

Pakistani university workers oppose job cuts; Offshore gas platform workers strike in Western Australia; New Zealand health workers protest

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 August 2020

### India: Power workers hold national protest against privatisation

Around 1.5 million power sector employees held a nationwide protest on Wednesday to demand withdrawal of the Indian government's Electricity (Amendment) Bill 2020. Protesters accused the government of using provisions in the bill to allow private companies to take over state-owned power distribution companies (discoms).

Workers alleged that there were plans to privatise discoms in Union Territories such as Puducherry, Chandigarh, J&K and Ladakh. Privatisation has already begun in Purvanchal, Vidyut, Vitran, and Nigam. The Odisha state government has already handed over Central Electricity Supply Undertaking (CESU) to Tata Power and plans to privatise three other discoms—NESCO, WESCO and SOUTHCO.

After mass protests in eleven states and two Union Territories on July 3, the Indian power minister promised to modify the Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2020. Angry protesters said that the central government, however, has not publicly released the promised amendment.

### Punjab state sector workers protest over job and wage cuts

Punjab state public sector workers demonstrated across the state on August 14 over cuts to jobs, wages and allowances.

Punjab State Power Corporation Limited (PSPCL) employees demonstrated in Mandi and Ahmedgarh while Technical Services Union members protested outside of the subdivision-level office on Pohir Road.

The workers want the government to revoke its abolition of 40,000 jobs and a 20 percent cut in daily wage workers' positions. Other demands were for the reinstatement of dismissed union leaders, payment of dearness allowance instalments and a mobile allowance.

In Tarn Taran, protesters wore black and presented memorandums to state authorities. Punjab Subordinate Services Federation (PSSF) members marched and condemned the state government for reducing the mobile allowance and not releasing their dearness allowance instalments. Punjab Water Supply and Sanitation Contract Workers Union members also held a protest march.

### Swiggy food delivery workers in Chennai on strike

Delivery workers for the app-based food delivery service Swiggy in Chennai, Tamil Nadu have been on strike since August 13 over wages. Workers said the company's new policy only pays them 15 rupees (\$US0.2) per order, a 20-rupee reduction on the previous rate.

On August 15, at least 50 workers protested in Royapettah and many smaller demonstrations were held at different parts of the city. Strikers complained that they cannot operate on the reduced payments. They demanded that Swiggy restore the previous wage package and implement a daily base pay rate.

They have threatened to intensify their protests if their long-pending demands are not implemented.

### West Bengal municipal workers hold week-long protest

Darjeeling Municipality Employees Union members held a one-hour protest outside the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) Lowis Jubilee Secretariat Complex on Monday over multiple demands.

Workers denounced Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council and the GTA and demanded payment of overdue wages, immediate implementation of the 2011 pay rates or increase in daily wages, immediate filling of vacancies with existing municipal daily wage workers employed, an increase in municipality workers above the current 539 and other demands. They have threatened to maintain one-hour protests every day until they win their demands.

### Karnataka private school teachers and guest lecturers protest

Teachers and guest lecturers from private schools in Karnataka demonstrated in Bengaluru on Wednesday to demand a relief package from the state government. Protesters alleged that the government has not released reimbursements of 10,250 million rupees (\$US136.6 million) in outstanding funds and teachers recruited to start work in March had not been appointed.

Teachers said some schools have cut salaries, claiming that parents can't afford to pay fees. They alleged that the government had urged school authorities not to pressure parents to pay fees but, teachers claimed the schools have an obligation to pay salaries till April 2021.

### **Karnataka medical workers protest over low salaries and lack of benefits**

Nurses, paramedical staff and other workers from the Institute of Medical Sciences in Belagavi, Karnataka wore black bands to work on August 13 in protest against the low salaries and lack of social security benefits. They also demanded the filling of all vacancies, permanent jobs for all temporary staff and better working conditions and facilities.

According to the health workers' union, the institute operates with over 30 percent vacant posts at every level and the resultant workload is unbearable. Workers said that there is only one technician for three wards and one nurse for 100 beds. They also want health insurance, pensions and other retirement benefits which they are not currently entitled to.

### **Pakistan: Islamabad university workers protest termination of jobs**

Terminated daily wage workers from the government run Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) in Islamabad have been demonstrating outside the university and the National Press Club since Monday demanding reinstatement of more than 500 sacked workers. The AIOU initially fired over 700 workers but then rehired about 200 of them on lower pay and benefit scales.

The sacking of the daily wage workers followed a court ruling that the daily wage workers should be made permanent. The actions of AIOU also comes amidst the axing of jobs both in the government and the private sector in response to the economic crisis produced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's drive to slash public expenditure.

