Bangladeshi health workers strike over wages; Sri Lankan teachers to demand COVID-19 protection; Offshore LNG maintenance workers strike in Western Australia

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

18 December 2020

Asia

Bangladeshi health workers strike over wages and conditions

Bangladesh Health Assistants' Association members from the government-funded Rajshahi unit have been on strike since November 26 over several long-pending demands. The walkout has delayed a nationwide-vaccination campaign against measles and rubella scheduled to begin on December 6.

The health assistants want a retrospective increase in pay rates, recognition of health assistants' work as a technical position, an additional 30 percent of basic salary paid as a risk or travel allowance, appointment of at least one health assistant for every 6,500 people, and the introduction of a 10 percent ward quota in the recruitment of health assistants.

There are about 26,000 health workers under three categories—health inspector, assistant health inspector and health assistants.

India: Terminated Tripura school teachers demand jobs

Terminated Tripura state government teachers have been protesting in Agartala, the state capital since December 7 to demand reinstatement. Three separate forums of former teachers called for ongoing protests until the government ensured they were reemployed.

Over 10,300 teachers were sacked after losing a Supreme Court action challenging faulty appointment procedures followed by the previous government. The teachers have rejected an offer to apply for 4,005 jobs in various departments and demanded a special recruitment procedure to resolve their situation.

Indian government workers in Jammu and Kashmir demand pay rise

Hundreds of workers at Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) offices in Jammu and Kashmir held state-wide protests on December 10 to demand payment of a wage rise due since August 2017. The lunch-time protests were organised by the Joint Front of LIC Class-1 Federation, National Federation of Insurance Field Workers of India and the All India Insurance Employees' Association.

The workers also demanded the family pension be doubled to 30 percent and for the current pension scheme (NPS) to be scrapped and replaced with the 1995 scheme. They complained that the NPS is a defined contribution scheme and does not guarantee a fixed or minimum pension on retirement.

The NPS was introduced by the Indian government in 2004 and implemented by most state governments. Employees are required to pay 10 percent of their wages into the scheme, which is matched by the government and currently invested in equity shares. Public sector workers across India complain that the pension is too low and not secured because it is tied to the stock markets. Under the 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.

Protest organisers warned that LIC employees will hold a two-hour national strike in support of their demands on December 22.

Karnataka public transport workers end four-day walkout

Thousands of Karnataka Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) workers ended a four-day strike on Monday after the government agreed to meet some of their demands. The workers walked out on December 10 to demand a wage rise and improved benefits, including health insurance. Workers want to be treated as government employees and their pay matched with state government employees. They also wanted compensation of 3 million rupees ($US40,805) to the family of any driver or conductor who lost their life from COVID-19.

The KSRTC has about 37,019 employees and runs a fleet of 17,138 buses across three subsidiaries. KSRTC and its subsidiaries claimed they faced huge losses due to the coronavirus lockdown and delayed payment of salaries for several months.

In settling the dispute, the state government agreed to provide health insurance under the Arogya Sanjeevini scheme, a wage increase and inter-corporation transfers.

Teachers at private schools in Bengaluru demand pay package

Thousands of private school teachers protested in Bengaluru, Karnataka state, on December 16 to demand that the government provide relief

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packages for teachers who have faced salary cuts or have lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

Sri Lanka: Teachers in North Central province strike to demand COVID-19 protection

Nearly 50 teachers at Awulegama Maha Vidyalaya in the Nikaweratiya Education Zone in the North Central province, which has about 1,000 students, went on strike on December 14, accusing the government of not providing adequate protection against COVID-19.

The strike was sparked after the death of a family member of a student at the school who was under COVID-19 quarantine. Teachers said only two classrooms at the school had been disinfected and that the entire school staff had taken steps to vacate the school. They said they would not report to work until proper protection was assured.

Healthcare workers protest in Colombo to demand permanent jobs

Around 200 government healthcare workers from several parts of Sri Lanka mobilised in Colombo on December 15 over several demands, including permanent jobs. The demonstration and march to the health ministry was organised by the United Health Workers Union and supported by other health workers who face similar issues.

