

China: Apple factory workers protest over jobs; Sri Lankan garment workers strike over cuts to annual bonus; New Zealand home care workers strike

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 December 2020

Asia

China: Apple electronics factory workers protest in Shanghai

Thousands of temporary workers from Apple's Taiwan-invested Pegatron facility in Shanghai demonstrated outside the plant on December 19 to protest against the forced transfer of workers to another facility. Large numbers of police blocked the plant entrance, sparking clashes.

The protest erupted after Pegatron tried to transfer thousands of workers from its Shanghai factory to another facility at Kunshan in Jiangsu Province. Workers were told that if they refused to transfer they would be fired and would not be eligible for their share of finders' fee commission usually shared between recruitment agencies and workers.

The fees form a substantial part of temporary workers' overall remuneration package. A worker could accumulate 11,000 yuan (\$US1,700) in such payments after 55 days working at Pegatron.

Faced with the large number of angry protesters, management said it would revise the relocation package to ensure that transferring workers would retain all of their existing salary and benefits.

Cambodian garment workers occupy closed factory demanding unpaid wages

A group of half a dozen former garment workers from a closed factory 50km south of Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh are occupying the factory, standing guard over the sewing machines. The owners shuttered the factory in March without paying outstanding wages and bonuses.

The workers have large debts because they took out loans to feed their families after the plant closed. They have fought off people sent by the factory owner to remove the machines, hoping to win their outstanding pay.

"Those machines are my money; they are my life," Vanna, a worker said, pledging to hold them hostage until she receives about \$US2,000 in wages and bonuses owed since the bosses shut the factory.

Cambodia's \$7 billion garment sector—the country's largest employer with 800,000, mostly female, workers—was dealt a double blow this year by the coronavirus pandemic and by unlawful crippling tariffs imposed by

the European Union over claimed human rights abuses.

India: Punjab police brutally attack unemployed teachers

Several people were injured when police used canes to attack a demonstration of unemployed teachers while they marched towards the chief minister's residence in Patiala, Punjab state, on December 19. Teachers held a sit-down protest near the residence alleging that the government was not considering their demands which are more than three years old.

The unemployed teachers, who have passed the Elementary Teacher in Training and the Teacher Eligibility Test, were demanding the repeal of the provision Bachelor of Education entry to elementary schools, and for 10,000 new posts to be immediately advertised. Elementary Teacher Training is a diploma level course for teaching the preschool curriculum and equips teachers with required skills.

Tamil Nadu COVID-19 door-to-door screeners demand wages

Former workers employed on contract by the Madurai [municipal] Corporation to undertake door-to-door screening protested outside the Madurai City health office on December 18 demanding their wages.

Protesters said that many workers were hired on a contract basis in June but were asked to quit the job on September 23 without prior notice. They have been demanding settlement of wages due for the past two months.

Puducherry public transport workers oppose against privatisation

Over 200 contract drivers and conductors for the Puducherry Road Transport Corporation (PRTC) stopped work on December 21 and demonstrated in front of the PRTC workshop demanding permanent jobs and for the government to reverse its decision to sell several bus routes to private enterprise. The town bus services were suspended during the

strike.

Tamil Nadu power distribution workers demonstrate against privatisation

Tamil Nadu Electricity Board workers protested against privatisation at different locations across the state on Monday. The state government plans to hand over maintenance of five power stations to private operators for two years. Workers fear the move is the first step to full privatisation and are demanding the government reverse its decision.

Workers have also demanded that the government withdraw its decision to recruit employees on contract basis through agencies. The workers alleged that the board has less than 82,000 employees, instead of the required strength of 142,000, which has impacted their workload.

Sri Lankan garment workers on strike over year-end bonus

Workers from the British-owned Next Garment Factory in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (KFTZ), north of Colombo, have been on strike since December 16 demanding that the year-end bonus be paid in full.

Workers at the factory, which employs about 2,000 people, began protesting after management announced that bonuses would be slashed due to profit losses this year. The factory was only closed for several days in October after 11 workers were tested positive for COVID-19.

Striking workers were holding daily protests outside the plant until management called the police to disperse them on December 18. Management also threatened workers who have raised their concerns on social media.

Districts near the KFTZ were under a curfew in October due to a high number of coronavirus infections in the factories. All free trade zone employees, however, were ordered to keep working and to use their service identity cards as curfew passes.

Sri Lankan development officers demand permanent positions

Development officers affiliated to government departments across the island demonstrated in 19 districts, including Colombo, on Tuesday, demanding that their appointments be made permanent. The protest was prompted by the government's failure to make their jobs permanent, even four months after their mandatory one-year training period ended.

The Joint Development Officers Centre coordinated the demonstrations. Protesters in each district chanted slogans and displayed placards in front of the district secretariats and in front of the Ministry of Public Administration in Colombo.

