

India: Punjab health workers strike for permanent jobs; Asahi auto glass-making workers strike in Chennai; Woolworths Distribution Centre workers locked out in Australia

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 August 2020

India: Punjab health workers strike for permanent jobs

Around 9,500 contract workers from the National Health Mission (NHM) in Punjab state struck for 24 hours on July 23 and protested outside all district headquarters to demand job permanency. The striking doctors, nurses and lab technicians said they had been contracts employees for more than 11 years.

The strike was in response to a state health department advertisement inviting applications for several posts, including staff nurses. The contract workers demanded that they should be made permanent before any new staff are hired.

Bihar state nurses strike at major hospital

Around 650 contract nurses from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Patna struck on July 24 demanding a salary increase as well as health insurance and leave benefits.

The AIIMS-Patna medical superintendent issued a statement claiming that there would be no disciplinary action against the nurses and they would be given “experience” letters. The private agencies that hire medical staff said they would also issue the nurses with certificates. The authorities also said the nurses would be given eight days off every month and guaranteed work for five consecutive days every week.

Jehangir private hospital nurses in Pune city strike for improved conditions

Around 200 nurses stopped work at the 350-bed Jehangir private hospital in Pune, Maharashtra state on July 26 to demand better pay, shorter working hours and improved patient management. The Pune Malayalee Association and United Nurses Association organised the protest.

Nurses want their wages increased from 10,000 rupees (\$US133) a month to 12,000 rupees. They said that they have to work 12-hour shifts in PPE kits, which is very difficult, and demanded the shifts be restricted to

six hours. The striking nurses alleged that one nurse was asked to handle eight patients in ICU (intensive care unit) but the government norm was one nurse per one ICU patient. The nurses have submitted a written complaint to the District Collector.

Delhi public transport workers oppose privatisation

Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) workers protested at multiple bus depots on July 24 and 25 against privatisation and for other demands. The protest was organised by the Delhi Parivahan Mazdoor Sangh.

The workers want the DTC fleet size increased to 11,000 and demanded that the government take over the “cluster operators” depots, provide permanent jobs to contract employees and increase the retirement age from 55 to 60.

Asahi glass manufacturing workers in Chennai relaunch strike

About 200 permanent Asahi Glass workers began indefinite strike action on July 22 at the company’s plant in Ernakulam, Kerala state to protest the unlawful dismissal and suspension of 28 employees. They are also demanding pay increases.

The strike, which was called by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, follows an 87-day strike that ended in June last year after management falsely promised to grant workers’ demands and reinstate the 28 dismissed employees. The workers were victimised in October 2018 following their participation in industrial action in 2015 for salary increases.

Asahi Glass Limited is a Japanese multinational company that makes windshields and other window-glass products for Ford, Volkswagen, Daimler, Hyundai, Nissan and Ashok Leyland. It also has plants in Chennai, Uttarkand, Haryana and Maharashtra.

Pakistan Railways workers oppose lay-offs and demand pay rise

Pakistan Railways (PR) workers held three “black days” protests across the country starting July 25. The workers demonstrated outside PR office complexes, the Lahore headquarters and at railway stations along the Karachi-Peshawar line.

The protesters want a 100 percent pay increase, an end to arbitrary layoffs and the payment of withheld pensions to retired workers.

PR, which employs about 73,000 workers and operates trains on over 7,750 kilometres of rail lines, provides the only affordable means of long-distance travel to the majority of Pakistan’s 200 million population. In line with International Monetary Fund demands, the Pakistan government claims that the transport service is an inefficient and expensive state enterprise that should be restructured. The government has already announced plans to outsource the operation of 10 passenger trains and 6 freight trains.

The protests were called by Workers Railway Alliance, an alliance of eight unions. The unions limited the protests to several rallies, wearing black arm bands and flying black flags on trains. To appease their members, the unions “warned” the government that they will turn to different industrial actions if their demands are not addressed.

Bangladeshi jute mill workers demand unpaid wages and festival allowances

Over 1,000 workers from two private jute mills in Cumilla in Bangladesh demonstrated on Tuesday. They blocked the Dhaka-Chattogram highway in Cumilla to demand two months’ unpaid wages and payment of festival allowances for the Hadji (Eid-ul-Azha) festival.

Police from Chandina and Debidwar intervened to stop the demonstration, claiming that the mill authorities had promised to grant workers’ demands within two days. The protesting workers, from Usha Jute Mills of Harikholra area and Asha Jute Mills at Nuritala area in Cumilla, ended the blockade following the worthless promise.

