

Strikes and protests develop across India, Pakistan and Indonesia, agreement disputes erupt in Australia and strikes break out in New Zealand

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

13 November 2020

Asia

India: Delhi municipal and healthcare workers on indefinite strike

Around 125,000 workers from the Municipal Corporation of Delhi walked off the job on Monday and demonstrated at the Civic Centre in Delhi, demanding five months of overdue salaries. Some 24,000 retired employees are also not being paid pensions.

The media reported that everyone went on strike, from security guards to the mayor's personal assistant. Protesters shouted slogans like "Give us our salaries" and said they would remain on strike until all salaries and annual bonuses were paid.

Municipal corporations in Delhi, East Delhi and North Delhi are in financial crisis due to the coronavirus pandemic. Workers from these corporations, including school teachers, hospital and medical centre workers, general duty workers and administrators, have been protesting for several weeks.

More than 2,000 healthcare workers, including doctors, from three North Delhi hospitals, Hindu Rao hospital, Rajan Babu Hospital and Kasturba Gandhi Hospital, went on a joint hunger strike on October 24 to demand payment of wages overdue since July. Doctors and other medical staff from the Hindu Rao Hospital had been on strike since October 7 over the issue.

Tamil Nadu power workers demonstrate against privatisation

Around 800 workers from the Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation (TANGEDCO), a subsidiary of the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board, demonstrated in front of the corporation's office in Dindigul on November 4 raising several issues, including against privatisation. Workers demanded that the 40,000 vacancies across the state be filled and that contract workers be included in bonus payments. The trade unions called for TANGEDCO's chairman to hold talks with them on the issues.

Protesters raised slogans against the privatisation of power distribution and demanded the immediate withdrawal of the move to hand over maintenance work at sub-stations to the private sector. The Joint Action Committee of Electricity Employees and Engineers also staged a

demonstration in front of the District Collectorate in Ramanathapuram on the same day.

Tamil Nadu: Krishnagiri toll collectors protest on National Highway 7

Contract workers at the toll plaza on National Highway 7 in Krishnagiri held a sit-down protest near the plaza on November 7 with many demands. Workers complained of job insecurity. They demanded permanent jobs and the accompanying wages and bonuses, and an end to contract employment through manpower suppliers. They insisted that workers should be recruited directly by the National Highways Authority of India and that the toll plaza be taken out of the control of contractors.

Other demands were for a wage settlement that was pending with the Central Labour Department, a bonus of 75-days' wages for 2019-20 and an end to compulsory retrenchments. The protest was organised by the Tamil Nadu Toll Plaza Employees Association, affiliated with the All India Trade Union Congress.

Jammu and Kashmir child care workers demand permanent jobs and regular pay

Anganwadi (childcare) workers and helpers demonstrated in Srinagar on November 4 demanding honorariums on a monthly basis and permanent jobs. The Jammu and Kashmir Anganwadi Workers and Helpers Association demanded an honorarium of 21,000 rupees (\$US283.40) per month until the Jammu and Kashmir government makes the Anganwadi workers and helpers permanent.

Karnataka anganwadi workers protest against opening of pre-schools

Members of the Karnataka anganwadi Workers Union marched to the deputy commissioner's office in Belegavi, Karnataka state on Monday

and held a sit-down protest for several hours. The workers are opposed to the state government's plan to open pre-primary classes in government schools and link anganwadi workers to the schools. They demanded permanency of their jobs, a wage increase and time-bound promotions.

Last December, 30,000 anganwadi workers from across Karnataka gathered in Tumakuru to protest against the introduction of pre-primary classes in government schools. Protesting workers told the media that a pilot program establishing kindergartens at 176 government schools in March 2019 had seen falling enrolments of pre-primary school age children at anganwadi centres. The workers demanded pre-primary schools be set up in anganwadi centres and that they receive training and a minimum monthly wage of 21,000 rupees.

Tamil Nadu public transport workers demand higher wages

Hundreds of Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) workers stopped work and demonstrated in front of the corporation's headquarters in Vellore on Monday to protest against a 50 percent cut in bonus pay and to demand a pay increase. They accused the transport department of failing to conduct wage revision talks since the wage agreement period expired over 15 months ago.

Demands included reversing the decision to cut the annual bonus from 20 percent to 10 percent, paying the festival advance amount of 10,000 rupees (\$134.20) and initiating talks for the 14th wage agreement.

The protest was part of a state-wide campaign for better wages and conditions orchestrated by the Federation of Trade Unions, which comprises nine unions, including the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, Labour Progressive Federation and All India Trade Union Congress.

The campaign began with a demonstration in the state's capital Chennai on February 12. The workers are also demanding urgent improvements to depot building infrastructure, workshop and restroom facilities. In 2017, a bus depot roof collapsed in Nagapattinam, killing eight workers and injuring many others.

