

400,000 bank workers strike across India

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

## Indian government bank workers strike over merger

Some 400,000 employees of public sector banks struck for 24 hours on October 22 against government plans for mergers and a reduction in interest rates on deposits.

In August, the government announced a plan to merge 10 public sector banks into four. Workers fear that this will be accompanied by the closure of around 5,000 government bank branches to boost the fortunes of private operators.

The strike was called by two unions, the All India Bank Employees Association (AIBEA) and the Bank Employees Federation of India (BEFI).

## Puducherry health workers demand unpaid salaries

Auxiliary nurse midwives and lady health visitors attached to primary health centres in the South Indian territory of Puducherry protested in front of the Directorate of Medical Services building on October 22 to demand immediate payment of salaries owing since September.

Workers complained they had suffered from late disbursement of salaries for over a year. The most recent delay was causing additional hardships being close to the festival season of Deepavali.

## Government doctors in Tamil Nadu demand promotions

Members of the Tamil Nadu Government Doctors Association (TNGDA) demonstrated outside Rajaji Hospital in Madurai on October 22 demanding time-bound promotions for doctors in their 4th, 9th and 13th years. Doctors raised slogans such as “higher achievements but lesser pay” and “reduce unfair discrepancies in pay.”

One senior doctor explained that he had worked for 15 years, travelling to different districts across the state, but that his salary is meagre compared to what doctors in the central government receive. The hospital provides tertiary care for around 20 million people in southern Tamil

Nadu.

The TNGDA said it will call a two-day strike on October 30 if the government fails to respond to their demands.

## Tamil Nadu conservancy workers protest

Over 500 conservancy workers affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) and Labour Progressive Front (LPF), staged a sit-in protest at Madurai Corporation premises on October 21.

Demands were for the disbursement of arrears of 6,400 rupees (\$US91.5) pending since April 2018 and a Deepavali festival pay advance of 10,000 rupees to daily, contract and consolidated pay workers. Workers later submitted a petition to the Corporation Commissioner.

## Tamil Nadu fishermen protest against new regulation

Members of the Thoothukudi Countryboat, Fiber Boat and Catamaran Fishermen Welfare Association protested against the central government’s proposed Marine Fisheries Regulation and Management Bill 2019 at the Thoothukudi Collectorate on Monday.

Fishermen from over 30 coastal villages said traditional and small-scale business owners would not be able to compete against commercial organisations if the rules regarding fishing limit them to 12 nautical miles from shore. They said they would barely have any fish to catch.

These traditional fishermen regularly fish up to 200 miles off shore. The new regulation has been insisted on by international bodies such as the World Trade Organisation and serves the interests of large commercial companies by denying traditional fishermen access to international fishing grounds.

## BEML heavy equipment manufacturing workers protest in Karnataka

Employees of the state-owned heavy equipment manufacturer BEML demonstrated at the Kolar Gold Field in Karnataka on Tuesday. Similar protests were held by units in Bangalore, Mysore and Palakkad in Kerala.

Workers were protesting against the BJP-led central government's decision to privatise BEML and other public sector operations. The BEML Employees Association said they will demonstrate each day until the government reverses its decision.

Workers fear that under privatisation they will lose job security and entitlements. The association demanded that the government retain 51 percent ownership.

BEML, previously Bharat Earth Movers Limited, is headquartered in Bengaluru. It manufactures a variety of heavy equipment for use in earthmoving, transport and mining. Protesters raised the slogans "BEML is the property of workers" and "No one has the right to sell it to private looters."

### **Bangladeshi pharmaceutical workers protest sale of company**

A group of workers from the French-owned pharmaceutical distributor Sanofi Bangladesh Limited protested in Dhaka on Monday. They gave a 48-hour ultimatum to company authorities to give assurances on a compensation and benefit packages when the business is sold.

The company announced on October 14 that it would transfer its stake to another party to whom it would hand over financial responsibilities, including management of the provident fund and gratuity. Workers fear the 60-year-old business will close, affecting 1,100 employees, along with their 5,000 dependants and family members.

### **Teachers from non-government schools end hunger strike**

Teachers and employees from educational institutions not included in the government's Monthly Pay Order (MPO) scheme called off their 2-day hunger strike in Dhaka on Tuesday night. This followed a government assurance that their demand for permanent jobs and enlistment in the MPO will be met.

Hundreds of teachers and employees at non-government primary schools held hunger strikes in July and August, following demonstrations in March.

