

Junior doctors walk out in India's Bihar state; Sri Lankan plantation workers strike over wage cuts; Australian health workers demand better wages and conditions

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

31 December 2020

Asia

India: Doctors at Bihar government-run medical colleges on strike

Around 1,000 junior doctors from nine government-run medical colleges and hospitals in Bihar state began an indefinite strike on December 23 to demand an increase in their monthly stipend. The strike affected health and emergency services but doctors in COVID-19 wards remained on duty.

A doctor told the media that a revision of their stipend was due in January this year. "We have made several representations to the health department during this period, but barring verbal assurance, we have got nothing," he added.

Tamil Nadu sanitary workers demand promised pay increase

Hundreds of sanitary workers from the Thanjavur [municipal] Corporation mobilised in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, on December 23 to protest delays in the implementation of government orders related to wages and other monetary benefits. They also chanted slogans accusing officials of having misappropriated money from the cooperative society.

The workers want their monthly salaries paid on or before the 5th of every month. They alleged that the government had promised a 10,000-rupee (\$US138) payment as a festival advance but this had not yet been paid. The protest was organised by the Thanjavur District Urban Development and Civic Body Employees' Association, which is affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

Uttarakhand: Staff from government-aided colleges protest over budget cut

Hundreds of professors and other educators from government-aided colleges protested in Dehradun, Uttarakhand state on December 23 against the so-called Umbrella Act for higher education institutions. The previous Act had a provision under which, government-aided colleges had the right to get a fixed grant each year from the state government.

The newly-introduced "Umbrella Act" will remove that provision. The government will now only provide supporting aid with that amount decided only by those in government. Protesters alleged that this will definitely impact the finances of the colleges and impact staff salaries.

Andhra Pradesh: Visakhapatnam municipal workers demand overdue wages/subhead

Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation (GVMC) contract workers protested near the Gandhi Statue outside the municipal building on December 23 demanding the government pay outstanding wages and resolve long-pending demands.

In October, GVMC sanitation workers demonstrated opposite the corporation's office at Asilametta calling for the immediate release of wages and complaining that they had put their lives at risk during the COVID-19 pandemic but not been paid.

Bangladesh garment workers demand wage arrears/subhead

Hundreds of workers from the Style Crafts garment factory at Lokhipura in Gazipur continued their protest for a third day on December 26 to demand immediate payment of their September and October wages. They blocked the Dhaka-Joydebpur Highway for an hour on the first day. The workers also want payment of outstanding overtime and maternity leave allowances.

Management falsely told the 5,000 workers employed at the plant that the arrears would be paid by December 20. It then claimed that

workers would receive it by December 24.

Bangladeshi sugar mill workers and farmers continue protests

Hundreds of workers and sugarcane farmers from the Rangpur Sugar Mills in Gaibandha district and the Shyampur Sugar Mills in Rangpur Sadar district held a half-day hartal (a strike by workers and shop owners) on December 23. The workers and farmers held street protests and blocked the rail line at Mahimaganj station for several hours. They demanded the government resume sugarcane processing in six shuttered state-owned mills, pay five months' outstanding wages, and modernise the mills.

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 plans 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 protests are jointly organised by the Bangladesh Sugar Mill Sugarcane Growers Federation and Bangladesh Sugar Industries Corporation Workers-Employees Federation.

Sri Lankan plantation workers strike over wage cuts

About 150 workers from the upper division of Mocha estate, in Maskeliya, a major tea plantation area in the Central Province, struck on December 23 to oppose wage cuts. Without warning, management paid workers only half their daily wage if they do not pluck a minimum of 16 kilograms of tea per day.

On December 28, another group of around 600 plantation workers from 4 divisions in Gartmore Estate, which is located in the same area, walked out to demand they be paid their employee provident funds before the estate is transferred to new owners. Workers demonstrated outside the estate's tea factory declaring that would not work for the new owners until the previous owners paid all outstanding allowances.

Australia

Chinese workers locked out at south-western Victorian abattoir

About 150 Chinese workers at the Midfield Group abattoir in Warrnambool, Victoria walked off the job on December 15, following an altercation between a worker and a supervisor. The meat worker required medical attention. In an act of intimidation against the temporary workers, the company immediately locked them out for two days. They returned to work on following negotiations between management and the Australasian Meat Industry Employees' Union officials.

The majority of workers involved in the dispute are on 482 and 408 temporary visas. According to media reports, some of the Chinese employees have been at the plant for several years. With anti-Chinese sentiment being whipped up by the Australian government and sections of the media, these workers are worried about whether their visas will be renewed. This has caused some friction between workers and Midfield management with little indication from the government about the workers' future employment.

The Chinese workers told the media that they had been subjected to bullying and racism and no longer felt safe at the abattoir. The abattoir is one of the largest businesses in the area, with more than 1,000 employees.

Victorian hospital and mental institution workers continue 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 are maintaining limited industrial action begun on November 16 in the fight for an improved enterprise agreement. The protected action includes rolling strikes—from 15 minutes to 24 hours—bans on certain paperwork, 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. While the workload of these workers in this critical area of health has exploded since the COVID-19 pandemic struck, their industrial action has been kept under wraps by the mass media and significantly and barely reported by their union.

Industrial action across the state is sporadic and un-coordinated with workers at each hospital and institution choosing when and what action they will take.



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