

Police attack teachers in Kolkata; thousands of Bangladesh jute mill workers protest

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 April 2019

South Indian university workers protest over salaries

Osmania University employees in Hyderabad protested on April 3 near the campus administrative block to demand payment of outstanding salaries. The demonstration mainly involved technical staff but also included Osmania University Employees Union members.

The workers complained that the delays in payment of their salaries were causing severe financial problems. They have threatened to intensify their protests by cutting off power supplies and shutting down the university.

Indian transport workers protest against outsourcing

Hundreds of contract workers from Punjab State Bus Stand Management Company (Punbus) held rallies outside 18 Punbus depots in the north Indian state on April 9.

The Punjab Roadways Punbus Contract Union, which organised the rallies, said government and bus officials had allowed the new contractors to hire new workers in violation of a previously agreed “model code of conduct.” Union leaders said that the contractors had reduced the new workers’ salaries but also imposed unnecessary penalties.

Protestors burnt effigies of management officials and referred to them as “corrupt.” The union is demanding that the new outsourced contractual workers be brought in to the bus company as internal contract workers and eventually be permanent by Punjab Roadways.

Tamil Nadu Food delivery workers demand better pay and conditions

Delivery workers for Zomato, an internet restaurant search and discovery company, protested in Chennai on April 5. The workers marched to Chennai city to demand better pay and working conditions.

The delivery workers alleged that the payment per delivery has been reduced to 30 rupees, down from 40 rupees. The company claimed that orders to the service had fallen but workers insist orders have increased and that they were not slaves. They have threatened to increase their protests.

Police attack protesting teachers in Kolkata

Over 350 computer teachers at government schools in Kolkata protested on April 3 for higher pay. The teachers are employed by a private firm and only paid 4,500 rupees (\$US62) per month.

Teachers have been demanding that their salaries be increased to 15,000 rupees for the past four years. Protesters are demanding to know how much profit the company makes from the amounts they receive from the government.

Protesting teachers were attacked by baton-wielding police when they approached the company's office. Several workers were injured and hospitalised and six were arrested.

Bangladesh: Unemployed workers demand permanent jobs at Barapukuria Coal-Fired Power Plant

About 150 unemployed workers demonstrated on Monday to demand jobs at the Barapukuria 525MW Coal-Fired Power Plant at Dinajpur in northern Bangladesh. They gathered outside the power plant and blocked its entrance.

The workers were previously temporarily employed during construction of the third unit of the plant. Authorities promised they would be given jobs as “operational employees” when the unit was built.

Workers allege that local officials from the ruling Awami League government control recruitment.

Water transport workers in Bangladesh threaten strike action

Water transport workers said they will strike on April 16 if agreements made at tripartite meetings between their union, management and the government are not implemented. Workers were promised that they would receive appointment letters, identity cards and landing allowances in India.

The workers are members of the Bangladesh Nourjan Sramik Federation which met with the Ministry of Shipping (MoS) and vessel owners on September 25 and October 4 last year.

Union officials claim that they told the government and vessel owners

that unless workers' demands are not met by April 20 they would demonstrate on April 13 at all the river ports.

Jute mill workers threaten to resume protests in Bangladesh

Workers from state-owned jute mills announced on Sunday that they would resume protests and industrial action across the country next week over unpaid wages. Over 50,000 permanent workers have not been paid for nine weeks.

Workers struck for two days late last month over non-payment of outstanding salaries, gratuities and provident fund payments for retired workers.

The Bangladesh Jute Mill Workers League (BJMWL) told the media that rallies would be held outside 26 mills run by the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) on Friday, followed by a march on Sunday and blockades of roads and railways for four days from next Monday. The union has threatened further action if its demands are not met before April 15.

Sri Lankan graduate officers begin sick-note campaign

Hundreds of graduate officers at state and provincial services launched a sick-note campaign on April 8 and picketed the State Administration and Management Ministry in central Colombo to demand improved recruitment procedures for graduates, timely promotions and the elimination of salary anomalies.

The graduate officers told the media that they would step up their campaign next month if their demands are not addressed.

Nurses and paramedics strike in Sri Lanka

Nurses and health workers attached to supplementary health and paramedic services struck work on April 8. They were calling for streamlined promotion schemes, increased allowances, duty-free vehicle permits and the standardisation of overtime payments.