Thousands of TNSTC workers are employed as reserve drivers and conductors. Workers want these employees, many of whom have worked for over 240 days, to be made permanent. Other demands were for benefits for retired staff and the re-introduction of the old pension scheme for workers who joined the service before April 2003.

Andhra Pradesh government hospital workers protest over unpaid wages

Around 50 cleaners and security guards employed at the Employee State Insurance (ESI) hospital in southeastern Andhra Pradesh staged a demonstration by begging in the streets on November 6 to protest against the non-payment of their wages for the past four months. The begging protest was organised by the Andhra Pradesh Medical Contractor Workers Union.

The workers further demanded to be brought under the ambit of the newly-formed Andhra Pradesh Corporation for Outsourcing Services and to be provided secure jobs. The protesting workers, the majority of whom have been hired on a contract basis, said neither the contractor nor hospital management had come to discuss their grievances during three days of protesting.

Pakistan: Striking Azad Kashmir engineers demand allowance

Engineers from government departments in Pakistan-held Azad Kashmir province have been on strike since October 30 demanding payment of a technical allowance, an allowance paid to engineers in other Pakistani provinces, as promised to them in June 2019.

The spokesman for the engineers warned the strike would continue until they receive assurance from the Azad Kashmir prime minister. Workers in Azad Kashmir are subjected to further exploitation on the basis of Azad Kashmir's status as an administrative province, in contrast to a province of Pakistan, in all administrative and financial matters.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa university teachers demand hostel facilities and pay increase

Academic staff from the Kohat University of Science and Technology in Kohat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa demonstrated outside the university administration offices on November 6 with several demands. A major demand was the provision of hostel facilities for the women's faculty. The female teachers are forced to find expensive lodgings outside the campus.

Other demands were for increased pay and revision of contracts, and payment of a stipend to PhD students at the university. Protesters complained that the administration had delayed the meeting of the university's financial planning council that is responsible for decisions related to the teachers' demands.

Indonesian unions organise more protests against anti-worker Omnibus law

On Monday and Tuesday peak trade union organisations held protest marches across Indonesia against the national government's Omnibus Law on Job Creation. The law is an effort by the ruling elite to attract foreign and domestic investment by attacking the rights and living standards of workers. The new law includes approximately 1,200 amendments to 79 current laws.

Unions, farmers and student organisations under the umbrella group Labour Movement with the People (Gebrak) marched from the office of the International Labour Organisation to the Horse Statue in the centre of Jakarta on Tuesday after police blocked the route to the presidential palace. Similar demonstrations were held in Surabaya, Makassar in South Sulawesi and Lampung in Sumatra.

Agus Arwani of the Kasbi union group called for a campaign of civil disobedience in denouncing the administration of President Joko Widodo for the law. On Monday, the Confederation of Indonesian Workers Unions held a demonstration outside the DPR, the lower house of the national parliament, demanding a review of the law.

The latest protests followed three days of strikes and demonstrations in Jakarta and outlying areas in early October. The Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions claimed at least 32 organisations representing some two million workers in industries like textiles, automotive, and pharmaceutical took part in the October strikes.

Australia and New Zealand

Australian tugboat workers begin industrial action over new agreement

Some 240 members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), a division of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU), employed by tugboat operator Svitzer Australia have begun limited national industrial action in opposition to Svitzer's proposed new enterprise agreement. Svitzer is a global company with 100 vessels in Australia and Papua New Guinea.

The MUA accused the company of attempting to strip away workers' rights and conditions. It claimed that despite being on a cusp of finalising a new workplace agreement earlier this year, Svitzer management decided to use the COVID-19 crisis to introduce 30 new claims that would slash workers' rights, conditions and job security. Initially Svitzer wanted to roll over its 2016 agreement for the next two years without a pay increase.

The MUA, as usual, is bending over backward and trying to make a deal with Svitzer and not disrupt its operations. The union is limiting industrial action to areas with minimum effect. In a media statement the union said: "We have provided extensive notice ahead of taking these actions, giving Svitzer management the opportunity to make appropriate scheduling changes to avoid any potential impact on customers."

At Port Botany in Sydney, action will not cover towage, only operations at the berth. As a result, the union claimed, there will be no impact on any vessels being brought in or out of the harbour.

In early October, the MUA acted quickly to close down national strike action that included Port Botany when Patrick Stevedores applied to the business-friendly Fair Work Commission to ban all MUA industrial action. The MUA pleaded with Patrick to accept a "peace deal."

Perth hospital maintenance workers walk off for 24 hours

Building maintenance workers from the state-owned Fiona Stanley Hospital in Western Australia's capital Perth walked off the job in a 24-hour strike on Friday and picketed outside the hospital in their dispute over their contract employer's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). The strikers, mostly members of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU), Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and the Plumbing and Pipe Trades Employees Union (PPTEU), work for Serco Australia.

According to the CFMMEU, the maintenance workers do exactly the same work as other maintenance crews at both public and private hospitals across the state, but are paid less, and have less rights, conditions and job security.

