Pakistan: Doctors and health workers continue strike in Islamabad; Sri Lanka: Trainee teachers and health workers protest; Australia: NSW paramedics threaten industrial action

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

8 January 2021

Asia

Nepalese road workers strike over pay and conditions

Around 1,000 road construction workers involved in the expansion and rebuilding of the Butwal-Naravanghat road, 200 km west of Kathmandu, remain on strike after walking off the job on December 16. The contract workers, who are employed by the China State Engineering Corporation, want the minimum wage and proper employment contracts.

Workers said that they had to work 15-hour shifts and the contractor refused to provide them with proper contracts. The China State Engineering Corporation claimed on December 22 that it would hire workers on a contract basis, provide insurance, security equipment, overtime pay, monthly salary and ID cards.

Workers remain on strike and have demanded that they be made permanent.

India: BEML heavy-equipment manufacturing workers oppose privatisation

Thousands of workers from the state-owned heavy equipment manufacturer BEML began indefinite protests at nine of the company's plants in Karnataka and Kerala on January 3. They are opposing the Indian central government's move to privatise BEML and other public sector units (PSUs).

The protests were called by the BEML Employees' Association and follow a series of anti-privatisation demonstrations begun in October 2019 by PSU workers across India.

The latest protest erupted after the Department of Investment and Public Asset Management issued a memo calling for a two-stage competitive bidding process. The government wants to relinquish management control and disinvest 26 percent equity share capital out of its current 54 percent shareholding.

BEML, previously Bharat Earth Movers Limited, is headquartered in Bengaluru and manufactures heavy equipment for use in earthmoving, transport and mining. The profit-making company's assets are estimated at over 500,000 million rupees ($US6.84 billion). This includes 205 acres of land in Bengaluru, 530 acres in Mysore, 2,400 acres in Kolar Gold Fields and 375 acres in Palakkad.

Terminated ground crew at Thiruvananthapuram International Airport demand jobs and outstanding wages

Nearly 160 former Thiruvananthapuram International Airport workers in Kerala state held a sit-down protest outside the airport on January 5 demanding outstanding wages and allowances. The demonstration was called by the confederation of Trivandrum airport workers trade union, a joint forum of all unions operating in the airport.

Protesters were former employees of the now defunct Bhadra International company, an Indian-based ground handling company in partnership with Danish ground handler NOVIA. The low paid employees had been working on reduced salaries for nearly a year.

In March, airport authorities threatened termination of its contract with the company because of license fees payment defaults. In October, the agency wound up its operations.

The workers have filed an industrial dispute suit with the regional labour commissioner are and calling for the government's intervention to enforce payment of all wages and allowances. Protesters have called on the airport not to release Bhadra International's equipment until it settles the industrial dispute.

Karnataka Music and Performing Arts University staff demand overdue wages

Teaching and non-teaching staff from the state-run Karnataka Music University at Mysurust protested on January 2 to demand payment of all salary and allowance arrears. The staff said that their salaries had not been paid for the last three months.

Teaching staff said they have been taking online classes since April 2020 when the university closed because of COVID-19. They alleged that the university was using the pandemic as an excuse for delaying salary payments. The university is regarded as India's second-highest-recommended music and performing arts tertiary institution.

Jammu and Kashmir public health workers continue years-long campaign for wages and permanent jobs

Hundreds of daily-wage workers from the public health engineering

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department (PHE) at the Jammu and Kashmir water supply scheme demonstrated in Udhampur city on January 2. The desperate workers have not received their full pay, or in some case any pay, for over 58 months.

Around 33,000 PHE daily wages workers struck for 24 hours on February 8 last year over their long-pending demands and walked out again for 50 days on September 24. They want payment of all outstanding salaries, daily wage workers to be given permanent jobs and all employees paid monthly in line with central government rates.

The protests were organised by the Jal Shakti (PHE) Employees & Workers Association and the PHE Employees United Front.

Non-teaching workers at Punjab schools demand permanent jobs

Non-teaching school workers involved in the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA—Education for All Movement) demonstrated outside the finance minister's office in Bathinda, Punjab on January 1 to demand permanent jobs.

