

Health and other workers across Asia fight for unpaid wages, COVID-19 allowances and PPE; strikes break out in Australia over new enterprise agreements

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 November 2020

Asia

Pakistan: Hospital medical staff in Karachi protest over overdue salaries

Doctors and other medical staff from 13 hospitals run by the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) have been protesting for several weeks, demanding the immediate release of salaries pending for between 2 and 18 months.

Workers from the Sobraj Home, Maternity Home and Sarfraz Rafique Shaheed Hospital protested outside the KMC offices on Monday and Tuesday, after forcing the shutdown of outpatient departments. The municipal commissioner claimed it was yet to receive funds to pay salaries, but the protests were called off on the basis of the commissioner's promise to issue the salaries.

Last week, KMC officers locked gates and doors to its premises to block the entry of over 200 protesting health workers from various hospitals.

KMC pays house officers a meagre 60,000 rupees a month (\$US375.59), and post-graduates 80,000 rupees a month. Given the low salaries, medical workers rely heavily on allowances. KMC has also failed to pay the health risk allowances, between 5,000 and 35,000 rupees a month, promised as the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country.

Karachi medical university workers demand benefits

The staff of the government-run Dow University of Health Sciences, a medical university and hospital in Karachi, continued to protest outside the outpatient department on Tuesday for the sixth consecutive day to demand allowances similar to the entitlements of other health workers and a proper service structure.

The allowances include the health risk allowance, health professional allowance and the ad-hoc relief allowance granted for 2020. They also demanded job permanency for contract-based workers and free treatment for workers and their families in the facility. The Joint Action Committee at the facility called the protest.

Sri Lanka: Hospital workers in Matara fight for restoration of leave entitlement

Nurses and other staff from the Matara Main Hospital stopped work and demonstrated at the hospital director's office on October 31 to demand the reinstatement of the hospital's coronavirus six-day leave entitlement, which was suddenly suspended. Their trade union remained silent on the issue, but workers voluntarily joined the strike.

A nurse said that with the spread of the coronavirus, the lives of health workers are at risk. "We also need a break. We need to look after the needs of our family at home. Employees are not ready to accept such repression in silence," she said.

Health workers at Colombo's main COVID-19 hospital demand PPE

Medical workers at the General Hospital, in Homagama, a suburb of Colombo, demonstrated on November 3 demanding adequate personal protective equipment (PPE). The hospital is Colombo's major COVID-19 treatment facility. Protesters said the PPE provided to staff in the COVID-19 wards was inadequate and almost no equipment was provided in the other wards.

India: North Delhi school teachers demonstrate over overdue salaries

Hundreds of schoolteachers from the North Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC) demonstrated this week outside the residence of the president of the Delhi unit of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party over unpaid salaries. The action followed a demonstration by 9,000 NDMC teachers in September over the issue.

Teachers said they were working every day, despite not being paid since May, to ensure that students do not suffer. "We are struggling to make ends meet. We don't have any other option other than protesting amidst the pandemic," a teacher said.

Andhra Pradesh sanitation workers demand overdue wages

Sanitation workers from the Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation (GVMC) in Andhra Pradesh protested opposite the corporation's office at Asilametta on October 27 with several demands. They demanded the immediate release of wages, complaining that while working for the public, putting their own lives at risk during the pandemic, they had not been paid wages for the past three months.

They alleged that the growing population of the city and the resultant increase in work, was causing a heavy burden on them. There has been no recruitment to cover the extra workload and the vacancies, arising due to death or other reasons, were not being filled.

Tamil Nadu waste management workers protest for pay increase

More than 500 conservancy workers demonstrated in Erode, Tamil Nadu on October 28 to demand payment of the wage increase announced in March by the state government. However, the Government Order, which will increase the wages of over 66,000 solid waste management workers in 12,525 villages by 1,000 rupees (\$US13.40) a month, has not yet been passed by parliament. These workers receive a meagre monthly wage of 2,600 rupees. They submitted a petition to the District Collector.

