

Tamil Nadu sanitary workers demand permanent jobs; Sri Lankan plantation workers strike; New Zealand bus drivers resume industrial action

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 March 2020

### India: Assam tea plantation workers strike for minimum wage

Hundreds of tea plantation workers from estates outside the industrial city of Dibrugarh, Assam state, demonstrated on March 6 to demanding an increase in their daily wages. Workers from the Bokpara and Sessa tea estates were organised by the All Assam Tea Tribes Students Association.

Workers in the Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley are only paid 167 rupees and 145 rupees respectively. Demonstrators demanded a minimum wage of 351 rupees (\$US5) per day

### Tamil Nadu farm workers demand higher pay and more work

Tamil Nadu Farm Labourers Association members employed under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS) demonstrated in Dharmapuri on Tuesday.

Association members demanded an investigation into alleged misappropriation of funds and the non-payment of workers' wages. They also called for 250 days' work per year and a minimum daily wage of 600 rupees (\$US8).

### Tamil Nadu: Sanitary workers in Coimbatore demand permanent jobs

Over 1,000 temporary sanitary workers at Coimbatore city corporation demonstrated on Monday to demand permanent jobs. The All India Trade Union Congress, the Tamil Nadu Annal Ambedkar Sanitary Workers and General Workers Association, and the Jansakthi Mazdoor Sabha accused the corporation of hiring new recruits to fill vacancies rather than giving temporary workers preference.

One worker said that he was hired as a temporary sanitary worker ten years ago for a meagre wage of just 60 rupees (\$US0.8) and is still a temporary worker.

### Tamil Nadu public transport workers continue protests

Hundreds of Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) employees stopped work and began an indefinite sit-down protest at the corporation's head office in Coimbatore on Tuesday. They were demanding higher pay and other work improvements.

The protesters included drivers, conductors and technical staff, as well as retired former employees. Their previous wage agreement expired last September.

The workers are organised by the Federation of Trade Unions, which comprises nine unions, including the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, Labour Progressive Federation and All India Trade Union Congress.

The demonstration was part of state-wide action for better wages and conditions. The industrial action began with a demonstration in the state's capital Chennai on February 12. The workers are also demanding urgent improvements to depot building infrastructure, workshop and restroom facilities. In 2017, a bus depot roof collapsed in Nagapattinam, killing eight workers and injuring many others.

Thousands of TNSTC workers are employed as reserve drivers and conductors. Demonstrators want these employees, many of whom have worked for over 240 days, to be made permanent. Other demands were for benefits for retired staff and the re-introduction of the old pension scheme for workers who joined the service before April 2003.

### Sri Lankan plantation workers strike over salary arrears

Around 700 plantation workers from two major estates belonging to the Agarapathana Plantations in Sri Lanka's central hills went on strike on Wednesday to demand payment of their February salaries. The workers are supposed to be paid their salaries on the 10th of every month. Workers said they will remain on strike until they are paid.

Meanwhile, estate workers on the Ella Kinalan estate, owned by Namunukula Plantations, are on strike demanding payment of their Employee Provident Fund, which they claim has not been deposited into their account for several months.

## **Sri Lankan audit office workers remain on strike**

Audit Services workers across Sri Lanka are maintaining strike action they began on March 2 to demand they be made a part of the state service and that all auditors across the country are integrated into the public service.

Led by the Sri Lanka Auditor Inspectors Service Union, the strikers protested outside the Fort Railway Station on Tuesday and marched to the Presidential Secretariat. They are also demanding an end to harassment from the Audit Service Commission.

## **Cambodian bag manufacturing workers demand reinstatement**

Three hundred workers from the T&L bag plant in Phnom Penh's Kamboul district resumed their strike and protest on Monday after the company refused to reinstate four sacked workers. The workers defied an Arbitration Council ruling ordering them to end their industrial action and return to work.

The four workers were fired on March 3, a month after they established a union inside the plant. One worker told the media that they were prepared to stop work indefinitely if the four were not reinstated. Workers say the company did not comply with government regulations on working conditions, did not provide trucks for transporting employees to and from work and had no health clinic on site for the 380-strong workforce.

## **Maryvale paper mill industrial action enters seventh month**

Maintenance workers from Australian Paper in Maryvale, southeast of Melbourne, Victoria state, stopped work for four hours on March 7 and reinforced ongoing work bans against the company's proposed enterprise agreement. Bans were imposed on overtime and using the company's phones.

The strike followed several months of limited rolling strikes and work bans in September and January. About 160 workers at the mill are represented by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Electrical Trades Union and United Workers Union.