Clinical services and medical tests, including x-ray and scan units at the Colombo National Hospital, as well as at provincial city hospitals, were severely impacted by the one-day strike. The Nursing, Paramedical and Supplementary Medical Services Joint Federation organised the walkout.

Australia: Hutchison port workers strike over automation

Construction Forestry Mining Maritime and Energy Union (CFMMEU) members at Hutchison's container terminals in Sydney and Brisbane walked off the job for 24 hours on April 5 to protest Hutchison Ports' refusal to end its plans for job outsourcing and overseas remote controlling of already semi-automated equipment.

The company's offensive is the latest stage in a cost-cutting offensive it began after starting operations in Australia in 2013. Hutchison has previously posted substantial losses, including \$50 million in 2017.

About 100 Hutchison dock workers in Sydney walked off the job for 24 hours on January 21 to oppose sweeping wage cuts and a further erosion of working conditions in a new enterprise agreement (EA). CFMMEU members have been maintaining limited work bans following strike action in January.

The company wants pay cuts of up to 10 percent, followed by a wage freeze, in a new enterprise agreement. Hourly rates could be reduced for workers at all wage levels, potentially costing some workers tens of thousands of dollars a year. The company is also wants to slash parental and sick leave, impose a 2.5 percent reduction in superannuation payments and abolish full-time first aid positions. The CFMMEU has isolated the Hutchison workers from other stevedores in Sydney and Brisbane.

Telstra workers maintain work bans

The Communications Electrical Plumbing Union (CEPU), which covers over 3,000 technicians at Australia's largest telecommunications provider Telstra, has called more token strikes while maintaining limited work bans imposed after a 24-hour stoppage on March 12.

The union called for half-hour work stoppages between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m. on April 12, 13 and 15. It took similar action a week earlier when the union claimed that this action was designed to "send a clear message to Telstra." The union is dragging out the dispute to wear workers' resolve and then impose a sell-out agreement.

After one year of negotiations, CEPU members (10 percent of Telstra's workforce) rejected the company's proposed pay rise of 4.5 percent over the next three years. This amounts to 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 wage increase over three years.

University staff in Melbourne strike again

Academics and staff at Melbourne's Monash University walked off the job for 24 hours on Wednesday in a dispute over a proposed enterprise agreement. The action followed an eight-hour stoppage on March 27 over the issue.

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 8 p.m. 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, 9,000 of the 15,000 employees at Monash have insecure work.

Sydney ferry skippers hold rolling stoppages

Sydney harbour ferry skippers employed by the NRMA on its My Fast Ferry and Manly Fast Ferry services implemented indefinite half-hour rolling stoppages on Friday due to stalled negotiations over the company's proposed enterprise agreement. The action followed two-hour

stoppages during morning peak periods on March 6 and April 3. At least 11 ferries are affected.

Ferry skippers are paid below the industry award and are casually employed. Workers are demanding more permanent full-time positions, regular shifts and higher wages. Last December, the Fair Work Commission found that the skippers could be collectively owed as much as \$1 million due to underpayment.

New Zealand primary teachers reject pay offer, vote to strike

Just under 30,000 New Zealand primary school teachers voted overwhelmingly on Monday to reject the Ministry of Education's latest pay proposal. The offer of 3 percent pay rise each year for three years was almost the same as those New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) members had already rejected, and which provoked two one-day strikes last year.

Teachers also voted to hold a third strike on May 29 unless a deal is reached before then. They will also vote next month on doing no work outside of 8am to 5pm for 10 days.

Teachers are angry not only about pay, which has been stagnant for at least a decade, but also the crisis of understaffing and under-resourcing in schools, which has led to impossible workloads. The Labour Party-led government has refused to further increase the offer to teachers and is maintaining austerity measures in education and other public services.

The unions, which support Labour, are seeking to derail the strike movement and impose a sellout deal. NZEI and Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) members had voted in favour of a combined strike of primary and secondary teachers, which was to take place on April 3. In an anti-democratic move, however, the unions cancelled the strike, using the March 15 Christchurch terror attack as a pretext. The PPTA has not announced a new strike date.

