

Thousands of workers strike at Indian arms factories; Indonesian police attack paper mill workers; South Korean doctors continue strike

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 August 2020

Thousands of workers strike at state-owned Indian arms factories

Thousands of workers from state-owned arms factories demonstrated across India on August 20 to oppose government's plan to corporatise the country's defence facilities and convert them into Public Sector Undertakings. The "Call Attention Day" protests followed a one-month strike in August last year over the same issue. Workers fear the government wants to impose mass job cuts and privatise the facilities.

There are more than 7,000 workers at 41 defense equipment manufacturing companies in India. An indefinite strike is planned for October 10.

Longview Tea Estate workers at the Kurseong sub-division in Darjeeling, West Bengal, began a hunger strike on August 21 after management suspended all work. The suspension was in response to workers demanding overdue wages and payment of provident fund and festive bonuses. The 506-hectare estate employs 1,252 permanent workers.

The action by workers at the Longview estate has inspired workers at some tea gardens in the Dooars region such as Kohinoor, Rahimabad and Naya Sailee. Workers in these tea gardens have been staging protests for the last couple of days, demanding distribution of unpaid bonus and other benefits.

India: Midday meal workers in demand unpaid wages in Karnataka

School midday meal workers demonstrated outside the district administration office in Mysuru, Karnataka state, on August 20 to demand release of wages not paid during the COVID-19 lockdown, when schools were closed. Workers said the government owed them five months' pay.

About 120,000 midday meal workers are employed as cooks and helpers in Karnataka under the Askhara Dashoa Scheme. They are members of the Karnataka Rajya Samyuktha Akshara Dasoha Karmikara Sangha.

Karnataka hospital doctors protest over heavy workloads

Karnataka Government Medical Officers Association members demonstrated across the state last weekend and threatened to strike over extreme workloads. The protests followed the suicide of a doctor in Nanjangud allegedly due to work pressure. The doctors withdrew their threat to strike on August 24, after the state's chief minister claimed he would "look into" their demands.

Telangana state hospital workers protest

Healthcare professionals working in Telangana state-run hospitals in Hyderabad are demanding 10 million rupees (\$US135,000) ex-gratia for colleagues who died after contracting COVID-19. They are also demanding an insurance policy for those working under the current circumstances. The protest followed management delays in providing assistance to family members of a 35-year-old doctor who contracted the infectious disease and died on August 7.

Paramedical workers employed under the National Health Mission (NHM) in Bihar state walked out on strike on August 23. Junior doctors, including those at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences at Patna, also threatened to strike.

Intern nurses at Kerala state medical colleges strike

About 375 junior nurses from state medical colleges across Kerala walked out indefinitely on August 21 to demand a pay rise to bring them into line with other nurses. They are currently paid just 450 rupees (\$US6) per day even though they work in COVID ICUs, COVID wards and transition wards. These junior nurses, or interns, are employed at Government Medical Colleges across Kerala. They said they will not return to work until their demand is granted.

West Bengal tea estate workers on hunger strike

Gujarat railway workers protest against privatisation

Railway workers demonstrated outside the divisional railway manager's office at Pratapnagar, Gujarat state, on August 25 over privatisation. The protest was organised by the Western Railway Mazdoor Sangh (WRMS). The railway workers demanded management withdrawal plans to eliminate line boxes of locomotive and traffic-running staff. They also want restoration of a previous pension scheme, limits on night duty work and other demands.

The railway workers oppose management's decision to handover 150 mail/express trains and 23 Western Railway services to private companies. They are also demanding 2 million rupees (\$US27,027) pandemic assistance be paid to railway employees and an end to the forced retirement of employees with 30 years in service or when they turn 55.

Tirupur municipal sanitation workers demand overdue wages

Around 300 contract sanitary workers from the Tirupur corporation in Tamil Nadu stopped work on August 25 to demand the immediate payment of last month's salaries. Workers from 40 wards demonstrated in three corporation zones.

Worker said they want to be paid 420 rupees (\$US5.6) per day but that contractors only pay 300 rupees per day, after deducting a percentage for Employees Provident Fund and other benefits.

Strikers said over 500 contract workers were not paid in July. They also demanded officials organise regular COVID-19 testing of the sanitation workers and provide them with good-quality safety equipment.

Punjab medical college workers continue protest over unpaid wages

Medical and non-medical workers from the government-run Shaikh Zayed Medical College Hospital in Rahim Yar Khan, Punjab province, are continuing a month-long protest to demand payment of outstanding wages and the conversion of temporary jobs to permanent positions.

Over 700 temporary casual and daily wage workers are affected. The health care workers boycotted services at the outpatient department during the last week.

The action was organised by the Grand Health Alliance, an umbrella organization of several unions of doctors, nurses, paramedics and support and clerical staff.

Bangladeshi bidi workers protest against tax increase

Bidi (hand-rolled cigarette) workers from different districts, including Rangpur, Sirajganj and Pabna, protested outside the National Board of Revenue chairman's home in Sirajganj on Tuesday. They submitted a memorandum demanding the 28.2 percent tax increase imposed on the bidi industry in the government's 2020–21 national budget be reduced.