Bangladeshi jute mill workers demand reopening of state-owned mills

Hundreds of jute mill workers from closed state-owned jute mills in Khulna demonstrated on Sunday outside the Crescent Jute Mills gate at the Khalishpur Industrial Belt in Khulna city.

They were demanding the modernisation and reopening of the mills, the immediate release of jailed jute mill union leaders Md Oliar Rahman and Nur Islam, payment of Eid-ul-Azha festival allowances, six weeks’ unpaid wages and pension payments to all previously retired workers.

On July 1 the Bangladesh government closed down 25 state-owned jute mills as part of its privatisation program. The Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation previously employed about 50,000 workers.

Bangladesh: Gazipur police force violently attacks garment workers’ protest

On July 25, thousands of Bangladeshi garment workers from Viyellatex and Shofi Tex blocked the Dhaka-Mymensingh Highway to demand wages for July, festival allowances and a 12-day festival holiday. Police violently attacked the protesters using batons, gunshots, teargas and sound

grenades, injuring 12 workers.

Sri Lanka: Union calls off public health inspectors’ national strike

The Association of Public Health Inspectors called off an 11-day national strike by 2,000 Public Health Inspectors. The walkout was to be in protest against the government’s failure to implement adequate legal procedures to contain the coronavirus pandemic. The Association’s president told the media that the strike was ended after the Ministry of Health accepted explanations from the Attorney General’s Office regarding the legal powers of the inspectors.

The inspectors’ main concern was that the government had failed to gazette health care guidelines for dealing with the coronavirus and that they did not have sufficient legal authority to conduct COVID-19 pandemic procedures. The PHI’s union claims its members’ work is severely limited by a lack of proper legal authority. PHIs are the main officials responsible for carrying out all the basic on-the-ground activities related to the control of the pandemic.

Woolworths distribution centre workers locked out indefinitely at Wyong

Over 500 workers at the Wyong Distribution Centre of the supermarket chain Woolworths have been locked out indefinitely in their dispute over the company’s proposed enterprise agreement (EA). The United Workers Union (UWU) members were locked out for a week in response to imposing a 24-hour strike at the depot on July 24.

Woolworths extended the lockout indefinitely on Friday after failing to do a deal with the union. The UWU was ready to agree on Thursday but the company only offered a 0.6 percent wage increase. The union negotiating team agreed to take the offer to the members for a vote, but Woolworths insisted that the delegates immediately accept the offer or face another lockout. The delegates refused to support the offer.

As well as a demanding a 16 percent pay rise, the workers want a limit of 20 percent casuals at the site with conversion to permanent jobs based on length of service; an end to dangerous pick rates; and an improved classification structure.

Victorian government engineers impose work bans

Victorian Department of Transport (DoT) engineers began limited industrial action on Tuesday in protest against a proposed Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) that will cut salaries for professional positions by up to 15 percent. Professionals Australia members have imposed bans on overtime and providing ministerial advice.

The union dispute was caused by last year’s decision to merge VicRoads and Public Transport Victoria and form the DoT. The merger eliminated previous conditions, classifications and salaries as laid out in the previous VicRoads EBA. Professionals Australia claims there was no consultation or agreement from affected staff or their unions.

Engineers insist that the proposed new EBA will see pay levels slashed by \$14,245 per year for senior engineers with typically ten years’ experience, and by \$21,438 per year for team leaders or specialists. A

union spokesman said proposed job reclassifications by DoT failed to resolve the issue.

Spotless laundry workers in Victoria strike over COVID-19 contamination

Some 35 workers at the Spotless commercial laundry facility in South Dandenong refused to attend work on Wednesday, following an outbreak of COVID-19 at the plant. It was the second time in a week they have refused to work because of contamination at the plant. The laundry workers handle and clean linen from medical facilities including hospitals treating COVID-19 patients.

The first reported COVID-19 positive worker at the Spotless plant was on July 22, which resulted in a one-day closure and deep cleaning ordered by the Victorian health authority, after which employees were told to return to work. Four days later a second worker tested positive to the virus. The workers refused to return to the plant and its unsafe conditions, citing inadequate testing, cleaning and accusing the company of not doing enough to contain the outbreak.

Spotless immediately applied to the fair work commission for a hearing to compel the workers to return. The next day it withdrew the application and directed workers who had close contact with infected colleagues to take 14 days self-funded quarantine leave if available.

The workers are members of the United Workers Union. It failed to call industrial action over the obvious workplace safety issue but instead demanded that all workers at the facility to be stood down with pay until their coronavirus tests results are released.



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