There are institutions that are not covered by the MPO, including a number of primary and secondary schools, technical and vocational colleges and Islamic-based madrasas. Workers have been told by the government that all educational institutions will eventually be added to the scheme. Previous pledges have been broken.

### **Pakistan: Punjab health workers' strike in third week**

Doctors, paramedics, nurses and other staff at government hospitals in Punjab are continuing a strike called by the Grand Health Alliance on October 10. The workers oppose the Medical Teaching Institute Reforms Act.

Under the planned reforms, hospitals and other state-backed health facilities will have to fund their own teaching institutions. Workers have condemned this as a preparation for wholesale privatisation.

Meanwhile, health workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have been on strike for four weeks to oppose the Regional and District Health Authorities Act which is intended to have the same outcome as the reforms proposed in

Punjab. The government assured workers it is planning to appoint 450 new doctors. At the same time, it is preparing a list of health workers leading the strike to be targeted for retaliation.

### **Burma: Garment workers in Yangon protest**

Over 200 workers from five foreign-owned garment factories in Burma's largest city, Yangon, demonstrated throughout Monday night outside the regional government's offices. They demanded that the chief minister intervene in their disputes with their employers, and order local arbitration bodies in three townships to enforce labour laws.

Other issues raised were low pay, poor conditions, a lack of overtime payments, leave entitlements, the refusal of employers to allow workers to freely form unions and threats to sack workers' leaders.

### **Cambodian garment workers walk out over unpaid wages**

One thousand garment workers demonstrated outside the entrance to the Chinese owned ML Intimate Apparel factory in the Special Economic Zone in Poipet city, Banteay Meanchey province, on Wednesday. They were protesting late payment of wages and being forced to work back as late as 10pm. The workers dispersed after appeals from city officials and promises from factory management to pay wages on time in the future.

### **Hyundai heavy industries workers strike over wage dispute**

Workers at South Korea's Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI) have scheduled partial strikes this week over stalls in wage negotiations with management.

Workers stopped for four to seven hours per day from October 23 to 25, after talks with the company ended without an agreement on October 22. Their demands include the raising of the basic monthly wage by KRW 123,000 won (US\$105) and performance bonuses. The union also opposes the company's planned merger with Daewoo Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering (DSME), fearing that DSME's significant debt burden and the consolidation of operations will lead to job losses.

Negotiations began in May. There have been 21 rounds of wage talks since then.

### **Water utility workers in Sydney resume strike action**

Six electricians and 30 fitters employed by engineering company Ventia to maintain the supply network of Sydney Water walked out on October 18, picketing the company's headquarters. The 24-hour stoppage followed two weeks of strike action that began on September 30.

The workers are covered by the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), which have been in negotiations with the company over an enterprise agreement (EA) for 18 months. Ventia has refused further bargaining.

Sydney Water contracted out its maintenance work to Theiss in 2013

and Ventia bought the relevant division in 2015. Since then Ventia has rolled over the enterprise agreement, leaving conditions intact while paying minimum wage increases.

According to the unions, the company wants to remove core conditions and force the former Sydney Water employees onto an inferior agreement shared with other Ventia workers. An ETU spokesman said workers would lose more than half their long service leave entitlements under the plan.

### **South Australian public sector nurses begin limited industrial action**

Around 13,000 members of the Australian Nurses and Midwives Federation (ANMF) in South Australia's public health sector will commence a series of one-hour stoppages and pickets at hospitals and other public facilities across the state. The actions begin next Monday at the Lyell McEwin Hospital in Adelaide.

The decision to strike followed four months of negotiations with the Liberal state government over its proposed enterprise agreement. As well as a pay increase, the ANMF is demanding improved staffing levels and conditions to stem the high number of nurses prematurely leaving the sector. An ANMF spokesperson said the government had rejected almost every "patient safety measure" demanded by nurses and midwives.

The ANMF called off proposed strike action in October last year after the government falsely claimed it would alleviate overcrowding at Adelaide's major public hospitals. Nurses and ambulance paramedics had been protesting for months about overcrowding in emergency wards forcing ambulances to ramp for several hours waiting to offload patients.

### **Aged care nurses in Tasmania vote on industrial action in wage dispute**

ANMF members employed at aged care facilities operated by Huon Regional Care in southeast Tasmania are voting on industrial action in their dispute for a new enterprise agreement. Nurses are to decide on action that includes work bans and stoppages of up to 24 hours. The ballot closes on November 8.

