 1,000 members not to take industrial action but drivers were so frustrated that "they are not listening to (union) advice to wait until negotiations in November."

The unions say they were due to enter into negotiations with NZ Bus, mediated by the Employment Relations Authority, on January 30, but the company pulled out saying it was too busy.

New Zealand hospital administration workers hold stop work meetings

More than 5,500 administrative and clerical workers at public hospitals held two-hour nationwide stopwork meetings on February 11. The Public Service Association members voted overwhelmingly in favour of planning for strike action if there is no satisfactory result from pay negotiations later this month with New Zealand's District Health Boards. Most of the workers are paid little more than the minimum wage.

The stopwork meetings occurred in the same week as a nationwide two-day strike by more than 3,000 junior doctors and a series of strikes by more than 1,000 hospital midwives. Last year, more than 30,000 nurses and healthcare assistants held a one-day strike.

The ongoing wave of strikes in the health sector is in response to deepening austerity measures under the Labour Party-led government, which falsely promised to address the crisis of underfunding and understaffing in hospitals.

Solomon Islands nurses vote to strike