The Fiona Stanley Hospital is a major teaching hospital with 783 beds, 18 theatres and 22 wards on nine levels. When it was opened in 2013 Serco won the contract for equipment sterilisation but this was stripped from them in 2017 after complaints from staff that Serco had been cutting corners, resulting in human tissue being present on surgical implements that had supposedly been sterilised.

Victorian hospital and mental institution workers vote to strike

Around 60 percent of members of the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) who participated in a ballot that closed on Monday approved taking industrial action at over 14 government-owned hospitals and mental institutions across Victoria during negotiations for a new four-year enterprise agreement (EA). Over 2,400 members will be involved in the action.

The vote followed a long period of failed and delayed negotiations between HACSU and the state Labor government over the maintenance of current conditions and demand for minimum 4 percent annual wage increases. Other demands include recognition of current skills and qualifications and an increase in parental leave.

The industrial action could include stopwork bans from 15 minutes and up to 24 hours, bans on administrative duties, and bans on working outside normal working hours.

The state government's own damning 2019 Royal Commission Interim Report into Victoria's mental health system pointed to decades of government defunding, privatisation, exploitation of mental health workers and failed service delivery. These conditions have been further accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The report calculated that even if the government added new funding for staff and 170 new acute mental health beds it would be unable to meet the ongoing growth needs for acute adult and youth services, or make up for the 200,500 people who were unable to obtain treatment in 2019.

Strike by Lactalis dairy processing workers in second week

Close to 150 members of the ETU, United Workers Union (UWU) and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) at the Lactalis dairy processing plant in Bendigo, Victoria have been on strike since November 6 to push for a wage increase and job security. They are holding a 24-hour picket at the plant's front gate.

The unions want the pay increase in a new enterprise agreement to be on par with workers at other Lactalis processing plants and a guarantee that if Lactalis abandons the Bendigo plant it must allow another dairy processing operator to take over the plant. The company has threatened to close its Bendigo operation if it is forced to pay equal wages.

Workers say that even after turning up for work every day to keep the factory operating and protect profits during the coronavirus pandemic they are threatened with losing their jobs. 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 maintain industrial action

Nurses and paramedics who transport patients in Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) ambulances in Victoria are maintaining a campaign of industrial action begun 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.

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.

Hussmann shop display manufacturing workers' strike in third week

Some 18 members of the AMWU employed by the shop display refrigeration equipment manufacturer Hussmann, a subsidiary of the global electronics manufacturer Panasonic, have been on strike since October 18 in a dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement. They are maintaining a 24-hour picket outside the company's premises in Glendenning, western Sydney.

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.

Strike on Prelude offshore LNG platform in fifth week

Construction and maintenance workers on Shell's Prelude offshore liquefied natural gas (LNG) platform off the north coast of Western Australia 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 (a combination of the Australian Workers Union and the Maritime Union of Australia) and the Electrical Trades Union, and employer Monadelphous (Monos), contracted by Shell to maintain the infrastructure. Monos is attempting to hire scabs through labour hire company AGC & MAS but has been unsuccessful. When 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.

The unions are demanding permanent jobs, job security, regular rosters, industry standard pay, shift allowance, superannuation, income cover, training and travel pay.

Monos is undertaking engineering and construction work on the Prelude platform, which came online last year and has been plagued by technical problems. Shell does not directly employ workers on the platform but demands labour contractors keep labour costs at a minimum.

New Zealand: Distribution centre workers at The Warehouse walk off

Workers at The Warehouse's North Island distribution centres held a walk off on November 9. The Warehouse is one of New Zealand's largest retail chains, and distribution centre workers manage online ordering and shipping of goods. Around 270 workers participated in the walk-off, citing frustration with the company's restructuring plans, redundancies at stores,

and lack of pathways to secure jobs for labour-hire workers.

St John paramedics take historic strike vote

Paramedics, primarily employed by the private charitable organisation St John New Zealand, have voted to strike for the first time since the service began in 1885. A majority of the 1,100 ambulance workers, represented by First Union, voted for the strike, which will take place for 24 hours on November 25. St John is refusing to pay a 1.25 shift rate that they had previously agreed to, and has proposed cutting the wages of dispatchers by up to \$10,000 per year. The workers are also concerned that St John wishes to remove minimum staffing levels, which would make ambulance workers unsafe.

New Zealand primary health care workers strike for 24 hours

Primary healthcare workers who are employed in community health organisations held a nationwide 24-hour strike on November 9, with over 3,000 nurses and administrators participating. Workers held midday rallies on major streets in cities and towns across the country.

The private businesses that employ primary healthcare workers pay nurses and administrators an average 10 percent less than their public sector counterparts. Workers are demanding parity with public sector workers.

The Ardern Labour government's Health Minister Chris Hipkins has repeatedly ruled out intervening to ensure parity, despite the employers blaming a lack of government healthcare funding for the low pay.



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