

Bangladeshi garment workers demand unpaid wages; Sri Lankan hospital workers protest for better conditions; LNG platform workers in Western Australia continue strike

## Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

27 November 2020

### Asia

#### **Bangladesh: Disabled workers from the Tazreen Fashions fire demand compensation**

Disabled workers and relatives of workers killed in the Tazreen Fashions garment factory fire in November, 2012 protested in Ashulia and Dhaka on Tuesday demanding an increase in compensation and justice for the victims. According to protest leaders, victims are only entitled to government compensation of 200,000 taka (\$US2,360) for a deceased worker's family and 250,000 taka for an injured worker.

Workers placed wreaths outside the factory premises in remembrance of those who lost their lives in the incident, while marking the eighth anniversary of the disaster. They called for the government to build a hospital and a dormitory for survivors on the land where the factory was located.

Rehana Akhter, an injured worker, told reporters that four of her family members died in the deadly fire. She managed to escape by jumping from the factory building.

The fire quickly spread through the nine floors of the building, trapping workers inside and killing 112. The victims have been living a miserable life for the past eight years, many of them unfit for work and suffering from mental illnesses.

#### **Bangladeshi garment workers demand unpaid wages**

About 700 garment workers from the shuttered factory of A-One BD staged a sit-down protest outside the Ashulia Press Club on November 17 and 18 demanding 10 months of unpaid wages.

The factory, located in Dhaka Export Processing Zone (DEPZ), previously employed at least 1,100 workers. It was closed in March with COVID-19 hitting the country and salaries have remained unpaid since January. Workers say that factory management, the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (BEPZA) and the government have failed to take any responsibility for the pay arrears.

One worker said they had held several demonstrations and DEPZ officials had assured them at least 18 times that the arrears would be paid. While DEPZ authorities claim workers' wages will be settled after the plant is auctioned, a stay order from the High Court has stalled this process.

#### **India: Puducherry child care workers demand payment of bonus and salary arrears**

Anganwadi (child care) workers demonstrated in Puducherry on Monday demanding payment of bonus and salary in arrears. They said that the government, which had commended the work by anganwadi workers during the pandemic, should immediately pay the outstanding monies. While public sector employees are being given pay rises based on the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations, this has not occurred for anganwadi workers.

#### **Kerala fishermen and boat owners strike**

Fishers and boat owners held a district-wide strike in Kozhikode and demonstrated outside the Fisheries Department office at Beypore on Monday. They were protesting against the proposed Kerala Fish Auctioning, Marketing and Quality Control Ordinance and condemned the Kerala state government for attempting to implement the ordinance without holding any public hearing.

#### **Himachal Pradesh government workers strike against pension scheme**

Himachal Pradesh state government employees held a two-hour strike at 11 a.m. on Tuesday in protest against the inadequacy of the new pension scheme (NPS). The strike was organised by the New Pension Scheme Employees' Association.

They said at least 100,000 employees in different state government departments were covered under the NPS. After retirement, they only receive a monthly pension of between 1,000 rupees (\$US13.5) and 2,000 rupees.

The NPS was implemented in 2004. It is a defined contribution scheme mandatory for all new recruits to the central government (and implemented by most state governments) from January 1, 2004. It is a contribution-based pension system in which employees are required to pay 10 percent of their wages, which is matched by the government and is being invested in equity shares.

There have been ongoing protests against the scheme across India since it was implemented. Workers complain that the pension is too low and not

secured because it is tied to the stock markets. Under old system, the entire pension amount was covered by the government and paid on the basis of 50 percent of the last drawn salary by the employee.

### **Indian government workers protest against privatisation**

Indian government workers from the Life Insurance Corporation demonstrated at the divisional office in Rajahmundry city, Andhra Pradesh on November 19 demanding the Modi government reverse its decision to privatise public sector companies that are currently operating successfully such as the railways, petroleum, finance, insurance companies and stop withdrawing investment from these sectors.

Protesters said the government's decision threatens hundreds of thousands of government jobs. The workers also joined the Indian general strike on Thursday.

