

Indian chemical workers oppose privatisation; Bangladesh garment workers protest for unpaid wages; Australian rail and tram workers to take industrial action

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 August 2019

## Asia

### India: West Bengal chemical workers oppose privatisation of company

Bengal Chemicals & Pharmaceuticals Limited (BCPL) employees protested early this month against Indian government plans to privatise the state-owned company. The Indian government has been trying to sell the firm since 2017, despite a previous high court order opposing the move. Sale of BCPL was cleared by the Modi government on July 17.

BCPL, which was established in 1901, was taken over by the government in 1977 and the Board for Industrial and Financial Reconstruction in 1992. The company was profitable during the 2018–2019 financial year with a total income of 1,197 million rupees (\$17.1 million).

Workers have held several demonstrations against the government sale of the company, with the largest protest organised by the All India People's Science Network, Students' Federation of India, Democratic Youth Federation of India, and the All India Democratic Women's Association on August 2.

### Sanitation workers strike at India's Taj Mahal

About 30 contract sanitation workers employed by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to clean and maintain public toilets at the Taj Mahal struck on August 13 over the non-payment of five months' wages.

Strikers denounced the ASI and its officials for dragging out their case for so long. The walkout, which impacted on toilet facilities at India's busiest tourist destination, ended after authorities agreed to pay all outstanding salaries.

### Roadways/Punbus contract workers strike for permanent jobs

About 400 Roadways/Punbus workers began a three-day strike in

Punjab state on August 14. Their main demand was for permanent work for all contract employees and better pay and conditions. The strikers also want equal pay for equal work, in line with Supreme Court guidelines, and the cancellation of driving permits for 12,210 private buses.

### Phagwara municipal cleaners strike in Punjab

Phagwara Municipal Corporation cleaning (safai) workers in India's Punjab state walked out on strike last week to demand the immediate payment of outstanding salaries and improved conditions. The strike was organised by Safai Karamchari Union.

Strikers chanted slogans against municipal corporation management and demanded the immediate payment of outstanding wages, and for holidays on Saturdays and establishment of a union office near the Phagwara municipal corporation.

The mayor unsuccessfully attempted to pacify the strikers but the cleaners said they would not return to work until their demands were granted.

### Teachers at Punjab residential school protest

Teaching staff at a residential school in Ludhiana, Punjab demonstrated on August 9 to demand the education department give them permanent jobs. The teachers accused education department officials of focusing on performance, not educational standards. They said that officials were using orientation development tests and harassing teachers, threatening them with removal if they did not perform.

### Bangladesh garment workers demand wages and festival allowance

Thousands of garment workers from factories in Dhaka, Gazipur and Chattogram demonstrated between August 7 and 9 to demand their unpaid July salaries, the Eid religious festival bonus and overtime allowances.

About 7,000 garment workers blockaded Legacy Fashion Ltd and Anwara Fashion Ltd in the Kalurghat Industrial Area and up to 300 workers from factories in Mirpur 1, in Dhaka, blocked the Mirpur Road. Workers from the Style Crafts factory north of Dhaka blocked the Dhaka-Gazipur road.

While management at some plants agreed to grant workers' demands by Saturday it is not clear how many have done so, or whether the full amounts have been paid. Bangladesh's industrial police was mobilised to contain the protests and prevent them from spreading to other garment factories.

### **Pakistan police attack sacked teachers**

Police attacked and injured at least two early childhood teachers who were participating in an August 5 protest march that attempted to reach the chief minister's house.

It was one of several demonstrations in July after 300 teachers were sacked from thirty Early Childhood Learning Centres in five Karachi districts. They had been sent dismissal letters from the government in June informing them that they would not be paid beyond June 30.

Despite continued service since 2009, the government would only extend their employment on an annual basis, instead of making their jobs permanent. They had not received a pay rise in over five years.

### **Karachi steel workers demand unpaid salaries and pensions**

Current and retired employees from Pakistan Steel Mills in Karachi protested on August 5 to demand immediate payment of two months' salaries and pensions. About 5,000 retired workers are affected.

Pakistan Steel Mills is one of the main state-owned enterprises that the International Monetary Fund wants the government to privatise.

### **Increased strike activity by Chinese sanitation workers**

A group of sanitation workers in Qi County, Henan struck on August 10 to demand payment of eight months' wages. Sanitation workers face long and gruelling hours in the summer and are not compensated for the high temperatures. The workers were employed for a private contracting company used by the county government. The strike ended after the local government paid the outstanding wages.

According to the China Labour Bulletin (CLB), there have been at least eight strikes and protests by sanitation workers in cities across China since May 1. The strikes account for 10 percent of the service sector incidents recorded on bulletin's strike map this year.

In another instance, contract workers took strike action on July 7, after a property management company in Zhengzhou (the provincial capital of Henan), took over a government contract, cut jobs and then increased shifts from eight hours to more than 12 hours.