### **Offshore gas platform caterers and cleaners in Western Australia strike**

Caterers and cleaners working on Shell's giant Prelude offshore liquefied natural gas (LNG) platform in north Western Australia stopped work between 4am and 7am and 4pm and 7pm on Thursday for a better enterprise agreement (EA). The action followed a similar strike on July 23 and the imposition of indefinite bans on baking, preparation of hot meals, laundry and other services.

The workers are employed by Sodexo, a food services and facility management company headquartered in Paris. The company employs over 60 workers on five LNG platforms off northern Australia. The Prelude floating platform is owned by Royal Dutch Shell, KOGAS and Inpex, and managed by Shell.

The Offshore Alliance, a coalition between the Maritime Union of Australia and the Australian Workers Union (AWU), claims that Sodexo had agreed to a new work agreement but that Shell Australia management had pressured the contractor to abandon the deal.

The AWU wanted pay increases of up to \$25,000 to bring these specialised workers into line with most other offshore employees. The

union has now scaled the claim back to between 6 and 10 percent.

### **Officeworks warehouse workers to strike for better pay**

Distribution centre workers for the giant Officeworks retailer have endorsed protected industrial action across sites in Victoria and New South Wales for a new enterprise agreement (EA). About 275 workers will strike for 24 hours on Monday at centres in North Rocks and Yennora, Sydney, and Laverton in Melbourne. The distribution centres replenish Officeworks stores and process online customer orders across Australia.

The workers are covered by the United Workers Union (UWU) which said members were demanding secure jobs and redundancy provisions amid concerns about the future outsourcing of their work on inferior wages and conditions. According to the union, Officeworks has offered sub-inflation wage increases with cuts to overtime penalties and no protection for future job security. Officeworks is recording high profits from a 27 percent increase in sales during the COVID-19 pandemic since March this year.

### **Queensland sugar mill workers protest over safety**

About 20 workers from the Mossman Sugar Mill in Mossman, Far North Queensland, protested outside the plant on Monday over safety concerns. According to the Australian Workers Union, these workers have been subjected to some of the worst safety conditions in the industry.

In December the company was fined \$75,000 for safety breaches that caused an accident in September 2014. The accident resulted in the amputation of the foot of an 18-year-old worker. The court found that there was a lack of supervision and safety equipment such as guarding that contributed to the accident.

### **New Zealand practice nurses vote to strike**

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) issued a statement this week confirming that 3,200 nurses and administrative workers in more than 500 medical practices throughout the country will hold an eight-hour strike on September 3. This follows a two-hour stop work meeting in July.

The nurses are seeking pay parity with their counterparts who are employed directly by District Health Boards. The union says an experienced public health nurse can earn 10.6 percent less per annum than a hospital nurse, a gap of \$7,651.

Nurses are under intense pressure following a renewed outbreak of COVID-19 in recent weeks. Testing for the coronavirus has ramped up significantly and health workers report feeling stressed and afraid of potential exposure. There are widespread reports of staff shortages in general practices and hospitals.

The NZNO's negotiations for a Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA) with the NZ Medical Association and Green Cross Health, which represent employers, have reached an impasse.

The NZNO said industrial action was "easily avoidable" and urged the government to intervene to negotiate a resolution so it could call off the strike. In a statement this week, Health Minister Chris Hipkins said it was

“not appropriate for the government to interfere.”

### **NZ laboratory workers plan 24-hour walkout**

About 600 workers at Southern Community Laboratories (SCL) workers will strike for 24 hours on September 4. The scientists and technicians, members of the APEX union, have faced exhausting shifts, sometimes over 12 hours long, to process soaring numbers of COVID-19 tests. They are demanding better pay and conditions, including better staffing levels.

Negotiations between the union and SCL have been underway since June. The employer has offered a pay increase of just 2 per cent, which fails to keep up with the real cost of living. The entry level wage for technicians, assistants and administration staff is just \$19.06 an hour. Mediation has been scheduled for Monday in an attempt to call off the strike.

### **Christchurch health workers protest**

Hundreds of doctors, nurses and other public health workers protested on Thursday against chronic underfunding at the Canterbury District Health Board. Protesters held up signs stating, “Health first, not \$\$,” criticising the Ministry of Health, and demanding the reinstatement of “sacked” senior staff.

The DHB is facing a funding crisis due to its hospital repair bill following the 2010 and 2011 Christchurch earthquakes, and grossly inadequate funding. The government is pressuring the DHB to reduce its \$180 million deficit. The board’s long-standing chief executive David Meates and several other members of management, including the director of nursing, have recently announced their resignations.

One protester told Radio NZ: “the only way to claw back money is from cutting services or cutting staff.” Chief of Medicine at Christchurch Hospital, David Smyth, said there were already “appalling facilities to look after COVID patients.”



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