Their main demand was for substitute workers who have completed probation to be given permanent appointments. They also wanted a job-risk allowance, an increase in overtime payments and an effective program to contain COVID-19.

Pakistan: Government doctors in Islamabad continue protests

Doctors from Islamabad's top government hospital, the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS), remain on strike and are continuing protests to demand the government withdraw its pro-privatisation Medical Teaching Institution (MTI) ordinance. The strike forced the closure of outpatient departments and all other departments except the emergency wards and wards treating COVID-19 patients. Doctors set up a camp inside the hospital premises and are holding a hunger protest.

The planned reforms under the MTI will force hospitals and other state-backed facilities to fund their own teaching institutions. Doctors claim the reforms are aimed at slashing federal government expenditure, winding back services and paving the way for privatisation. Health workers also claim the MTI will affect their federal government employee status, making their salaries, promotions and other benefits, determined by a board of governors. Similar reforms in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab met with significant resistance by health workers.

The Grand Health Alliance (GHA), the umbrella union body that called the protests, held negotiations with the government on Tuesday to negotiate a deal and betray the strike. According to the GHA chairman, the union does not "object" to the MTI but only wants assurances that it is "not deprived of the right to pension, gratuity, health facilities, promotion, housing and other service and post-retirement benefits."

Union bodies representing at least 22 other sectors of government employees, including clerks, teachers and non-teaching education workers, declared their support for the striking doctors but have not organised any industrial action, ensuring the strike remains isolated.

Australia

Jadestone offshore LNG platform workers in Western Australia strike

Around 35 maintenance workers on the Montaro floating liquefied natural gas (LNG) platform, off the coast of northern Western Australia, have resumed rolling strike action begun in November in a dispute over their first union negotiated enterprise agreement. The rolling stoppages, which range from 4 hours to 24 hours, are preventing maintenance and rectification work to a damaged wellhead causing a shutdown.

The dispute is between the Offshore Alliance (a combination of the Australian Workers Union and the Maritime Union of Australia) and Jadestone Energy. The Offshore alliance claimed that Jadestone is seeking to rip apart existing employment conditions by seeking to cut pay rates, reduce superannuation, redundancy, travel and training entitlements.

Jadestone employees are currently engaged under employment contracts which have no legal standing in the Fair Work Commission. The Offshore Alliance (OA) is demanding job security, a pay increase and maintenance of existing conditions.

Meanwhile, over 60 construction and maintenance workers on Shell's Prelude offshore LNG platform off the north coast of Western Australia are maintaining rolling stoppages and work bans begun on October 9 in a dispute between OA and employer Monadelphous (Monos) over a proposed enterprise agreement. Similar to the Jadestone workers, Monos' highly-skilled workforce is 100 percent casual and not covered by a negotiated agreement.

Hanes warehouse strikers return to work

Over 100 United Workers Union (UWU) members at the Hanes (Australasia) warehouse in Truganina, an outer-western suburb of Melbourne, ended a five-day strike on Friday against a company enterprise agreement proposal.

Hanes is a large and profitable transnational company that distributes its own lines of linen and apparel. In March it used COVID-19 to close its 450 retail stores and dismiss thousands of its employees while increasing warehouse worker exploitation as its online sales rose by 70 percent to a reported $1.74 billion.

Management's enterprise agreement "offer" involved cuts in wages and changes to conditions. Strikers rejected this and demanded the company end "extreme" casualisation and ongoing cuts to permanent jobs at the warehouse.

Hanes currently employs over 150 casuals each day on the site, far exceeding the number of permanent employees. In recent years Hanes has eliminated 30 permanent positions and replaced them with casual insecure jobs. According to the UWU, some casuals had been waiting eight years for permanent secure work. Other employees are placed on six- and nine-month rolling limited ten-year contracts.

On Friday, the UWU claimed to have "won" job security with the current permanent jobs site maintained, a "fair pay rise" and a $2,000 bonus. No further details were publicly released.

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The rampant growth of casual labour at Hanes and other warehouses is the direct result of years of worthless enterprise agreements struck by the unions. In 2017, the National Union of Workers (now included in the newly-formed UWU “super-union”) reached an agreement with Hanes providing for casualisation, without any limits on the casual proportion of its workforce.

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