The protesters, who were joined by workers from Muktsar, Mansa, Faridkot, Ferozepur and Barnala, marched in the city and beat utensils to attract attention. They submitted a memorandum of demands to an official at the minister's office.

The workers said 8,886 SSA teachers were made permanent in 2018 by the state government. One thousand non-teaching employees involved the scheme, however, were not given permanent jobs even though they had completed written exams in the merit list to get a job. The non-teaching workers include clerical workers, data entry operators, accountants, finance, legal assistants among other posts.

Bangladeshi sugar mill workers protest against terminations

Workers at the state-owned Rangpur Sugar Mills protested on the mill's premises at Mahimaganj, in Gaibandha district, on January 2 over the termination of 90 workers. The mill is one of six where the government has suspended sugarcane processing.

Angry workers kept the mill's managing director confined in his office for about five hours to demand immediate payment of all outstanding wages and cancellation of the termination order which was issued without prior notice.

Workers claim that the Bangladesh Sugar and Food Industries Corporation (BSFIC) issued a statement on December 20, assuring employees that no one would be terminated. The BSFIC claims that 15 state-owned sugar mills in the country's southern and northern regions are running at a loss.

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

Pakistan: Islamabad doctors and health workers continue strike

Doctors and other health workers at the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS), Islamabad's top government hospital, remain on strike and are continuing protests to demand the government withdraw its pro-privatisation Medical Teaching Institution (MTI) ordinance.

The strike has forced the closure of outpatient departments and all other facilities apart from emergency wards and wards treating COVID-19 patients. The doctors have established a protest camp inside the hospital premises.

The strike has won widespread support amongst other PIMS employees, including paramedics, nurses and other workers. On December 30, protesters marched to a busy square near the high-security zone housing the parliament where they threatened to launch a sit-in demonstration starting January 5 if the government failed to withdraw the ordinance.

The Grand Health Alliance (GHA), an umbrella organisation of health sector unions, is trying to negotiate a deal with the government and shut down the strike. In its latest round of capitulations, the GHA withdrew its January 5 deadline on the government to withdraw the MTI.

The planned reforms under the MTI will force hospitals and other state-backed facilities to fund their own teaching institutions. Health workers claim the reforms are aimed at slashing federal government expenditure, slashing services and opening the way for privatisation.

Sri Lankan trainee teachers protest against delayed job appointments

About 100 government trainee teachers protested outside the ministry of education in Colombo on January 5 to demand the government expedite job appointments which had been delayed for nearly a year and a half.

According to the teachers, there are almost 4,000 trainees across the country that have completed their training but not given jobs. The teachers said the government had not listed schools where there were vacancies, undermining their chances of getting employment.

Sri Lankan government healthcare workers hold nationwide protest

Several hundred non-medical healthcare workers demonstrated outside government hospitals across Sri Lanka, including the National Hospital in Colombo and Main Hospital in Kandy, on January 6 over several demands.

Their demands included permanent jobs, increased overtime payments, uniform and risk allowances for handling COVID-19 infected equipment, and the provision of proper personal protective equipment (PPE).

Workers complained that ancillary staff were becoming infected in many hospitals because they lacked PPE. The protest was organised by the United Health Workers Union and supported by other health workers who face similar issues.

Australia

New South Wales paramedics vote for industrial action

Ninety percent of New South Wales Ambulance (NSWA) paramedics who responded to a survey from the Ambulance Division of the Health

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Services Union (ADHSU) have endorsed future industrial action. They are in dispute with the NSWA over its decision to implement a part-time structure for newly-recruited university graduates.

The NSWA wants to hire new paramedics on a take-it or leave-it permanent part-time arrangement with no right to a full-time contract.

Paramedics fear that the new recruits could only be guaranteed 12 hours work per week—i.e., one shift on average a week. They could then be asked to fill holes in rosters anywhere as if they were casual employees.

The union has threatened to apply to the Fair Work Commission for approval to ballot its members to take protected Industrial action on the grounds that NSWA has not consulted with the union or given members time to respond to its proposal.

The ADHSU, however, has indicated that any industrial action would be low-level. In a newsletter to members the union said, “With COVID being back in the community, it’s probably not a good time to take actual strike action, but instead limit it to nuisance action.”

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