

Indian telecommunication workers strike; Bangladesh teachers and education workers protest pay cuts; New Zealand anaesthetic technicians strike

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 February 2019

Royal Enfield workers in India oppose forced transfers of union members

Several hundred Royal Enfield motorcycle workers demonstrated outside the company's Oragadam factory in Tamil Nadu on February 18. The demonstration was in opposition to management's forced transfer of union office bearers, including its general secretary and other active members, to other plants across India on 12 February. The workers are members of the Royal Enfield Employees Union.

Protesters also demanded the company finalise long-running collective bargaining negotiations and guarantee equal treatment and permanency for all temporary workers. While the Oragadam plant employs over 5,550 workers only 1,059 are permanent.

Royal Enfield workers held a series of protests and demonstrations between September and November last year. The industrial campaign ended after the company agreed to continue discussions for a collective bargaining agreement.

Indian telecommunication workers strike in New Delhi

Over 100,000 Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) workers held a three-day national strike on February 18 for improved wages and conditions. The walkout at the state-owned telecommunications company was organised by the All Unions and Associations of the BSNL. During the walkout the mainstream media called on the Indian government to revive the company or shut it down.

BSNL strikers called for improved benefits under the Pay Revision Committee, including a 15 percent pay increase for executive and non-executive employees, better pensions for BSNL retirees and other demands.

Pakistan: Sindh doctors strike for salary increase

Doctors at government-run hospitals in Sindh boycotted outpatient departments on February 13 in protest against the continued failure of the

government to increase their wages.

The Sindh chapter of the Young Doctors' Association called the strike. The most affected facilities were major hospitals in Karachi and Hyderabad. The doctors' main demands include increased salaries for doctors in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab, a permanent service structure and timely promotions.

The previous round of strikes were shut down at the end of January, after the union falsely claimed that the government had agreed in negotiations with the Pakistan Medical Association to meet the doctors' demands.

Sindh sanitation workers demand outstanding wages

Shikarpur Municipal Council sanitary workers demonstrated on February 14 to demand the payment of four months' outstanding wages to about 240 workers. Workers warned of expanded protests if the municipal administration continues to withhold the wages.

Frequent delays in wage payments are common in Pakistan where the government, under instructions from the international banks, are constantly slashing development and public expenditure budgets. The government policies have a devastating impact on local government bodies.

Bangladesh: Teachers and education workers protest pay cuts

Teachers and workers from non-government educational institutions (Non-MPO Educational Institutions) in Bangladesh held nationwide demonstrations on February 3 over a 4 percent increase in pension and welfare trust payments to 10 percent of their salaries. They previously paid 6 percent.

The Bangladesh Non-Government Teachers' and Employees' Forum submitted a memoranda to their respective district commissioners on Tuesday demanding a removal of the increase. The order for the rise was issued by the Madrasah Education Board and the Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board.

Forum members have threatened to step up their protests if their

demands are not granted by May 10. For the past few years they have been demanding nationalisation of all Non-MPO Educational Institutions and that their salaries be paid through the government's Monthly Payment Order system. There are nearly 80,000 teachers and 6,000 education workers employed in the non-government education sector.

Sri Lankan road construction workers demand permanency

Road construction workers from the Road Development Authority of Sri Lanka picketed the George R. E. De Silva playground in Kandy on February 15 for permanent jobs and other demands, including adequate leave entitlements.

Workers told the media that they were promised permanency after 180 days when they were hired but are still waiting after more than two and half years. They said they have requested permanency from successive governments but those requests fell on deaf ears.

Australia: Coal haulage crew continues strike at Aurizon

Aurizon train crew covered by the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) in Queensland walked off the job for 24-hours on Thursday as part of industrial action over a new enterprise agreement (EA). On Wednesday, Aurizon workers who are members of the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Employees (AFULE) applied for permission to conduct a seven-day overtime ban.

The RTBU, AFULE, Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Manufacturing Union have dragged out the dispute since action began in December. They have restricted workers' opposition to limited strikes by isolated sections of the company's 1,000 workers involved in the dispute. Workers have not had a pay increase for 16 months.

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.

Lockout at Port Kembla Coal Terminal extended

Fifty-one permanent workers at the Port Kembla Coal Terminal (PKCT) facility near Wollongong were locked out for a week on Monday after the Construction Forestry Mining Maritime and Energy Union (CFMMEU) announced it would commence one-hour rolling stoppages in its dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). It is the fourth time in five weeks that the workers have been locked out. They have not received any pay during this period.

The union and PKCT have been in dispute since the old EA expired in 2015, leaving workers without a pay rise for four years. PKCT applied in January last year to the Fair Work Commission (FWC) for termination of the 2015 agreement, on the grounds that the conditions it contained were "too generous."