The Bangladesh Bidi Sramik Federation members held two protests in June on the same demands. The industry employs over 400,000 people, with up to 70 percent of them children under the age of 15 years. The

highly exploited workers in this industry are only paid 50 taka (\$US0.59) a day.

Bangladeshi jute mill workers and farmers protest over mill closures

Hundreds of jute workers and farmers demonstrated in Khulna and Tangail on Monday to demand the immediate reopening of jute mills under government control, protection of jute farmers, fair prices for raw jute and the industry classified as a national asset.

In July, the government closed down 25 state-owned jute mills, claiming they were running at a loss. About 50,000 workers lost their jobs overnight while thousands of jute farmers were left with no income. The government claims the mills would be reopened through public-private partnership or leased.

Bangladeshi garment workers on hunger strike demanding reinstatement

Six dismissed garment workers from the Goodrich Sweaters factory in Ashulia began a hunger strike in front of the Ashulia Press Club on Sunday, demanding reinstatement. They allege that the authorities took their signatures on blank papers, collected their factory identity cards on July 30 and then forced them to resign. The factory employs around 1,400 workers. The workers said they were being victimised for organising a protest to demand workers be given leave for the Hadji festival.

Indonesian paper mill workers continue picket despite police attacks

Sacked workers from the PT Tanjungenim Lestari Pulp and Paper (PTTL) mill in Lampung Province, Sumatra, are maintaining their long-running 24-hour picket line in defiance of police attacks. On August 8, 120 police dispersed and assaulted the 50 workers, including females, at the picket which was established more than 80 days ago.

The sacked workers are demanding reinstatement of 38 employees, all of whom are members of the Federation of Indonesian Pulp and Paper Workers. They were dismissed in a union-busting operation just as the coronavirus began to hit Indonesia.

The mill owner changed to a different outsourcing company and has refused to reinstate the 38 workers. The company employs well over 2,000 people, most of them provided by outsourcing companies.

South Korean doctors continue strike action

Tens of thousands of resident doctors from general hospitals and practitioners from regional clinics walked out on a three-day strike on Wednesday to protest against the government's medical workforce reform plan. Members of the 130,000-strong Korean Medical Association (KMA) were defying a return-to-work order and threats of punishments. South Korea's five major general hospitals were forced to limit their hours and delay scheduled surgeries.

The strike followed weeks of walkouts that started on August 7 with a one-day strike by about 16,000 members of the Korean Intern Resident Association.

Doctors oppose the government's plans to boost the number of medical students across several years, establish public medical schools, allow government insurance to cover more oriental medicine, and broaden the scope of telemedicine. They said the money would be better spent on improving pay and conditions to encourage more people to work outside Seoul.

Taiwan railway workers protest over unpaid overtime

Thousands Taiwan Railways workers, including train-car crews and dispatch workers, have demonstrated outside the Ministry of Transportation and Communications in recent weeks to demand unpaid overtime, up to \$US340, for May and June.

Taiwan Railways management is conducting a vicious attack on jobs, wages and safety conditions. The protesting workers say that cuts in the rail workforce has led to increased overtime and the danger of workplace and train accidents.

Australia: Tugboat workers discussing possible strike action

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) has applied to the Fair Work Commission to ballot its members employed by tugboat operator Svitzer about future industrial action in their dispute for a new enterprise agreement (EA).

The MUA claims that Svitzer is refusing to negotiate a new agreement and wants to roll over its 2016 agreement for the next two years without a pay increase.

Svitzer is a global company with 100 vessels in Australia and Papua New Guinea. According to the MUA, Svitzer claimed negotiations during the coronavirus made negotiations too difficult. Svitzer will to oppose the MUA application to hold the ballot.

Sydney bus drivers hold four-hour stop work meeting

Public transport bus drivers held a four-hour stop work meeting on Monday affecting services in Sydney's north-western suburbs, northern beaches and eastern suburbs (regions 7, 8 and 9). Drivers were demanding the provision and compulsory wearing of face masks by passengers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) officials had cancelled a 48-hour strike planned for Monday, claiming that the New South Wales state government had agreed to make "crucial" concessions in the drivers' dispute over safety and privatisation.

The union did not publicly disclose what these concessions would be. In fact, RTBU officials told the meeting that the government would not reverse its plan to privatise bus services in regions 7, 8 and 9 but agreed to "consult" with the union and community groups on possible changes to bus stops, routes and serviced by the private operator. And on safety, there was no concrete commitment from the government except that it would review health regulations.

New Zealand: Lab workers suspended for imposing bans

Lab workers at Southern Community Laboratories (SCL) have reported that their employer is sending workers home without pay for refusing to process non-urgent tests. Around 600 workers are taking industrial action this week over low pay and excess workloads, issues they say that have been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Staffing levels are too low and the workers, who are members of the APEX union, say they are worried about injuries caused by the many repetitive actions involved in processing such large volumes of COVID-19 tests. These tests require fine motor skills to administer properly.

The union and SCL have been negotiating since June. The employer has offered a pay increase of just 2 percent, which fails to keep up with the real cost of living. The entry level wage for technicians, assistants and administration staff is just \$NZ19.06 an hour.



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