The ANMF have been bargaining for a new enterprise agreement since January 2016. Members have not received a wage increase since January 2017. The union rejected the employer's last offer on October 15, claiming that there was no improvement on previous offers and that back pay was restricted to six months.

### **Queensland timber mill workers' industrial action entering fourth month**

Thirty-six workers at Hyne Timber's Tuan Forest mill in Maryborough Queensland have been holding limited rolling stoppages and work bans since August 1 in opposition to the company's proposed enterprise agreement.

Members of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union, the AMWU and ETU decided unanimously to strike after the company refused to back down from a proposal to introduce a two-tiered workforce. Under the proposed agreement, existing workers would retain

their benefits but lunch breaks and overtime entitlements would be cut for new employees.

### **Victoria: Maribyrnong council workers to strike**

Close to 180 employees from the Maribyrnong City Council (MCC), in Melbourne's inner west, will walk off the job for four hours at 10am next Tuesday to oppose the council's proposed enterprise agreement. Negotiations with the Australian Services Union (ASU) have been ongoing for over five months.

The ASU rejected the MCC's offer in June saying it reduced redundancy entitlements and a redeployment period from 8 to 4 weeks. The 2 percent annual pay rise over three years is below cost of living increases and casual employees' eligibility to apply for a permanent position would be extended from six to twelve months.

### **Workers at Australian Paper resume strike**

About 160 workers at the Australian Paper mill in Maryvale, southeast of Melbourne, walked off the job for 24 hours on Wednesday to oppose the company's proposed enterprise agreement. The action followed a 48-hour strike on September 9 and continuing bans on overtime, call-outs and higher duties. Workers said they will walk out again next Wednesday if an agreement is not reached.

The company wants a two-tier agreement that would result in the wages of new recruits being 15 percent less than current employees. Australian paper is also seeking a freeze on existing employees' wages until the pay of new starters catches up. Proposed changes could lead to full-time staff being replaced by contractors, a reduction of sick and personal leave and alterations in the way overtime is calculated and rosters devised.

Workers unanimously rejected the company's proposed EA in July and voted for unlimited strike action. The unions covering the workers, however, including the ETU, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the National Union of Workers, have limited the number of strikes, hoping to wear down workers' resolve until they accept a deal that is acceptable to the company. The unions are currently in backroom negotiations at the pro-business Fair Work Commission.

### **New Zealand radiographers vote to escalate strikes**

Nearly 1,200 radiographers (Medical Imaging Technologists, MITs) employed by New Zealand's 20 District Health Boards (DHBs) have voted for their biggest strike action in a decade. According to the APEX union, the DHBs are yet to produce an improved offer despite both sides having met for mediated bargaining last month. Negotiations for the MIT national Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA) have been ongoing for 11 months.

The strike action is a significant escalation and comes after a fourth 24-hour strike held last week. Stoppages will take place between Tuesday October 29 and Saturday November 2, and again on Monday November 4. MITs will also be taking a range of collective actions to reduce workload.

MITs are essential to radiology services used in diagnosis and treatment of patients requiring general x-rays, CT, MRI, mammography,

angiography and nuclear medicine.

This week, 600 DHB-employed psychologists have been voting on a new offer presented by APEX to try to settle a collective agreement. Psychologists have held three months of partial strike action after negotiations broke down in July.

### **Auckland casino workers picket SkyCity shareholders' AGM**

SkyCity Casino workers who have held several strikes on weekends over the past two months picketed the shareholders' AGM in Auckland on October 18. SkyCity's major shareholders are mostly global banks such as HSBC, JP Morgan and Citibank.

The SEA-Unite union, which represents most of the 900 employees at the casino, is seeking a settlement that will provide time-and-a-half pay rates for unsociable hours. A ballot of union members saw a 98 percent vote to strike last weekend, from 6am Friday to 8am Monday.

The weekend strikes have been conducted by the union under the slogan "Bring Back the Weekend." While the low-paid workers have shown considerable combativity, SEA-Unite has drawn out the dispute, and previously agreed to join mediated talks, which failed due to employer intransigence.

SEA-Unite revealed last week that it was imposing up to 100 job cuts at SkyCity's new Convention Centre because of construction delays. A disastrous fire that enveloped the partially completed building on Wednesday and Thursday could well put many more jobs at risk.



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