The FWC ruled in favour of PKCT's application, but delayed the

termination until March, 2019. If workers, by then, fail to accept the company's proposed EA, or reject a deal worked out by the union and the company, they will be forced onto an industry national award on considerably reduced wages and entitlements.

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.

Illawarra coal miners endorse strike action

A large majority of CFMMEU members at South32's Appin coal mine, south of Wollongong, endorsed strike action in a protected action ballot that closed on February 12. Of the 342 workers who voted, 335 endorsed action ranging from indefinite strikes, limited stoppages and various work bans.

The CFMMEU and South32 failed to reach an agreement in Fair Work Commission conciliation talks over a proposed enterprise agreement on Monday. Issues unresolved were over annual wage rises, the term of the agreement, public holiday leave and rostering. Following the failed conciliation, the union threatened to call a four-week strike commencing February 22.

New Zealand doctors to hold fourth nationwide strike

Over 3,300 Resident Doctors' Association members are due to strike for 48-hours starting on February 26. The strike will be the fourth this year by junior doctors in public hospitals opposing attacks on working conditions by New Zealand's District Health Boards.

Pickets have been announced in Wellington, Auckland, Christchurch, Dunedin and Waikato. Doctors have been voting this week on whether to hold a fifth strike on March 12–13.

Doctors are opposing a plan by DHBs to extend the number of hours they can work in a shift beyond the current limit of 16. DHBs also want to extend the maximum number of consecutive workdays for a doctor from 10 to 12, and to be able to force doctors to relocate to any hospital in the country.

The RDA wants to maintain the status quo, including extremely long and exhausting shifts. It is also seeking a pay increase of just 3 percent per year—not enough to match the increased cost of living.

New Zealand anaesthetic technicians strike

Anaesthetic technicians held a five-day strike at Rotorua Hospital from February 18–22. Eleven specialist workers, who are members of the APEX union, took part in the action, which followed an earlier strike in January. Anaesthetic technicians held several strikes in different regions throughout the country over the past year.

The Lakes District Health Board (DHB) reportedly transferred Rotorua patients to other health providers during this week's strike.

Workers want higher wages and more rest breaks. Anaesthetic technicians in the private sector are paid up to 20 percent more than those

in public hospitals. A statement on February 14 said APEX was “willing to compromise” to avoid the strike and was only asking for a deal worth \$NZ25,000 more than what the DHB is offering. It did not provide any further details.

The union said the strike went ahead because the Minister of Health, David Clark had “interfered” and refused to allow the DHB to shift its position.

Anaesthetic technicians in Northland DHB have also voted to hold a 72-hour strike starting on February 26. This follows seven 24-hour strikes in the region after negotiations with APEX broke down last year.

New Zealand teachers to hold stop-work meetings

The primary school teachers’ union, the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), has announced it will hold stop-work meetings at public schools across the country during the week of March 18–22. The union has limited the paid meetings to just one hour and promised to keep schools open, meaning some teachers may be unable to attend.

According to media reports, the NZEI and Ministry of Education officials will meet next week to discuss a potential pay offer that could be put to teachers at the stop-work meetings. No details have been made public.

Negotiations between the NZEI and the Ministry have dragged on for months behind closed doors. Last year, primary teachers held two one-day strikes, in August and November, after rejecting an offer of a 9 percent pay rise over three years. The offer did not make up for a decade-long effective wage freeze or address the staffing shortage in schools. The union initially lodged a claim for a 16 percent increase over two years. Teachers have also demanded improved staffing and resources to help children with special needs.

Papua New Guinea teachers return to work

A three-week strike by teachers in Madang, Papua New Guinea, ended on February 18. The teachers struck in protest over the non-payment of leave fares, totalling 4.8 million kina (\$US1.4 million). About 700 teachers took part in the boycott, which shut down classrooms across Madang province since the start of the first term three weeks ago, affecting thousands of students.

The teachers have still not been paid. A local PNG Teachers’ Association spokesperson told the media the strike would resume at the start of the second term of the year if teachers were not paid in full before then.

Meanwhile, a total of 2,150 teachers in the Highlands region are reportedly considering taking industrial action over the same issue of unpaid wages. The union says the central PNG government paid the money to the provincial government, but teachers did not receive it.

French Polynesia hotel workers strike

Workers at four Intercontinental hotels in French Polynesia began strike action last week. The strikers, who are members of the O Oe To Oe Rima union, make up more than two thirds of the hotels’ staff in Moorea, Tahiti

and Bora Bora. According to media reports, workers are seeking changes to the company’s sick leave policy, which only allows for two paid sick days per year.

Supermarket workers strike in French Polynesia

Workers at the Champion TOA supermarket on the island of Moorea in French Polynesia went on strike on February 18 demanding a 5 percent pay increase and improved working conditions. The workers claim that management has not respected the right to organise. They are also seeking reinstatement of a worker who was allegedly unfairly dismissed.



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