

Bangladeshi police assault protesting workers; Sri Lankan ambulance paramedics oppose sackings; South Australian brewery workers' strike

## Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

11 December 2020

### Asia

#### **Bangladeshi police assault workers in Dhaka**

Police using batons, teargas and water cannons violently attacked a peaceful protest of around 600 workers and injured 54 people on Monday. Protesters included 42 victims from the Tazreen Fashions fire, over 300 terminated workers from the A-One BD garment factory and over 200 independent Ebtedayee madrasa teachers and aspiring primary school assistant teachers.

The workers, many of whom were asleep when the police attacked, were holding a sit-down protest outside the Jatiya Press Club, in Dhaka.

A former worker from Tazreen Fashions told the media that the police "beat us like animals" whilst a madrasa school teacher said, "We never expected that the police could beat teachers like us."

Disabled workers and relatives of workers killed in the November 2012 Tazreen Fashions factory fire had been protesting for 80 days to demand an increase in compensation and justice for the victims.

The terminated workers from the A-One BD factory in the Dhaka Export Processing Zone had been involved in the protest for about three weeks and were demanding 10 months of unpaid wages. The madrasa teachers had been demonstrating for 22 days calling on the government to nationalise their madrasa schools.

#### **Bangladesh state-owned sugar mill workers and farmers protest**

Workers from 15 state-owned sugar mills and sugarcane farmers have been demonstrating outside their mill gates and adjacent areas since Monday to demand the government resume sugar cane processing in the state-owned plants. As well as staging a two-hour daily strike, they have also blocked the Pabna-Ishwardi highway.

On December 1, the Bangladesh Sugar and Food Industries Corporation ordered the suspension of sugarcane processing at six out of 15 state-owned sugar mills in the southern and northern regions. The corporation claims that all 15 mills are running at a loss.

Workers fear that the government intends to eventually close all these mills leaving thousands of workers jobless and farmers without income. About 4,000 people are employed by the six mills which process cane from about 30,000 small farmers. An estimated 200,000 sugar cane farmers are dependent on the country's state-owned mills.

The protest was jointly organised by the Bangladesh Sugar Mill Sugarcane Growers Federation and Bangladesh Sugar Industries Corporation Workers-Employees Federation.

#### **India: Karnataka government hospital doctors hold state-wide protest**

Resident junior doctors from the Bangalore Medical College and Research Institute, and nine affiliated colleges in Karnataka state began ongoing two-hour protests outside their respective hospitals on Monday. The Karnataka Association of Resident Doctors' (KARD) is demanding a COVID-19 risk allowance, regular payment of a stipend, exemptions from tuition fees and full restoration of non-COVID-19 care.

The young doctors alleged that because all postgraduates, house surgeons and undergraduates have been involved in COVID-19 activities over the last nine months, no proper clinical academic activities are being held in medical colleges across the state. The doctors met the principal secretary for Medical Education on Monday and submitted their demands.

#### **Karnataka private school teachers and non-teaching staff hold hunger protests**

Teachers and other employees from private educational institutions across Karnataka began hunger protests in Dharwad on December 5 over a series of outstanding demands. Members of various education management boards are also participating in the protest. Although the minister for primary and secondary education said he would meet with the protesters, the protesters said they will continue their agitation until their demands are met.

School managers told the media that they are concerned about inadequate government funding and that educators from privately-aided institutions were being deprived of benefits extended to teachers from government institutions.

#### **Telangana: Nurses at Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences demand overdue wages**

Outsourced nurses at the Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) in Adilabad, Telangana state, walked out on December 4 and demonstrated outside the hospital. They were demanding that the government pay them three months' outstanding wages. The protest was organised under by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

### **Puducherry power distribution workers protest against privatisation**

Unions covering Puducherry Electricity department workers shut down a week-long protest strike against privatisation on Tuesday following a verbal promise from the chief minister that he would arrange a meeting with India's power minister to discuss their grievance.

Workers want privatisation put on hold until a delegation meets the power minister. They said they will resume their strike if the Modi government goes ahead with its plan to privatise the department.

Public sector workers across India have been protesting for several months, including two national one-day strikes, against the Indian government's plan to privatise railway, power, petroleum, finance and other public sector companies.

### **Sri Lankan ambulance paramedics protest against dismissals**

A group of paramedics from the government-funded Suwa Seriya island-wide ambulance service demonstrated outside the organisation's head office in Kotte on Monday. They were protesting against the dismissal of three co-workers who had spoken out against the brutal working conditions they faced. They demanded that the sacked workers be reinstated immediately.

The dismissed workers were leaders of the Suwa Seriya Workers Union who addressed a media conference about working conditions on November 24. The workers were complaining about their conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, including inadequate PPE, poor accommodation during resting times and the rapidly deteriorating condition of the ambulances.

Paramedics accused the government of trying to privatise the widely used service which is currently free for working people and the poor. The 24-hour service employs 1,500 people. During the pandemic these workers struggled with minimum facilities to transport infected people from homes to hospitals.

## **Australia**

### **South Australian brewery workers' strike in third week**

Thirty-seven United Workers Union (UWU) members from the West End brewery at Thebarton, an inner-western suburb of Adelaide, the South Australian state capital are on strike and picketing in a dispute over severance pay.

The workers began four-hour rolling stoppages on November 25 seeking a better redundancy deal in a new enterprise agreement. The brewery, which is owned by Lion, will be closed and production moved to the eastern states beginning in the middle of next year. More than half of the

94 workers at the site are expected to lose their jobs.

