

Over 35,000 jute mill workers strike in Bangladesh; 200,000 Sri Lankan teachers and principals walk out for higher pay; Telstra technicians strike in Australia

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 March 2019

Thousands of Bangladesh jute workers strike for outstanding pay rise

More than 35,000 workers from nine state-owned jute mills in Khulna and Jessore held a 24-hour strike on Tuesday over their employer's refusal to pay a wage increase previously announced by a government appointed wage board in June 2015.

The workers were also demanding immediate payment of financial benefits and other arrears, funds for the purchase of raw jute for the mills, removal of corrupt factory officials, and payment gratuities and provident fund disbursements for retired workers.

A worker from Platinum Jute Mill, where over 4,000 people are employed, told the media that he only receives \$US24 (2,000 taka) a week but has not been paid for eight weeks.

The strike, which was organised by the Bangladesh Jute Mills Sramik League, Central Patkal Sramik League, and the Amin Jute Mills Sramik Karmachari Union, will be followed by a 48-hour walkout, starting on March 19, and a rally in Dhaka on March 24.

Bangladesh garment workers demonstrate

About 300 female garment workers of several different factories staged a demonstration by forming a human chain in Savar on March 8 to demand six months' maternity leave, an end to workplace violence, payment of outstanding salaries and the reopening of closed garment factories.

The protest, which was organised by the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation, was held outside the Rana Plaza site where over 1,130, mainly clothing and textile workers, were killed when the building collapsed in April 2013.

In a separate development, hundreds of Standard Group and other garment factory workers on March 7 blocked Mohakhali-Moghbazsar Road in Dhaka's Tejgaon area for an hour-and-a-half on March 7 to demand a pay rise.

Sri Lankan teachers hold one-day national strike

Over 200,000 teachers and principals held a one-day national strike to demand higher salaries, restoration of a pre-2016 pension scheme, reduced workloads and other demands. The walkout, which took the form of educators calling in sick, was called by the Ceylon Teaching Service Association with the collaboration of a number of other education unions.

According to the unions, more than 200,000 teachers and 15,000 principals were involved in the industrial action, which impacted on 10,000 schools. Sri Lankan teachers are only paid 35,000 rupees (\$US195) per month, which is considerably lower than other government workers.

Migrant workers protest in Hong Kong

About 20 protesters gathered outside Hong Kong's government headquarters on March 8 to demand better working conditions for foreign domestic workers. The rally was timed to coincide with International Women's Day.

There are at least 350,000 foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong. The super-exploited workers are mainly from countries in South-East Asia.

The march was organised by the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body. Key demands included an increase in the minimum monthly wage, from HK\$4,520 to HK\$5,500, higher government food allowances, decent accommodation, three mandated meal breaks a day and 11-hour breaks between consecutive working days. The demonstrators also called for the prosecution of recruitment agencies that charge high fees for workers.

Telstra technicians strike for 24 hours in Australia

Over 3,000 technicians at Telstra, Australia's largest telecommunications company, walked off the job for 24 hours on Tuesday. The national strike was part of an ongoing dispute over a new enterprise agreement.

The Communications Electrical Plumbing Union (CEPU), which covers ten percent of the workforce, said it first suggested a ban on undertaking specific duties during unpaid time. Telstra, however, threatened to deduct a day's pay for every day in the protected action.

CEPU members have rejected Telstra's proposed pay rise of 4.5 percent over the next three years, an increase of just 1.5 percent per year, well below the official rate of inflation. The union has called for a meagre 12 percent pay increase over three years.

The latest attack on Telstra technicians follows its announcement last year that it would eliminate 9,500 jobs over the next three years. At least 3,200 jobs have already been axed without any opposition from any of the unions covering the company.

Chemist Warehouse distribution centre workers strike indefinitely

Around 800 workers at Chemist Warehouse, Australia's largest pharmacy retail chain, began indefinite strike action on Tuesday to demand better pay and conditions in a new workplace agreement. They are also protesting alleged management bullying and sexual harassment. Strikers have picketed the company's warehouses at Somerton and Preston in Victoria and Eagle Farm in Queensland.

The National Union of Workers (NUW) has called for a 25 to 30 percent pay rise and an increase in the proportion of permanent positions across the three sites to at least 70 percent of the workforce. Currently, only 25 percent of workers are not casual or on a contract.

According to the union, workers are paid 25 percent less than those employed by industry competitors. Storemen at the company's distribution centres, for example, earn on average just \$A20.84 per hour.

Aurizon coal haulage crew resumes strike action

Unions representing over 1,000 train crew and maintenance workers in the Central Queensland coal haulage network notified Aurizon last Saturday that they have called for three separate 24-hour stoppages on March 15, 16 and 18. Unions called off strikes last week, in what they said was a "good faith" gesture.

Since December, the Rail Tram and Bus Union, the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Employees, the Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union have restricted workers' opposition to limited strikes by isolated sections of the company's workforce. 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."

DP World port workers vote to strike

Workers at container terminals in four states run by DP World, Australia's largest stevedore, have voted for rolling strikes and indefinite work bans in their dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). The Construction Forestry Mining Maritime and Energy Union (CFMMEU), representing 1,800 workers at DP World ports in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Fremantle, said strike action would begin at Fremantle from March 19–25. If a resolution is not reached, it said action would be extended to the other ports.

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 has called for a ban on the use of casual labour, improved leave entitlements and the conversion of unused sick leave to days-in lieu.

New Zealand doctors vote on fifth strike

More than 3,000 junior doctors in New Zealand public hospitals are voting on whether to strike for an entire week after already holding four 48-hour strikes so far this year against plans by the country's District Health Boards to undermine their working conditions. Three days of talks between the DHBs and the Resident Doctors' Association last week failed to resolve the dispute.

DHBs are demanding more "flexible" rosters, including scrapping the current maximum limit of 16-hour shifts. Hospital managers also want to remove a restriction on the number of days doctors can work consecutively without a break: currently the limit is 10 days. DHBs want to be able to relocate doctors to any hospital in the country, without their having any ability to object.

The union is attempting to maintain the status quo, including extremely long shifts that result in fatigue and place doctors and patients at risk. The union has reapplied for talks to be facilitated by the government's Employment Relations Authority in an attempt to avoid another strike. The RDA also called for the Labour Party-led government to intervene and help settle the dispute.

The doctors' strikes follow nationwide strikes by nurses, midwives, healthcare assistants, and industrial action by ambulance paramedics and anaesthetic technicians, in response to the ongoing austerity measures imposed by the government on the health system.

Pharmacists plan strike action

Pharmacy staff at Canterbury District Health Board are planning to strike for 24 hours on March 25 after the DHB failed to make an offer of a new collective agreement. The workers supply and manage the provision of medication in the public health system in Christchurch and surrounding area. The APEX union, which represents the workers, said they last met to negotiate with the DHB in September 2018. It stated that the lack of any deal was exacerbating staffing issues faced by the public health system in the region.

Medical physicists take industrial action

Around 75 medical physicists, who provide radiation oncology treatment at hospitals around New Zealand, began industrial action on March 12. For 10 days they are refusing to work outside the hours of 8am-4:30pm. Six of the country's 20 District Health Boards provide radiation oncology services and are affected by the action: Auckland, Waikato, MidCentral, Capital and Coast, Canterbury and Southern DHBs. The specialist workers are represented by the APEX union, which says DHBs have not made any pay offer to renew a nationwide collective

agreement.



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