### **Sri Lankan hospital workers demand better working conditions**

Hundreds of health workers at the Colombo Hospital and Kandy General Hospital demonstrated in front of their respective hospitals on Wednesday to demand better working conditions and adequate budget allocations for the public health sector. They specifically demanded a COVID-19 hazard allowance for all workers involved in coronavirus treatment.

The workers, members of the All Sri Lanka Health Workers Trade Union Federation, called on the government to implement a new program with a scientific approach aimed at the eradication of the COVID-19 pandemic. Riot Police had been deployed to break up the protests but workers continued their actions despite police harassments.

### **Sri Lanka free trade zone workers oppose pay cuts**

Over 500 workers from the Japanese-based Okaya Lanka electrical components factory in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone protested from November 18 to 20 against cuts to their annual wage increment. The annual salary increase is between 1,200 and 1,500 rupees, but the administration says it will not exceed 1,000 rupees next year.

The Okaya Lanka workers allege that management had threatened new employees and attempted to get information about who organised the protest. There are about 1,200 workers at the factory.

## **Australia**

### **Coles warehouse workers in Sydney remain locked out**

About 350 workers at the supermarket giant Coles warehouse in Smeaton Grange, in Sydney's south have been locked out since November 20. The lockout was management's immediate response to a 24-hour strike by members of the United Workers Union (UWU).

While the union announced this week that it is filing for indefinite strike action, it has not called for industrial support from other Coles employees, even though it says Coles can supply its stores from other distribution centres during the three-month lockout.

A union spokesman said members had vowed that they will return to work when they vote "yes" to an offer from the company that they deem acceptable.

The workers are in dispute with Coles over the company's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). Workers are concerned about job security following the company's announcement that it is building a new automated warehouse and intends to eventually close the Smeaton Grange facility. They want the new EA to provide job protection and adequate compensation.

Workers are demanding that all those forced to take redundancy be paid at five weeks for every year of service, capped at 104 weeks, and be given the right to transfer to the new Coles warehouse with no loss of pay, job security in the form of a permanent to casual ratio.

According to the UWU, Coles has refused to give workers an opportunity to be redeployed to the new facility. Some workers have been at the Smeaton Grange warehouse for 30 years.

### **Canberra garbage truck drivers to continue strike action**

Following three weeks of rolling strike action, garbage truck drivers in Canberra announced this week that they will hold further strikes after rejecting their employers latest wage increase offer of 8.3 percent over three years, only 0.3 percent above the last offer.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU), which represents the 42 drivers, is calling for 4 percent annual wage increases in a new enterprise agreement. The TWU and contract employer SUEZ Waste Management and Recycling have been in negotiations for over five months. Ongoing strike action has affected garbage collection across 40 Canberra suburbs since November 3.

### **Moreton Bay garbage truck drivers hold second strike**

Some 35 members of the TWU who drive garbage collection trucks for Cleanaway, contracted by the Moreton Bay Regional Council, a northern suburb of Queensland's capital Brisbane, held a second 24-hour strike on Monday. They previously walked out on November 16 over Cleanaway's proposed new enterprise agreement.

The workers want a decent pay increase to make up for agreeing to accept a reduced pay offer in the current expired enterprise agreement. In 2017, the TWU and the Council pressured workers to accept a low pay offer to ensure that Cleanaway retained the contract. Workers pointed to the company's record profits this year and increased shareholder dividends by 15 percent.

### **Svitzer tugboat workers' industrial action in third week**

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 are in their

third week of limited national industrial action. The workers are opposing Svitzer's proposed new enterprise agreement.

The MUA accused the global company, which operates 100 vessels in Australia and Papua New Guinea, of attempting to strip away workers' rights and conditions. It claimed that despite being close to 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 is intent on dragging out the dispute and cause a minimum of disruption to Svitzer's operations and the general shipping industry. In a media statement when industrial action commenced 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, industrial action will not impact on towage but only operations at berths—i.e., there will be no impact on any vessel being brought in or out of the harbour.

### **Prelude offshore LNG platform strike in seventh week in Western Australia**

Over 60 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 their first union negotiated enterprise agreement. The dispute is part of a union campaign to standardise wages and conditions in the offshore oil and gas industry and to increase union membership.

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 has been unsuccessful in its attempt to hire scabs through labour hire company AGC & MAS and Kaefer.

The highly-skilled 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.



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