The brewery is able to maintain limited production because only UWU members are on strike. Lion claimed that the picket is a blockade and applied to the Fair Work Commission (FWC) for an order to suspend industrial action and force the union into arbitration. This week the UWU told its members to comply with an FWC order directing them not to interfere with persons or vehicles entering or leaving the premises.

### **Blacktown Hospital nurses and midwives continue protests**

A group of off-duty nurses and midwives gathered outside the Blacktown Hospital, in western Sydney, New South Wales on Monday voicing their continued frustration over serious staff shortages in the hospital's maternity services.

On November 19, over 150 traumatised and overworked nurses walked out on a 24-hour strike demanding that staffing at the hospital be increased to safe levels. They were ordered back to work after several hours by the union on orders from the NSW Industrial Relations Commission.

According to the NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association, births at Blacktown Hospital since 2015 have increased 52 percent but staffing has only risen by 11 percent. The nurses rejected an offer from the hospital to provide an additional 15 full-time equivalent midwives and a review of the staffing model.

The union said there are already eight vacant staffing positions at the hospital and that nurses and midwives were not confident that the additional positions would be filled. Fifteen additional staff, moreover, could not properly cover all the wards and patients at Blacktown Hospital.

Due to obstetrician shortages, midwives are being trained to take on more roles, increasing their workloads each shift. At least 20 senior obstetricians at the hospital threatened to resign in the first week of February 2021 if their concerns about understaffing, lack of experienced staff and access to birthing facilities are not addressed.

### **Victorian hospital and mental institution workers take industrial action**

Over 2,400 members of the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) at 16 state-owned hospitals and mental health institutions across Victoria have begun limited industrial action demanding an improved enterprise agreement. The protected action includes rolling strikes from 15 minutes to 24 hours, bans on certain paperwork and refusing to work in unpaid breaks and outside normal working hours and bans on non-clinical duties.

The action follows a long period of failed negotiations between HACSU and the state Labor government over the maintenance of current conditions and demands for minimum four percent annual wage increases over the life of the four-year agreement, plus a one-off immediate pay increase to bring them in line with other health workers. Other demands include recognition of current skills and qualifications and an increase in parental leave.

The state government's Royal Commission Interim Report into Victoria's mental health system last year pointed to decades of government defunding, privatisation, exploitation of mental health workers and failed service delivery. The commission 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.

### **Locked out Coles warehouse workers implement indefinite strike**

About 350 workers at the supermarket giant Coles warehouse at Smeaton Grange in Sydney's south have responded to the company's imposed three-month lockout by implementing an indefinite strike. The lockout was management's response to a 24-hour strike by members of the United Workers Union (UWU) on November 26. Coles indicated it will maintain the lockout until February 11. The workers now say they are taking indefinite strike action and vowed that they will not return until their demands are met. The dispute is over the company's proposed enterprise agreement (EA).

Workers are concerned about job security following Coles' 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, adequate compensation and a 5.5 percent pay rise.

Workers want those forced to take redundancy to be paid 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, and an improved permanent to casual employment ratio. The company has offered four weeks' pay per year of service and a 3.5 percent pay increase, which workers rejected.

### **Distribution depot workers at GWA Caroma end strike in southwestern Sydney**

Some 34 workers from the distribution depot of toilet fittings manufacturer GWA Caroma at Prestons in southwestern Sydney ended their week-long strike on Tuesday after gaining a small pay increase in the company's new enterprise agreement (EA).

Members of the United Workers Union walked out on November 30 against the company's proposed EA that would have stripped away long-held conditions and left workers with a zero percent pay rise.

While the UWU claimed it reached a deal that retained all previous conditions and secure an overall 7 percent pay increase no details are provided on the unions Facebook page.

### **Canberra garbage collection truck drivers end strike**

Garbage truck drivers from SUEZ Waste Management and Recycling in Canberra have ended four weeks of rolling strikes, affecting 40 suburbs across the city.

The Transport Workers Union called off action after reaching an "in principle" enterprise agreement deal with SUEZ for a 10.2 percent pay increase over three years. The 42 striking drivers had originally sought a 12 percent increase while SUEZ offered only 8.3 percent.

Drivers have received a 3.4 percent pay rise each of the last four years, with the latest deal the equivalent of that across the three-year total. SUEZ wanted to reduce future pay increases, fraudulently claiming it was necessary due to the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic.

Workers argued that SUEZ receives the same revenue from its multi-million dollar contract with the ACT (Australian Capital Territory) government regardless of coronavirus.

### **Offshore LNG platform strike enters 10th 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 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. The Offshore Alliance bragged this week that 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 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 unions want permanent jobs, job security, regular rosters, industry standard pay, shift allowance, superannuation, income cover, training and travel pay.

### **Metro Trains Melbourne drivers resign from union over enterprise agreement**

About 600 members of the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) who drive trains on Melbourne's Metro Trains network have resigned from the union this year in opposition to the enterprise agreement (EA) negotiated this year by the union. The drivers are members of the union's locomotive division which accounts for 35 percent of RTBU membership.

The Metro Trains' EA vote was passed in May by a margin of less than 1 percent and saw many outraged rail workers quit the union in protest against the bureaucracy's imposition of far-reaching concessions. Metro Trains operates Melbourne's privatised rail network and is majority owned by the Hong Kong-based giant MTR Corporation.

Locomotive division members campaigned against the proposed agreement citing concerns over new rostering rules that they claimed were unsafe. The campaign was ignored by the union leadership which pushed through the company's proposed EA.

Resigned drivers said they were betrayed and have warned about the danger of fatalities because the new rosters force them to drive on the same track multiple times a day and increasing the risk of driver error because of reduced alertness. Previously past drivers could be assigned to drive four different tracks a day across the network but now many have to repeat the same line three times in a single shift.



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