

Chinese healthcare workers demand unpaid wages; Construction workers strike in Myanmar; New Zealand home support workers locked out

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Asia

### Chinese healthcare workers protest over wage arrears

On January 16, hundreds of doctors, nurses and healthcare workers at Suixian Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Henan Province marched to the local government building, demanding unpaid salaries. Many of them have not received any pay for months. The government responded by arresting more than 20 healthcare workers.

The hospital has stopped paying bonuses and merit-pays since May 2019. Management kept deducting pensions and insurances from employees' salaries but these amounts were never used to pay for actual pensions and insurances. One doctor said he has only received the full amount of his monthly salary once in the past two years.

Several hundred healthcare workers previously demanded their wages be paid through the local government and Health Bureau and were told a solution would be organised by December 25, 2020. This proved to be an empty promise, triggering the current demonstrations.

Many of these healthcare workers were on the frontline during the most severe stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in China at the beginning of last year.

### South Korea: Exhausted nurses call for extra staff

Korean Health and Medical Workers' Union members held a press conference and demonstration outside Seoul City Hall on Tuesday. They were demanding the government increase the number of nurses at the city's government-run Boramae Hospital. It followed previous protests by nurses over the same issue.

The traumatised and exhausted nurses said they are struggling to care for the surging number of patients since health authorities hastily increased the number of hospital beds without increasing the number of workers. A nurse in the coronavirus ward wrote an open letter to the prime minister complaining that "Each of my colleagues is taking care of nine critically ill patients without any assistance. They have already been stretched to their limits."

A union spokesperson said the minimum number of nurses needed at the

hospital was 436 but there were only 160.

### Parcel delivery workers in Seoul threaten strike

Taekbae Union members held a press conference at the union's office in Seoul on January 15 and threatened to call a strike next Wednesday if parcel-delivery firms do not improve working conditions. The union demanded a clear response by Monday.

Parcel delivery firms have promised to hire more workers so work is divided into classifying and loading packages and then delivering parcels. Currently, delivery drivers are responsible for all tasks. This has been cited as a major reason for long work hours and the death of 16 parcel delivery drivers last year alone.

### Construction workers strike in Myanmar for unpaid wages

Over 2,000 building workers walked off the job on Tuesday and protested outside the huge Yoma Central Project in downtown Yangon, Burma's largest city. The \$US400 million Peninsula Yangon and Yoma Central projects are a collection of luxury apartments, hotels and offices.

The walkout was triggered when workers from the Peninsula Yangon project, run by BYMA Myanmar, were short-changed by as much as three quarters of their proper pay. The wages should have included arrears from December and government social security payments.

Responding to the strike, BYMA Myanmar announced it would pay workers the full amount on the next pay-day, January 26, saying that the affair was a "misunderstanding." Workers said they knew nothing about the arrangement to pay next Tuesday until they took strike action.

### Nepalese health workers demand COVID-19 allowance

Over 100 workers from the government-run Bara district Kalaiya Hospital, in south-eastern Nepal, have been protesting for over a week

demanding immediate release of the COVID-19 risk allowance, which was payable from March last year. Protesters complained that workers at the district health office are getting the allowance.

The 50-bed hospital, which has 200 staff, was shut down in August after 11 workers, including a doctor, contracted the coronavirus. All services, including the emergency ward and outpatient department, were closed for three days while the hospital was disinfected. Health workers blamed administration for the virus spread, saying they were not provided with the necessary safety equipment while dealing with COVID-19 patients.

### **India: Municipal workers in Delhi demand overdue wages**

Workers from the Municipal Corporations in East and West Delhi marched from the Civic Centre to the Delhi Secretariat on January 15 to demand five months' wages and pensions. Protesters included teachers, nurses, paramedics, engineers and all other municipal employees. A memorandum was handed to the chief minister.

In November, around 125,000 workers from the Municipal Corporation of Delhi walked off the job demanding five months of overdue salaries. Municipal corporations in Delhi, East Delhi and North Delhi are in financial crisis due to the coronavirus pandemic. Tens of thousands of retired employees are not being paid their pensions.

### **Restaurant food delivery workers in Punjab on strike**

Workers from the on-line restaurant food delivery company Zomato have been on strike since January 10 in Amritsar, Punjab, over slashed income during the coronavirus pandemic. They said a worker who was earlier earning up to 25,000 rupees (\$US345) after working 28 days is now earning only around 13,000-rupees (\$179).

A workers' delegation approached the labour commissioner but were stalled and told to wait until company officials bring a copy of service conditions to the next scheduled hearing.

### **Maharashtra public sector insurance workers demand wage increase**

Employees of central government-owned Public Sector General Insurance (PSGI) companies demonstrated in Nagpur on January 12 over several outstanding demands. These included immediate resumption of wage revision talks, reversion to the 1995 pension scheme for all, an update of the pension and a uniform family pension of 30 percent. Demonstrations were held outside the Nagpur regional office of the mother company Oriental Insurance Company.

The demonstration was organised by the Joint Forum of Trade Unions and Associations (JFTU). They criticised the General Insurers (Public Sector) Association of India and Government of India for delaying wage revision in PSGI companies. JFTU has decided to intensify the struggle by organising a hunger strike on January 27.

### **Punjab University non-teaching workers oppose terminations**

Non-teaching workers at the Punjab University in Patiala stopped work on January 13 to oppose the non-renewal of contracts of three work colleagues. They picketed the university gate from 8 a.m. until the evening.