Punjab Road Transport Corporation workers oppose privatisation and new labour laws

Punjab Road Transport Corporation workers protested outside the Bathinda city bus stand on October 31. They raised slogans against the Indian central government for amending labour laws and allowing private operators into various sectors. The protest was organised by members of the PRTC Employees Union.

Ten central trade unions have announced a nationwide general strike for November 26 to protest against the new labour laws, passed by parliament in September. The Industrial Relations Code Bill, the Code on Social Security Bill and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code Bill will push workers' rights back by decades. The unions say the new laws make it difficult for labour unions to be recognised, and for workers to strike and protect their jobs.

Bangladesh: Disabled workers from the Tazreen Fashions fire demand compensation

Over 40 former garment workers, disabled victims of the November 2012 Tazreen Fashions factory fire in Dhaka, are continuing protests and rallies demanding decent compensation and rehabilitation programs. They have been demonstrating in front of the National Press Club in Dhaka for over eight weeks.

The fire quickly spread through the nine floors of the building, trapping workers inside and killing over 100. The victims have been living a miserable life for the past eight years, with many of them unfit for work and suffering from mental illnesses. The workers are organised by the Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity.

Bangladeshi construction workers strike over unpaid wages

Over 100 local workers and sub-contracting suppliers attached to the construction of transmission lines for the Rampal Power Plant in Khulna stopped work and held a sit-in protest at Molliker Morh on Tuesday, demanding unpaid wages.

Workers said they would not resume work unless their demands were met. According to the local contractors who employ these workers, they are unable to pay wages because the Indian company EMC, the main contractor, left the project without making payments to them.

Bangladeshi telecommunications workers demand reinstatement of union leader

Workers from Bangladesh's largest mobile phone operator, Grameenphone (GP), held a sit-down protest in front of the company's head office in Dhaka on Monday to demand the reinstatement of their union leader. Workers alleged that the leader of the GP Employees Union, Mia Mohammad Shafiqur Rahman Masud, was dismissed because he protested against the company's planned mass layoffs.

Workers held a similar protest over the sacking and mass layoffs last week, and appealed to the government to intervene.

Australia and the Pacific

Lactalis dairy processing workers in Victoria on indefinite strike

Around 140 workers at the Lactalis dairy processing plant in Bendigo, Victoria walked off on Thursday on an indefinite strike to push for a wage increase. Members of the United Workers Union want their pay increased in a new enterprise agreement to be on par with fellow workers at other Lactalis processing plants. The company has threatened that if it is forced to pay equal wages it will close its Bendigo operation.

Workers complained that even after turning up for work every day to keep the factory operating and protecting profits during the coronavirus pandemic they are threatened with losing their jobs. Workers have also demanded that if Lactalis abandons the Bendigo plant it must allow another dairy processing operator to take over the plant.

Over the past decade there have been several cases of large dairy operators mothballing their sites and refusing to sell to other companies as a way to prevent competition.

Royal Flying Doctor Service paramedics and nurses take industrial action

Nurses and paramedics who transport patients in Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) ambulances in Victoria started an indefinite campaign of industrial action on October 29 over the organisation's proposed

enterprise agreement (EA). Action includes banning overtime, writing slogans on their vehicles and returning back to base for meal breaks rather than eating on the road.

The highly specialised workers, who are members of the Victorian Ambulance Union and the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, are opposed to the RFDS's attempt to impose a two-tiered wage system that would slash wages of new recruits by 16.8 percent (\$4,000 per year). The management also wants to end recognition of the registered nurse classification and critical skills and experience, and cut leave benefits of part-time employees.

The RFDS attempted to implement a non-union EA in 2017 with provisions similar to those in the current offer, but it was decisively rejected by the ambulance crews. An "in principle" agreement was reached with the unions in 2019 but its implementation was stalled when the RFDS applied to the Fair Work Commission in May for a delay while the RFDS's contract with the Victorian Labor government's Ambulance Victoria was renegotiated.

