

Engineering department workers strike in India's Jammu state; Sri Lankan nurses strike; Tasmanian teachers to strike for higher pay

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 March 2019

### India: Engineering department workers' strike in Jammu hits water supplies

Drinking water supplies in the north Indian state of Jammu were disrupted for 24 hours this week when thousands of public health engineering (PHE) department workers held a one-day strike. The March 27 walkout, which was organised by the PHE Employees' Union, involved full time and casual employees, and was over outstanding wage payments, full time jobs for casual employees and other demands.

The union has threatened to step up the industrial campaign in the coming weeks if the PHE department and the Jammu state administration refuse to agree to workers' demands. Some casual workers have not been properly paid for five years, according to media reports.

### Indian government school teachers protest over delayed wage payments

Adarsh Government School teachers in Manawan, Punjab state, demonstrated on March 26 against the state government and its education institute for failing to pay salaries for the past eight months. The state government, through the Punjab Education Development Board, has been running more than 26 Adarsh schools through a public-private partnership for over 10 years.

The protesting teachers allege that management has not applied to the state government for the release of the required funds to pay the salaries. They also claim that their monthly salaries have been recently reduced from 18,000 rupees to 16,500 rupees. Teachers said they had raised these issues with the district administration but been ignored.

### Punjab railway sanitation employees remain on strike

Railway sanitation workers in Chandigarh, the Punjab capital, have been on strike since March 23 over the non-payment of salaries and other amounts, including provident fund payments. Workers demonstrated outside the station superintendent's office.

Indian Railway Stations Development Corporation Limited (IRSDC) officials had previously met with workers but refused to do anything,

stating that the work was outsourced and that the contractor had to pay the outstanding wages. The striking sanitation workers said that they have been threatened with arrest by the Railway Protection Force.

### Madhya Pradesh railway workers protest line changes

Railway workers in Ujjain, a city in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, demonstrated on March 25 against a management decision to change the starting locations of three main lines.

Members of five different unions, including the Western Railway Employees Union, All India Guard Council, All India Loco Running Staff Association and All India SC-ST Association, held a joint rally in the city over the issue.

### Sri Lankan nurses hold two-day national strike

Hundreds of nurses from Sri Lankan government-funded hospitals held a two-day strike on March 26 urging the government to grant a pay rise and other demands. The strike was organised by the Public Service United Nurses' Union. The union has called on the health ministry to increase pay and provide allowances for uniforms. Nurses have threatened further strike action if their demands are not met.

### Pakistan: College teachers protest in Lahore

Lecturers and professors from government colleges across Punjab demonstrated in Lahore on Tuesday to demand a service structure and the five-tier promotion system used in other Pakistani provinces. They want timely promotions, abolition of arbitrary testing for promotions and job permanency for contract-based teachers.

Teachers recruited in 2002, 2005, 2009 and 2012 have been impacted by the current procedures. In 2018, about 200 teachers retired, having been relegated to the same levels and pay rates as when they were originally recruited.

The protest, which was organised by the Punjab Professors and

Lecturers Association and held outside the Punjab Assembly in Lahore, created a major traffic jam across the city.

### **Bangladesh police attack protesting garment workers**

Police violently attacked striking garment workers during a demonstration that blocked the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway on March 21. Fifty mainly female workers were injured in the attack.

The workers began protesting after learning that Rina Akhter, a Chaity Composite garment employee, had died in the bathroom of the company factory in Narayanganj. The factory administration was reported to have taken Akhter to a nearby hospital after discovering her on a bathroom floor of the plant.

Officers from the Sonargaon police station and the Kanchpur industrial police were mobilised against the demonstration. More than 40 rounds of blank bullets and 10 rounds of teargas shells were used in the attack, the *Dhaka Tribune* reported. The newspaper said the “whole area [was] turned into a battlefield.”

### **Hong Kong protest demands the release of labour activists**

About 20 members of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) marched on Tuesday morning to demand the release of detained labour activists.

On August 24 last year, police in mainland China abducted a number of labour activists who supported a strike by Jasic workers in the southeastern city of Shenzhen. Over 40 workers, students and activists have been detained. The whereabouts of some of them is unknown.

The Hong Kong protest began at the Western District Police Station and proceeded to the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government. Participants demanded the Chinese government release all the detainees, withdraw charges against them, halt further repression and improve labour laws.

The march was supported by the Korean Council of Trade Unions, which held a protest outside the Chinese embassy in South Korea the same day.

### **Taiwan workers protest repressive strike laws**

Workers participated in a union-organised demonstration outside the office of Legislator Chao Cheng-yu in Taoyuan last Monday, over proposed laws that would require 10 days' notification before any strike can be held.

The proposed repressive new laws follow strike action by China Airlines pilots earlier this month which resulted in the cancellation of 214 flights.

The protest was organised by the Taoyuan Confederation of Trade Unions (TCTU), the China Airlines Employee Union, the EVA Air Union and the Federation of Aviation Employees.

### **Hundreds of South Korean petrochemical workers strike after failed negotiations**

Up to 800 unionised workers at the Hanwha Total Petrochemicals plant took strike action on March 23, after wage talks with management collapsed. The walkout was set to continue until last Thursday morning.

The union has demanded a 10.3 percent per annum pay rise. The company has offered a paltry 2.3 percent. Operations at the plant have reportedly been continued by the company's 900 non-unionised employees.

### **Cambodian garment workers end strike**

Over 1,000 garment workers at the W&D Garment Company factory in Phnom Penh's Meanchey district voted to end strike action on Wednesday after the company's director-general declared that “all workers,” including those previously blacklisted, could return to work if they started on Friday and Saturday.

