

India: Chennai garbage workers strike; Sri Lankan bank workers protest over contracts; Australian waterfront workers walkout

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 September 2020

India: Hospital nurses in Tamil Nadu protest

Over 50 nurses from the Government Mohan Kumaramangalam Medical College and Hospital at Salem stopped work for two hours on Wednesday and demonstrated on the premises demanding all vacant positions be filled and for improved food and accommodation.

The nurses said there had been staff shortages prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but they now had even greater workloads. The nurses have been accommodated in hotels during the pandemic but are dissatisfied with the quality of food and accommodation.

Junior doctors in Hyderabad demand improved facilities

General surgery junior doctors at Osmania General Hospital in Hyderabad, Telangana state, imposed indefinite bans on September 6 for better facilities. The bans have been applied to elective operating theatres, post-operative wards and wards for elective admissions. The doctors said none of these areas were adequately equipped.

The doctors have called for designated wards to accommodate outpatients, oxygen ports and flow meters, monitors, resuscitative equipment and basic emergency drugs. They ended the industrial action on September 12 after the hospital superintendent gave a written assurance that their demands would be met by September 19.

Chennai garbage workers strike over low wages

Over 3,000 garbage and conservation workers in Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, began an indefinite strike on September 7 for higher pay. The strikers demanded that their daily wages be increased from a meagre 379 rupees to 624.50 rupees (\$US8.5) as determined by a 2017 government order. The workers collect around 3,500 tonnes of garbage every day.

The Corporation Red Flag Union, which covers the workers, called off the strike after two days when city management officials claimed that the impact of COVID-19 and reduced property tax collections had reduced city corporation funds and they would only pay an additional 12 rupees per day.

Migrant workers returning to Odisha demand welfare entitlements

About 60 returning migrant workers in Jagatsinghpur district, Odisha state, held a sit down protest outside the local administration offices at Kostimallikapur on September 9 to demand outstanding welfare entitlements.

Protesters said that ration card-holders have not received three months' entitlements from a special food security scheme and a financial aid package to farmers for two months.

They also said that they had not received a 2,000-rupee (\$US27.2) incentive payment promised by the government to each migrant worker on completion of the 14-day quarantine period after their return. According to the media, only 6,680 people out of about 17,000 returnees in the district have received the incentive cash benefit.

Unorganised workers in Tamil Nadu protest

Workers in the unorganised sector and labour union members protested outside the labour department office in Coimbatore on September 10 to demand 11 months of outstanding pensions. They claimed that around 5,000 workers in the unorganised sector and members of the manual workers welfare boards in the district have not received the 1,000 rupees (\$US13.6) pension since last September.

Protesters demanded regular payment of the pension and complained that pension applications of 1,500 eligible people had not been processed for five years because of age anomalies in documents.

Uttar Pradesh sanitation workers strike over death of a worker

Sanitation workers in Agra city, Uttar Pradesh, walked off the job for a day on September 9 and picketed the Agra Municipal Corporation office. They were protesting over the death of a rag picker who was killed in an accident involving a municipal garbage collection truck at the Kuberpur dumpsite two days earlier.

Workers called for action against municipal commissioners and demanded compensation for the family of the deceased worker. They said they will continue to their protest until suitable compensation is paid to

the deceased worker's family.

Auto workers in Maharashtra forced to work during COVID-19 pandemic

Bajaj Auto Limited factory workers in Pune, Maharashtra state, protested in support of fellow workers who are being forced to remain on the job at Bharat Forge plants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Organised by the Vishwakalyan Workers Association, the auto workers condemned Bharat Forge management for forcing their employees to work in a "valley of death."

Bharat Forge is a Pune-based Indian multinational company that manufactures parts for the auto, power, oil & gas, construction & mining, locomotive, marine and aerospace industries.

Bangladeshi bidi workers resume protests against tax increase

Bidi (hand-rolled cigarette) workers and producers protested outside the National Press Club in Dhaka on Sunday demanding the government withdraw the 4 percent tax increase imposed on each packet of bidi in the government's 2020–21 national budget.

Protesters claimed that the tax increase made the bidi industry uncompetitive leading to the closing down of factories and the destruction of thousands of jobs.

Bangladesh Bidi Sramik Federation members held a protest on August 25 and two in June over the same demands. The industry employs over 400,000 people, with up to 70 percent of them children under the age of 15. The highly exploited workers in this industry are only paid 50 taka (\$US0.59) a day.