Ambulance Victoria has contracts with several patient transport providers to move patients between medical facilities, or in the case of RFDS patients, from the airport to a hospital. The RFDS says the attack on its workers' wages and conditions is necessary to rein in costs as the industry had become more competitive.

Mesh & Bar workers' strike enters third week

Workers from the construction supply company Mesh & Bar in western Sydney are maintaining their strike after walking out on October 22 in a dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). The company offered a revised EA on October 30, which workers rejected in a secret ballot.

According to the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, its 30 striking members want a better pay rise and improved overtime provisions. Workers say they are paid less than other workers in their industry.

Husmann shop display manufacturing workers on strike

Some 18 members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union employed by the shop display refrigeration equipment manufacturer Husmann, in Glendenning, western Sydney walked out on October 28 in a dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement. They are maintaining a 24-hour picket outside the company's premises.

Workers said they have turned up for work every day during the COVID-19 pandemic while management and the office staff remained at home. They are demanding a pay increase above the annual 2 percent increase offered by the company. Husmann is a subsidiary of the global electronics manufacturer Panasonic.

Canberra garbage collection truck drivers hold second strike

Following a 24-hour strike on Monday by garbage truck drivers from SUEZ Waste Management and Recycling in Canberra, the 42 drivers, members of the Transport Workers Union, have called another 24-hour

strike for November 9 in their dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement. Tuesday's garbage collection will also be disrupted, affecting 40 Canberra suburbs.

After five months of negotiations, SUEZ offered 2 percent annual pay increases, but the drivers want 4 percent. The drivers currently are paid a base rate of \$32 an hour.

Offshore gas platform caterers and cleaners win pay increase

After four months of rolling stoppages and various work bans, caterers and cleaners working on Shell's giant Prelude offshore liquefied natural gas (LNG) platform in northwestern Australia have won a pay increase from their employer Sodexo. Sodexo originally offered an enterprise agreement that increased working hours with no extra pay.

In the new deal negotiated by the Offshore Alliance, a coalition between the Maritime Union of Australia and the Australian Workers Union, the unions say Sodexo workers will receive a 15 percent upfront pay increase, a \$15,000 sign-on bonus, annual pay increases, rosters locked in and superannuation paid for all hours worked.

Other gains were night shift allowance, service allowance, trade allowance and for labour hire contractors to be paid no less than the rates in the Sodexo Offshore Agreement. It is not known what trade-offs the unions made in the deal.

Sodexo is 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.

Strike by maintenance workers on the Prelude LNG offshore platform in fourth week

On the same Shell Australia Prelude LNP platform, construction and maintenance workers are maintaining rolling stoppages and work bans begun on October 9 in a dispute over a new enterprise agreement.

The dispute is between the Offshore Alliance and the Electrical Trades Union, and employer Monadelphous (Monos), contracted by Shell to maintain the infrastructure. Monos attempted to hire scabs through labour hire company AGC & MAS but when the recruited workers found out that they were to be scabs on the Prelude they withdrew their applications.

The highly skilled contract workforce is 100 percent casual and not covered by a negotiated agreement. The unions claim that Monos wants to impose a four-year enterprise agreement that will put workers on wages 30 percent below the industry standard. Monos put a revised agreement to the workers that was to be voted on by November 6. The unions have directed their members to return a "No" vote.

Solomon Islands nurses protest unpaid allowances

Defying intimidation from government and union bureaucrats, nurses in Honiara staged a sit-in protest on October 30, demanding that the government pay them a promised COVID-19 allowance.

In June, the government promised nurses working in the city an

allowance for working at the front line of the pandemic. In response to the protest, Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare suspended the nurses' union, SINA, as punishment for not preventing the strike.

Sogavare declared: "We have laws in place, laws to regulate how we behave in certain situations, such as trade disputes."



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