New Zealand doctors vote for five-day strike

About 3,000 resident doctors, also known as junior doctors, employed in public hospitals across New Zealand, have voted for a five-day strike starting on April 29. The Resident Doctors Association (RDA) announced the result of the ballot on Friday. It will be the fifth strike by junior doctors so far this year, following several 48-hour strikes.

The country's District Health Boards, (DHBs) which manage hospitals, are attempting to impose major attacks on working conditions, including an end to the current limit on 10 consecutive working days. Employers also want the ability to force doctors to work shifts longer than 16 hours and to relocate to any hospital in the country.

The RDA has accepted the DHBs' pay offer of 7.5 percent over three years, barely above the official rate of inflation, so effectively a pay freeze. The union is not seeking any improvement to current working conditions, but is asking for the status quo to be maintained.

Talks are still underway between the RDA and DHB in order to try and avert the strike. The union had initially scheduled a strike from April 15 to 19, but this was postponed due to an unexplained "technical" problem.

It is unclear how many RDA members will take part in the strike, should it go ahead. According to DHBs, 60 to 65 percent of registrars worked over the last strikes, and 35 percent of house officers. The RDA has excluded the Canterbury DHB from the coming strike, saying this is due to the March 15 terrorist attack in the city of Christchurch.

New Zealand medical physicists take industrial action

Medical physicists at six District Health Boards throughout New Zealand began a seven-day partial strike on April 10. The APEX union said the specialist workers, who provide radiation treatment for patients in public hospitals, have not yet received a pay offer from the DHBs, and believe they are being ignored.

The industrial action follows a 10-day partial strike last month. The union has limited the action to restricting work during "anti-social hours." In Auckland, medical physicists will refuse to carry out plan checks after midday. As with the looming junior doctors' strike, the Canterbury District Health Board has been excluded from the industrial action, with the Christchurch terror attack given as the pretext.

Rotorua Hospital anaesthetic technicians strike

Rotorua Hospital's 11 anaesthetic technicians are in a week-long strike that began on April 8. The workers have taken several strikes since last October following a breakdown in negotiations between the APEX union and the Lakes DHB. About 150 surgeries have been cancelled due to the latest strike.

A group of anaesthetic technicians told the local newspaper they felt "undervalued, underpaid unappreciated and are being treated as second-class employees" compared with their colleagues in private hospitals. They complained of being overworked and understaffed.

The union is calling for the DHB to reinstate a mandatory 12-hour break between shifts of more than 10 hours. Workers have been told they can only have a nine-hour gap between shifts. In response to the industrial action the DHB claimed it was being singled out for practices that are common throughout the public hospital system.

Midwives union ends dispute in New Zealand

The Midwifery Employee Representation & Advisory Service (MERAS) announced on Friday that it had reached a settlement in its dispute with the country's 20 District Health Boards for about 1,250 hospital-based midwives. Precise details of changes to pay and conditions were not clear, Fairfax Media reported yesterday.

An April 5 media statement from MERAS indicated that midwives were voting on an offer of a 17.5 percent pay increase "for the majority of MERAS members who have been on the top step of the registered midwives pay scale for more than a year." It is not clear how many midwives would benefit from this increase, which appears to be spread across two years.

Midwives held a series of strikes and protests earlier this year after rejecting a sellout offer of 3 percent per year for three years—the same deal imposed on nurses following a bitter dispute last year. Midwives were also concerned about the severe staff shortage in hospitals. A press release yesterday from the DHBs did not specify any increase to staffing levels but merely said the DHBs were "working closely" with the union "to address the broader workforce concerns."

Ambulance paramedics continue industrial action

New Zealand ambulance paramedics employed by St John are continuing low-level industrial action, which began last November. About 900 FIRST Union members are refusing to perform extra duties such as processing the paperwork for St John to invoice people who have used ambulances for a voluntary part payment. Ambulances have also been covered with chalk graffiti by paramedics, who are demanding a decent pay increase.

This week, paramedics delivered a petition signed by 14,000 to parliament, calling on the Labour Party-led government to nationalise and fully fund the ambulance service. Currently, St John is run as a charity, largely staffed by volunteers and with limited government funding.

The starting rate for ambulance workers is just over \$19 an hour, barely more than the minimum wage. They work gruelling hours and are frequently responsible for saving lives. Many of them have degrees and large student loans. The FIRST Union and St John entered facilitated bargaining over a new pay deal this week.



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