The workers had been on strike since December over cuts to seniority indemnity payments. In February, the company said most of the workers could return except 127 who were blacklisted. The majority of the company's workforce remained on strike, defying court orders and opposition from the Cambodian Council of National Unions.

The company offer came after Prime Minister Hun Sen intervened on Monday saying the workers were no longer demanding the seniority indemnity and should be allowed to return to work. The workers are demanding payment for the time they spent on strike.

### **Sacked cement workers maintain month long picket in the Philippines**

Over 100 workers laid off at Lafarge Holcim's cement plant in Davao are picketing the plant. On March 4, the labour hire subcontractor Fortsteel sacked 141 employees. The picket was established on March 6. Like other contractual workers in the Philippines, the strikers are denied the right to bargain alongside the permanent workforce. They are also denied tenure and benefits including annual leave and social security payments.

The Building and Wood Workers union has lodged a complaint with the government Department of Labour calling for the sacked workers to be made permanent employees.

### **Australia: Tasmanian teachers to strike**

Teachers at government schools across Tasmania will walk out next week after rejecting the government's latest enterprise agreement offer. Stop-work meetings will be held at Burnie on April 2 and in Launceston and Hobart on April 3. Australian Education Union (AEU) members unanimously voted down a proposed 2 percent pay increase offer earlier this month.

The AEU, which has 5,600 members across the state at 196 schools and colleges, said the government had failed to respond to its counter wage claim. The union has called for a meagre 3 percent rise, caps on class sizes and increases for in-class support. The state Liberal government is enforcing a 2 percent pay cap on all public sector workers.

Government bus drivers in Tasmania's capital Hobart walked off the job for four hours last week to demand a pay rise above the cap. The

previous Labor-Greens government, backed by the unions, introduced the 2 percent wage cap in 2011. The public sector unions repeatedly signed deals restricting pay increases to below the rate of inflation.

### **University staff in Melbourne strike over pay and conditions**

Academics and staff at Melbourne's Monash University walked off the job for four hours on Wednesday morning in a dispute over a proposed enterprise agreement. Negotiations began in November 2017 and reached a deadlock over the casualisation of the academic workforce and a proposal to increase ordinary work hours to 8pm.

The National Tertiary Education Union complained that extending hours would eliminate overtime rates, resulting in a substantial pay cut for those currently forced to work regular overtime. The union is calling for the university to reduce the number of casuals by offering career opportunities to seasonal academics. According to the union, out of 15,000 Monash employees, 9,000 have insecure work.

### **Chemist Warehouse workers end strike action**

The National Union of Workers (NUW) ended indefinite strike action by around 800 workers at pharmacy retail giant Chemist Warehouse's distribution centres at Somerton and Preston in Melbourne and Eagle Farm in Brisbane. The union has touted a company enterprise agreement offer as a "victory."

Workers walked out on March 12 to demand a 25 to 30 percent wage rise and cuts in the use of casual labour. Chemist Warehouse (CWH) workers are paid 25 percent less than those employed by industry competitors. Labour hire companies ASAP and Taylors provided between 75 and 80 percent of the CWH low wage workforce.

The union has claimed that under the agreement, workers will receive an 18.75 percent wage increase over 4 years. In a bid to sweeten the deal, 8.75 percent of that will reportedly be paid within the next two weeks. This means that over the final three years of the agreement, workers will receive pay rises of around 3.3 percent per annum, well below the rapidly rising cost of living.

The union has said that casual labour hire workers who went on strike will receive permanent jobs. Other labour hire workers not in the union will have to wait six months before they can apply to be made permanent. In other words, the company will be able to terminate their employment, to prevent them gaining permanent status.

Under the previous Enterprise Agreement (EA), endorsed and imposed by the NUW, CWH distribution centre workers were paid an average of just \$A20.84 per hour. Workers at CWH's retail outlets remain on poverty wages. Pharmacy assistants are paid just \$19.05 an hour and retail sales assistants as little as \$17.54 per hour.

### **New Zealand teachers' unions cancel nationwide strike**

The Educational Institute (NZEI) and the Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) have cancelled a nationwide teachers' strike that had been scheduled for April 3, citing the Christchurch terror attack as a pretext.

PPTA president Jack Boyle said the decision had been taken to "better support Christchurch teachers." Boyle stated the PPTA would go back to its members after the April school holidays to decide the "next steps" in its industrial campaign over pay negotiations.

This is a patent fraud intended to shut down a growing rebellion among teachers and prepare the way for a sell-out. In the wake of the Christchurch tragedy, all the unions are falling into line with calls by the government and media for national "unity" and suppression of any opposition sentiment.

The NZEI, the primary teachers' union, earlier cancelled a series of stop-work meetings scheduled for last week to vote on the Ministry of Education's latest pay offer, which has been widely opposed, and to confirm its participation in the strike. Members are instead voting in an online ballot from April 1-5 on the offer.

Negotiations between the unions and the Labour-led government dragged on throughout 2018. Teachers have demanded pay increases of at least 15 percent over two years and improvements in workload and other conditions in schools. A series of ministry offers, which teachers have repeatedly rejected, did not provide for any significant increase in staff and resources for schools, and mandated meagre wage rises.

### **Fuji Xerox workers strike for a fourth time**

Workers at Fuji Xerox offices in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin held a two-day strike on March 27 and 28. A picket was set up outside the company's head office in Auckland. It was the workers' fourth stoppage to demand that back pay be added to Fuji Xerox's earlier 2 percent pay offer.

Without the back pay, the workers will have had a wage freeze for a year. A spokesman for the E Tu Union said members had voted "overwhelmingly" for the latest action. The total cost of the backpay to the company is less than \$100,000.



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