Protesters said the university has not renewed the contracts of two ad-hoc employees and one who was on a work-charge. They alleged that the workers were not given any notices in advance despite being employed since 1995.

### **Catholic Syrian Bank workers in Kerala protest**

Workers from the privately-owned Catholic Syrian Bank (CSB) demonstrated at the bank's head office in Thrissur on January 19 to demand implementation of the 11th Bipartite Settlement. Under the 11th Bipartite wage settlement, effective from 2017, bank employees were entitled to a 15 percent pay rise. Workers also opposed the current voluntary retirement scheme (VRS).

CSB is a private sector bank with its headquarters at Thrissur. It is one of the oldest banks in India and has a network of over 450 branches across India.

### **Pakistani power utility workers hold anti-privatisation protest**

Workers from the government-owned utility Water & Power Development Authority (WAPDA) and its regional power distribution companies held a national protest day on January 14 against the proposed privatisation of national electricity distribution and thermal power stations at the behest of the International Monetary Fund.

The protest was coordinated by the All Pakistan Wapda Hydro Electric Workers Union. It follows demonstrations and strikes by thousands of power workers over several years against the privatisation of the country's power utilities. The government intends to privatise all profit-making state-owned enterprises but unions have not initiated any nationally coordinated campaign.

### **Bangladeshi hotel and restaurant workers demand implementation of labour law**

Hotel and restaurant workers in Dhaka demonstrated in front of the National Press Club on January 17 to demand implementation of the labour law and an end to terminations. The workers want an end to labour law violations and physical assaults. The demonstration was organised by the Bangladesh Hotel, Restaurant, Sweetmeat, and Bakery Workers' Union. The union said employers had seized on the COVID-19 pandemic to not pay wages and terminate workers without paying arrears and overtime pay.

### **Sri Lankan government hospital workers hold nation-wide protest**

Health ancillary workers from Sri Lankan government hospitals

protested in several provinces on January 19 over multiple demands. The United Health Workers' Union organised protests outside hospitals in Panadura and Beruwala in the Western Province, Balapitiya and Kamburupitiya in the Southern Province and Nuwara Eliya and Gampola in the Central Province.

Workers displayed placards denouncing a freeze on overtime rates, inadequate leave, failure to provide risk allowance and the delay of uniform allowances. They also demanded that substitute workers be made permanent. The union claimed that the government had not taken any decision to make these workers permanent although they qualify having completed nine months as substitute workers.

These workers demonstrated in Colombo on December 15 and marched to the health ministry to put forward the same demands. On December 2, hundreds of junior health workers protested outside seven major government hospitals demanding that all substitute workers be made permanent, along with other demands.

The protests followed demonstrations in November outside the country's major hospitals, including the National Hospital in Colombo, Kandy Hospital and Jayawardanapura Hospital.

## **Australia**

### **Peters Ice Cream factory workers in Melbourne begin industrial action**

Close to 150 members of the United Workers Union (UWU) at the Peters Ice Cream factory in Mulgrave, south-east Melbourne, began protected industrial action on Friday. Workers are opposing the company's proposed enterprise agreement. The industrial action consists of an indefinite ban on overtime.

According to the UWU, the company is mainly attacking casual workers. Workers had already rejected the company's first offer that proposed cutting the hourly wage of casual employees by more than \$9. About 30 percent of the plant's workforce is casual, many workers having been at the company for years without an offer of a secure permanent job.

The company's latest proposed enterprise agreement offered a \$26.95 hourly base rate for casuals, with a 25 percent loading. Casuals are currently paid \$31.70 an hour. Permanent workers were offered a paltry 5 percent pay rise over three years. The union is demanding a slightly higher increase of 7.5 percent over three years—less than the increase in the cost of living for a worker living in Melbourne.

The union claimed that this is the second consecutive enterprise agreement where workers at the factory have been forced to take industrial action in order to protect the wages and conditions for casual workers.

### **GEOVERT workers in Queensland strike**

Eight workers from the Gladstone depot of GEOVERT, an asset management contractor in mining and construction on Queensland's north-east coast, walked out on Monday morning for one hour and again on Friday. The dispute is for a better enterprise agreement offer. They picketed on the roadside outside the depot holding placards saying "workers fighting to maintain conditions" and "Workers fighting for proper wages."

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union members have not had a

pay increase for five years. GEOVERT has offered only a 1 percent pay rise. Workers want industry-standard pay, improved allowances and no loss of conditions.

### **New Zealand: Auckland home support workers locked out**

Auckland home support workers employed by the Lifewise Trust have been issued a lockout notice from February 2 to 17, after taking a series of one-day strikes this month. The 90 workers have been pushing for more guaranteed hours and increased sick and bereavement leave for more than 18 months. Lifewise is a community social development organisation which cares for the elderly and people with disabilities in Auckland District Health Board areas.

Last year, the organisation agreed to increase sick leave and bereavement leave in a proposed collective agreement but then went back on its word.

Helen Taufa, a Lifewise carer for 12 years, said the workers would have to seek financial help to get through the lockout. Increased bereavement leave was a "big thing" for the predominantly Pacific islander workforce, she said.

Workers also needed extra sick leave due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They had also been fighting for more than the current 10 guaranteed hours a week. The number of hours workers perform has gone down, meaning their take-home pay has decreased.

E t? is seeking advice on the legality of the lockout while calling for mediation through the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. Lifewise is mobilising strike-breakers to cover the lockout period.



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