Sri Lankan qualified development officers demand permanent jobs

A group of development officers who have already completed their training, marched to the Ministry of Public Administration in Colombo on Monday to demand that their delayed appointments be expedited. The protest was extended to a nationwide action on Wednesday with workers denouncing the current and previous government for continuously rejecting their demands.

The workers want immediate confirmation of employment for the 14,450 development officers who have already completed their training. They also want their maternity leave, which has been reduced to 42 days, to be extended to 84 days in line with other government employees.

Sri Lankan bank employees hold five-day protest over contracts

Workers from the Bank of Ceylon, one of Sri Lanka's two main state-owned banks, demonstrated outside the bank's head office in Colombo from September 7 to 11. They were demanding a reduction of their contract-based tenure to two years. Employees of various grades in branches throughout Sri Lanka joined the protest.

The Bank of Ceylon workers have been holding protests over this demand for many years. They have resumed the campaign because neither the government nor any other authority has responded favourably to their demands.

Australia: Waterfront workers at Port Botany strike

Sixty Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members at DP World's Port Botany terminal walked out for four hours on Friday as part of a national campaign for new enterprise agreements (EAs) covering four ports. The MUA has reached a national "in principle" agreement with DP World but there are local issues outstanding at several ports. These include company demands for roster and idle time changes in exchange for increased productivity, as well as long outstanding job security issues related to automation and outsourcing.

The strike is to be followed by two weeks of "work to rule" actions alongside existing overtime and upgrade bans by MUA members at Patrick's and Hutchison terminals at the port. Patrick's terminal workers walked out for four hours last week.

The MUA claimed that Patrick's wants to scrap about 50 pages of conditions in its proposed EA. The company ended negotiations over its proposed EA in April with the union demanding the rollover of the current agreement and a 12-month ban on outsourcing and automation. Hutchison is docking the pay of its workers by 30 percent, claiming that this reflects the value of lost productivity due to work bans.

While negotiations for new EAs covering hundreds of waterside workers in Perth, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane have been ongoing for nearly 12 months, the MUA opposes unified national action to fight the employers.

Opera Australia workers oppose job cuts

A group of Opera Australia (OA) workers demonstrated outside the Sydney Opera House on Monday over management's decision to slash more than 40 percent of its permanent and contract workforce. The cuts would impact on every part of the company—from the orchestra and choir, to hair and makeup, costumes, set construction, and stage and technical crew.

According to the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA), the OA also plans to terminate the workplace agreements that set pay and conditions for the remaining workers.

The MEAA, which has no intention of fighting the job destruction, has responded by taking Opera Australia to the Fair Work Commission and complaining that the cuts are being made without consultation or justification. It has called on OA management to negotiate the sort of wage cuts it has organised with other major performing arts companies, such as the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

Victorian carpet underlay manufacturing workers take industrial action

About 20 workers at the Airstep carpet underlay factory in Dandenong, Victoria have begun taking action in their dispute over the company's

proposed enterprise agreement (EA). In a “protected action ballot,” the workers approved industrial action including limited work bans and strikes ranging from 4 hours to 24 hours.

The company is trying to force workers to accept a wage freeze, despite not having a pay increase for two years. The United Workers Union members said that they kept the production line running overtime during the COVID-19 pandemic to keep profits up but have been treated with contempt by management.

Thousands of primary private healthcare workers to strike in New Zealand

Primary healthcare workers employed in private practices have voted for a two-hour strike and picket on September 30. It will be the third such action this year, after 12 months of stalled negotiations. About 3,400 practice nurses and health administrators working across 500 small medical practices are demanding pay parity with public hospital staff, who are paid 10.6 percent more than private staff. The workers are represented by several unions, including the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists, and the New Zealand Nurses’ Organisation, which pushed through an agreement in 2018 that ignored serious concerns about pay, and the extreme staffing conditions faced by public sector nurses.

Negotiations have allegedly foundered due to a \$15 million funding shortfall that would need to be allocated to private practices from District Health Boards, New Zealand’s regionalised health administration centres.

Many nurses have publicly called for the government to intervene. Teresa Wasilewska, a practice nurses with five decades of experience wrote to the *Otago Daily Times*, stating that, “the Government tells us that pay parity is not their responsibility, as our employers are private businesses; we see this as insulting.”



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