

Indian social health workers hold two-day national strike; South Korean hospital doctors walkout

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 August 2020

Asia

Accredited Social Health Activists workers hold India-wide strike

Around 600,000 Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers across India held a two-day national strike on August 7 and 8 to demand better pay, full-time jobs and payment of government employee salary levels and associated benefits.

The highly-exploited, low paid workers said that they have not been provided with PPE kits, despite regularly calling for this basic equipment since March. ASHA workers are COVID-19 first-response teams in India's rural and urban slum areas.

India: Specialist teachers in Kerala demand renewal of contracts

Specialist Teachers Association members, who teach arts, sports and work experience under the Samagra Shiksha education program, demonstrated in Ernakulum, Kerala state on August 6 to demand renewal of their contracts and payment of outstanding wages.

The teachers complained that the government in 2016 appointed nearly 2,400 specialist teachers on a monthly salary of about 26,500 rupees (\$US355), which included a travel allowance. The association alleges that the government has used COVID-19 to reduce the salary to 14,000 rupees and refused to renew the teachers' contracts for the new academic year. The government claims that the teachers' services are not required because the schools are still closed due to the pandemic.

Maharashtra nurses protest working hours and low pay

Around 80 nurses working in the COVID-19 wards at the Aditya Birla Memorial Hospital in Pune, Maharashtra state, stopped work and demonstrated on the hospital premises on August 6 over extended working hours and low salaries.

The nurses denounced poor quality food and inadequate safety equipment, which they claimed is responsible for some nurses being infected with COVID-19. They complained that management has failed to grant a promised annual increment that was supposed to double this year.

Indian railway workers in West Bengal and Punjab protest against privatisation

Indian Railways (IR) employees demonstrated at train stations throughout West Bengal's capital Kolkata on August 10 against the national government's privatisation policies. Indian Railways is allowing private companies to operate 151 trains on 109 existing routes.

The protest was organised by Eastern Railway Men's Union and the All India Loco Running Staff Association. Workers protested at Howrah station, Liluah station and inside Farlie Place (Eastern Railway Headquarters).

Workers denounced the Indian Railway Board's decision to freeze the creation of new jobs. The unions allege that the government plans to slash the government-owned rail service's labour force by 50 percent.

On the same day, Indian Railways Diesel Locomotive Works (DMW) manufacturing plant employees in Patiala, Punjab state, demonstrated against privatisation.

Protesters accused the Indian government of mismanagement and demanded it withdraw a new pension scheme and replace it with the previously existing system. They also opposed salary and job cuts, called for an end to the contract labour system and outsourcing of services and for all contract workers to be made full-time employees. The Punjab demonstration was organised by the Indian Railways Employees Federation and the All India Central Council of Trade Unions.

Punjabi University staff demand salary increase

The Punjabi University Joint Action Committee, comprised of university professors and non-teaching B and C class employees, demonstrated outside the vice chancellor's office in Patiala, Punjab on August 10. They were demanding timely payment of salaries and pay increments. Members of the Punjabi University Teachers' Union protested outside the vice chancellor's home over the same issues.

The educators allege that the university had failed to honour written assurances that employees' salaries would be paid on time and outstanding arrears for the promoted employees would be finalised by July 31.

Bangladeshi garment workers protest factory relocation

Bando Fashions factory workers in the Signboard area at Gazipur, Bangladesh protested on Tuesday over a management decision to suddenly relocate the plant to Sreepur without prior notice.

The garment workers blocked the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway for more than two hours that morning. The factory currently employs 2,360 workers. Workers said they would not relocate unless given 120 days "notice pay," a yearly service benefit and arrears in line with Bangladeshi labour laws.

Sri Lanka: Colombo Port city workers oppose layoffs

A group of Colombo Port workers, whose employment was put on hold during the COVID-19 pandemic, have been holding a daily picket at the port from August 10 to demand reinstatement. They said they have been blocked from entering the port, even though they reported for duty as usual at the end of the general election.

Hundreds of workers, including drivers, inspectors and other workers, have denounced the government and demanded a discussion with the labour commissioner. Many of the workers have been employed under contract basis for three years. They said that around 150 such workers had not been reemployed for more than five months.

Thousands of South Korean hospital doctors strike

Tens of thousands of young doctors from general hospitals in South Korea struck for the day on August 7 against the government's proposed "medical workforce reform" plan. The strikers included interns and resident doctors who oppose a government plan to expand admissions to medical schools by 400 a year to resolve the shortage of qualified medical personnel in South Korea's health system.

According to the Korean media, about 16,000 members of the Korean Intern Resident Association participated in the strike. Doctors from the 130,000-strong Korean Medical Association (KMA) were scheduled to hold a one-day strike on August 14.

The KMA accused the government of offering little financial support and complained of extremely low salaries. They said shortages of doctors outside the main cities and in rural provinces was due to poor medical support infrastructure and lack of incentive for doctors to move into these areas.

Australia and the Pacific

Australian print workers face job and pay cuts

Ovato, one of Australia's largest print companies, has applied to the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to end its existing (but expired) union-negotiated enterprise agreement (EA). The company claims it needs increased workforce flexibility and "more appropriate" redundancy payment levels in order to allow them to "resize" its business in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. One worker claimed that 300-400 jobs were "on the chopping block".

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) has been negotiating with Ovato for a new EA since last October. The union says the company wants to impose a 30 percent pay cut on 850 of its 1,300 staff and reduce redundancy payouts. If the FWC sides with the company, workers would be forced back onto the lower paid Graphic Arts Award.

When COVID-19 hit company revenue in March, the AMWU allowed Ovato to reduce working hours by more than a third and make employees take accrued annual leave. While the union has denounced the company's plans, it has not called for any industrial action over this attack on jobs and wages.

Tasmanian aged care workers protest for pandemic leave

Health workers from the Regis Aged Care facilities in Hobart and Launceston demonstrated outside their facilities on August 7 to demand COVID-19 pandemic leave in accordance with the industry standard set by the FWC. Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) members work for four "for-profit" aged care providers in Tasmania, including Regis, that do not provide pandemic leave.

On July 29 the FWC ruled that workers paid under the Aged Care Award, the Nurses Award and the Health Professionals Award are entitled to two weeks' paid leave if they are required to self-isolate due to having coronavirus symptoms or being a close contact of a confirmed case. If workers test positive to the virus they must also be provided with workers compensation leave.

The pandemic leave applies to full-time and casual workers employed on a regular basis. Currently these workers are forced to use their normal accrued leave entitlements if forced to self-isolate.

Solomon Islands university staff call second strike

Academic and non-academic staff at the Solomon Islands National University in Honiara gave notice on August 6 that they will withdraw all services indefinitely within a week to demand removal of the Vice-Chancellor Dr. Ganesh Chand. The threat involved members of the Lecturer Association of Solomon Islands National University and the Solomon Islands National University General Staff Union.

The action followed a one-day walkout on July 10. The educators have accused the vice-chancellor of financial mismanagement and abuse of procurement and recruitment processes.

University management claims future strike action would be illegal and has threatened to take "strict disciplinary action" against any staff member that participates.



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