According to the unions, Australian Paper, which is a subsidiary of Nippon Paper, a global company with a net income of \$10.3 billion, wants a two-tier agreement that would see 15 percent lower wage rates for all new employees. The company also wants a freeze on existing employees' wages until the pay of new starters catches up. The proposed changes could lead to full-time staff being replaced by contractors, cuts in sick and personal leave and alterations in the way overtime is calculated and rosters devised.

During wage negotiations in 2016 and 2017, the unions used the threat of a total closure by Australian Paper management to force workers to accept pay cuts. Australian Paper workers are now demanding pay rises to claw back what the unions agreed to give up in the last enterprise agreement.

The unions are dragging out the dispute with limited strike action while they negotiate a closed-door deal with the company in the Fair Work Commission.

## **Hobsons Bay City Council workers escalate industrial action**

Over 100 workers from the Hobsons Bay City Council, a seaside southern Melbourne suburb, stopped work for four hours on Tuesday to oppose the council's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). Australian Services Union members are maintaining low-level industrial action imposed on December 11 that includes work bans on mowing sports fields and parks, removing seaweed from the foreshore, processing court documents and fines, issuing infringement notices, cleaning minor plant and refuelling vehicles after 1 p.m.

Negotiations for a new agreement have been ongoing for 11 months. Council management has offered an 8 percent pay increase over a five-year period including one year backdated, meaning an average annual increase of 1.6 percent. The union is seeking a 7.5 percent pay increase over three years (2.5 percent annual increase).

## **New Zealand: Auckland bus drivers resume strike**

Auckland bus drivers involved in an ongoing dispute with NZ Bus began a new round of strikes on Friday after pay negotiations failed. The rolling stoppages began with drivers from the Panmure and Auckland City depots, who walked out from 4 a.m. to 7 a.m. Further strikes are expected across the city and suburban areas next week.

Last month, 86 percent of 800 drivers rejected a 43 cent increase in their hourly rate, to \$22.50, by NZ Bus management. The drivers voted on February 11 to strike if talks were unsuccessful. A subsequent strike was called off by the Tramways Union and First Union to allow the negotiations go ahead.

Tramways Union president Gary Froggatt said NZ Bus hasn't made any attempt to improve its pay offer or to reduce onerous 14-hour shifts. The unions asked the company to join an approach to the Auckland Council to "find a solution" but NZ Bus declined to take part. First Union secretary Jared Abbott said, "there's always things happening behind the scenes and we want to find a resolution."

NZ Bus, which is contracted by the Labour Party-led Auckland Council, has been in discussions with the unions since December, when the unions first called off industrial action, falsely claiming that a council resolution was a step towards resolving the dispute. First Union then turned against migrant workers, scapegoating them for low wages.

## **New Zealand laboratory workers strike**

Laboratory workers employed by New Zealand's District Health Boards took nationwide strike action on Friday as part of an ongoing series of action over a pay dispute. Workers taking part in the strike have been imposing partial work bans on taking blood, refusing to process samples and undertake certain tests, from early February until May 5.

Around 500 members of the APEX union are demanding better pay. Medical lab technicians and scientists are paid \$10,000 to \$15,000 less than nurses.

The director-general of health, Ashley Bloomfield, condemned the strike's "poor timing," amid ongoing testing for COVID-19. He accused the lab workers of "trying to use this as leverage" in the dispute.

APEX union advocate David Munro said the timing of the strike, though "unfortunate," was not deliberate. He blamed the timing on the DHBs

“deliberate dragging of the heels.” APEX issued a statement saying processing of Covid-19 samples will continue, “but in the face of considerable disruption to the labs where testing takes place.”

### **Massey University staff stop work over restructure**

About 1,200 staff at New Zealand’s Massey University held a series of two-hour stop-work meetings on Thursday to discuss the university’s restructure plans. Meetings were held on Massey’s three campuses at Albany, Palmerston North and Wellington.

The university has released “discussion documents” for the future of some colleges under its “digital plus” strategy, which it claims will remove duplication of courses. Each subject will be centralised at an “anchor” campus.

The college of science is most affected. One document says science has delivered losses of \$3–\$5 million in recent years and has a forecast deficit of \$15.7m for 2020, so a “decrease in operating costs or an increase in revenue” is needed, including a likely swathe of job cuts. Many of the likely affected scientists are leading researchers. While enrolments on some campuses will cease, students have not been consulted on the plans.

A Tertiary Education Union spokesperson said the union was “looking for direction from its members” about the next steps, but has announced no plans for industrial action to oppose the looming cuts.



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