Workers had earned 2,598 yuan a month for an eight-hour shift but this only increased to 2,998 yuan a month after working 12 and half hours each day. The company also introduced a harsh new system of performance-related fines which reduced the workers' meagre income even further.

### **Taiwanese garbage workers protest unsafe conditions**

Dozens of protesting garbage collectors on Wednesday called on the Taiwan Environmental Protection Administration (EPA) to establish safer working conditions, including preventing management demanding that workers stand on the back of garbage trucks on collection rounds.

The protest came a day after the Taiwan premier announced that the EPA would allocate NT\$6 billion (US\$191.1 million) to purchase new uniforms for garbage collectors, install new shower facilities and washing machines at their workplaces, and subsidise local municipalities to replace old garbage trucks with new ones.

Garbage collectors demonstrated outside the EPA's office, accusing the government of not understanding their "real, urgent needs." The Federation of Environmental Workers' Unions told the media that 84 garbage collectors have been killed at work in the past 17 years, or about five deaths per year.

### **Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific**

#### **Melbourne rail workers to strike**

The Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), representing over 2,000 train drivers, guards, station hands and support staff in Melbourne's rail network, has called a four-hour strike, between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. on August 27 over a proposed enterprise agreement with Metro Trains.

Work bans planned for last Monday and next Monday were called off after the Fair Work Commission ruled that some of the bans would unfairly reduce the rail operator's revenue. Bans included plans to leave ticket barriers open and not check whether commuters had a valid myki card, not skipping stations to make up for late running and not wearing uniforms.

Metro had also threatened to dock the pay of workers who participated in the bans.

RTBU and Metro have been in negotiations for a new four-year agreement for five months. The union has called for 6 percent annual pay rises but Metro management wants to cap annual increases at 2 percent, well below rises in the cost of living.

Workers have denounced Metro's demands for the elimination of overtime pay for part-time employees and to abolish increased wage rates for drivers working on their entitled day off.

#### **Melbourne tram drivers take industrial action**

Around 1,500 workers for Yarra Trams have threatened to impose work bans, starting on August 26, including voluntary overtime, covering shifts on days off or wearing uniforms, in their dispute over a new enterprise agreement. The new agreement would cover drivers, authorised officers and customer service staff.

The RTBU has been negotiating for four months with the company, which is owned by international company Keolis Downer. Yarra Trams management has rejected most of the union's 107 claims.

A union spokesman said Yarra Trams was trying to remove a minimum requirement that part-time workers do seven hours a day. He said the company wants more external part-time employees on shorter hours, and to raise a 4 percent cap on part-time work to 22 percent across the company.

In May, Yarra Trams offered 3 percent annual wage increases over four years. This was rejected by workers who want annual increases of 6 percent.

#### **New Zealand doctors' union accepts sell-out contract deal**

The Resident Doctors Association (RDA) announced this week that its members had voted to accept a contract deal recommended by the Employment Relations Authority (ERA) and end a long-running dispute with New Zealand's 20 District Health Boards (DHBs).

About 3,000 junior doctors employed in public hospitals have been fighting the DHBs since last year over onerous workloads and proposed changes to rosters. The RDA had declared that it was not seeking to improve wages and conditions, but opposing "clawbacks" demanded by the DHBs. The ERA was called in months ago in order to break up the doctors' struggle, which had resulted in five strikes between January and May.

Under the sell-out deal, roster changes will be decided on a hospital-by-hospital basis. Union members in each hospital will vote on any changes, with a two-thirds majority required. The union agreement will isolate and divide doctors and see different systems in hospitals across the country.

#### **Principals vote on pay offer in New Zealand**

Primary and intermediate school principals attended union meetings this week to vote on a new government offer that will establish pay parity with secondary principals. The offer came more than a month after principals rejected a \$64 million pay offer, and placed a ban on communications with the Ministry of Education.

The previous offer, recommended by the NZ Educational Institute (NZEI), was rejected because it did not meet the principals' pay parity demand and was proportionately less than a deal settled by the union for teachers. The difference exacerbated a longstanding complaint that senior teachers in large primary schools can earn more than principals at the smallest schools.

While NZEI president Lynda Stuart claimed the deal would address "workload and wellbeing issues," the offer does not include limited classroom release time for principals at schools with fewer than 100 students, which was previously offered.

#### **Fiji police block union protest march**

A planned protest march through Suva, organised by the Fiji Trades Union Congress (FTUC), was called off last Saturday after a permit was declined by police. FTUC national secretary Felix Anthony said no reason was given for the refusal of the permit, which was applied for last month.

Several smaller gatherings of workers were held around the country after police told the FTUC they would not intervene in cases of "peaceful

assembly." Police said they would monitor the gatherings to ensure "safety and security of the general public."

The protests had been called by the unions purportedly to address ongoing harassment of workers and unionists, to demand a \$4 per hour national minimum wage, the right to strike, labour law reforms, and to oppose widespread imposition of individual contracts.



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