Pakistan: Punjab police attack teachers demanding permanent jobs

Over 700 contract-based teachers from Punjab government schools were attacked by police using teargas and batons as they marched toward the

prime minister's residence in Islamabad on Saturday. Many protesters were injured and 44 were arrested.

The teachers continued their demonstration blocking a main transport artery of the city in defiance of police orders to move their protest to the Press Club. Later the protest was moved to a different area after police agreed to release those arrested. The demonstration ended later in the day when the government agreed to hold discussions the next day.

Teachers want immediate job permanency and repeal of new regulations that disqualify many teachers despite their years of service. The new rules impact on 11,000 teachers currently in service.

The government is aggressively seeking to reform public education in Punjab including handing over the administration of schools to non-governmental organizations, as part of its overall cost cutting plans. The increasingly large number of contract-based workers is a result of this policy.

Australia and New Zealand

Royal Flying Doctor Service paramedics and nurses maintain eight weeks of industrial action

Nurses and paramedics who transport patients in Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) ambulances in Victoria are maintaining low-level industrial action begun on October 29 over the organisation's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). The action includes writing slogans on their vehicles, returning back to base for meal breaks rather than eating on the road, and not working extra time before or after their rostered shift (incidental overtime).

The highly specialised workers are members of the Victorian Ambulance Union and the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation. They are opposed to the RFDS's attempt to impose a two-tiered wage system that would slash the pay 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 wants to limit annual pay increases to no more than the consumer price index (CPI) and has refused to include back pay in the new agreement, even though wages have been frozen for three years while negotiating a new agreement.

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 to become more competitive.

Blacktown Hospital nurses continue struggle for safe staffing levels

The NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA),

representing traumatised and overworked nurses at the state-owned Blacktown Hospital, in western Sydney, New South Wales, filed a dispute with the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) over the hospital management's delay in following through in a commitment to resolve inadequate staffing levels.

On November 19, over 150 NSWNMA members 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. The government responded by saying it would employ an additional 15 full-time equivalent midwifery roles and launch a "thorough" review into staffing levels at the hospital.

Frustrated with hospital management inaction, off duty nurses began protesting outside the hospital forcing the NSWANF to register a dispute in the IRC.

According to the union, there are already eight vacant staffing positions at the hospital and 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.

Adding to the nurses' workload, 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.

Tasmanian municipal workers strike for new work agreement

Outdoor workers from the Glenorchy City Council (GCC), on the outskirts of Tasmania's capital Hobart, walked off the job on December 15 for a stop work meeting in an attempt to force GCC management to enter "genuine" negotiations for a new enterprise agreement. The Australian Services Union (ASU) has been in negotiations with the council since April. It said the workers have not had a pay increase since May last year but management refuses to present a "real" wage offer.

The union claimed that the council has not given a detailed response to claims around superannuation or allowances; not addressed the use of insecure employment; advised they wish to cap redundancy entitlements at 52 weeks and want to remove the Employee Support Benefit and Study Fees Reimbursement from the enterprise agreement.

Over 90 ASU members are involved in industrial action that could include stoppages up to 24 hours, bans on overtime, call backs, working on Saturdays and Sundays and pub holidays, outdoor equipment maintenance in parks and buildings, and bans on selected administration work.

New Zealand home care workers strike

Workers employed by the Auckland-based home support provider, Lifewise, continued industrial action this week after talks between the company and the E Tu union broke down.

The workers, who provide support for elderly people, began to hold partial strikes, lasting four hours a day, from December 14 and picketed Lifewise offices. They are calling for a guaranteed minimum number of work hours, as well as increased sick leave. Many workers are only offered 15 hours a week, making them unable to survive financially on low wages.

In July 2019, when bargaining began for a new collective agreement, workers say Lifewise agreed to an extra three days of sick leave, as well as more bereavement leave. But the company withdrew the offer in September this year, blaming the financial impact of the pandemic. E Tu is continuing to negotiate with the company.

Toll transport workers walk out

Workers for Toll Logistics, an Australasian transport company owned by Japan Post, walked off work on December 22 for 24 hours. Twenty-five workers participated in the action, around 70 percent of the company's operational workforce. Workers are concerned about redundancy conditions after Japan Post decided to sell its New Zealand operations. This is the second strike by Toll workers this month, with further action planned if a settlement is not reached. The First Union is negotiating with Toll.

Fresh Collective supermarket staff hold one-hour strike

A group of workers at New World supermarket's boutique offshoot store, Fresh Collective, held a one-hour picket line strike in the affluent Auckland suburb of Mt Albert. A First Union representative stated that workers are concerned at the lack of pay parity with other supermarket workers. Fresh Collective is a luxury store where customers pay high prices, while some store staff earn only 10 cents over the minimum wage of \$18.90.



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