

Nepalese health workers demand COVID-19 risk allowances;
 Pakistani power workers expand anti-privatisation protests; New
 Zealand home care workers face lockdown

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 January 2021

Asia

Nepalese health workers demand COVID-19 risk allowances

As many as 53 health workers, including six doctors, at the Dolakha District Hospital, in north-east Nepal, began protesting on December 20 to demand immediate payment of a promised COVID-19 risk allowance. The workers are wearing black armbands and have been holding a sit-down protest at the hospital.

Meanwhile, over 100 workers from the government-run Bara district Kalaiya Hospital in south-eastern Nepal have been protesting for over two weeks for the same allowance.

Health workers and employees working to contain COVID-19 and care for coronavirus patients are eligible for the allowance, which was payable from March last year.

Nepalese public sector workers demand overdue wages

Public servants, teachers, health workers and other employees from the Dhanauji Rural Municipality in Dhanusha district walked out on January 4 and are maintaining a sit-down protest outside the civic body's office to demand six months unpaid wages. Office staff have padlocked the offices.

According to the *Kathmandu Post*, delays in processing several rural municipal budgets have blocked the distribution of wages. The delays have also stopped various public services, including vaccination programs for children.

India: Jammu and Kashmir childcare workers demand pending salary

Anganwadi (childcare) workers and helpers demonstrated in Jammu and Kashmir in northern India on January 27 to demand outstanding salaries. Workers from various Ganderbal district zones assembled outside the Sub-Divisional Magistrate's office and chanted slogans. "There are many

workers who are the only breadwinners of their families, yet the government pays no heed to our demands," one protester told the media.

On November 4, the Jammu and Kashmir Anganwadi Workers and Helpers Association held a protest in Srinagar. The anganwadi workers want a 21,000-rupee (\$US283.40) monthly honorarium and for the state government to permanently employ all anganwadi workers and helpers.

Assam midday meal workers demand government worker status

Midday meal workers in the north-eastern Indian state of Assam held a sit-down protest on January 23 to demand government employee status for midday meal workers at government schools. The central Indian government established the National Program of Nutritional Support in Primary Education (midday meal scheme) in 1995 but insisted that midday meal workers did not qualify for the entitlement and employment privileges of permanent government workers.

While most of the protesting workers were from Lakhimpur district they were also joined by employees from several other districts.

Kerala government medical college doctors walk out

Government medical college doctors in Kerala walked out on Monday to demand payment of wage arrears that have accumulated since 2016. The Kerala Government Medical College Teachers Association planned a series of strikes to commence on Friday from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. Outpatients facilities, elective surgeries and classes would not operate. All non-COVID meetings, board duties, VIP duties and pay ward admissions were to be boycotted.

Doctors have threatened to hold a 24-hour hunger protest on February 5 and an indefinite strike February 9.

Odisha revenue department workers protest over assault of colleague

Revenue department workers in Jagatsinghpur district, Odisha state walked out on January 23 to protest against a physical attack on a revenue inspector colleague. Organised by the Odisha Rajaswa Amala Sangh, they demonstrated outside Balikuda village office where the inspector worked. They then marched to the Collectorate and Sub-Collector's office and demanded the arrest of the attackers. They continued the protest on January 25, stopping all work at the Collectorate office.

Pakistani power utility workers expand anti-privatisation protests

Water & Power Development Authority (WAPDA) workers and employees of its regional power distribution companies protested on Monday to demand the government withdraw plans to privatise the state-run utility and its distribution companies.

The action followed a nation-wide protest on January 14 coordinated by the All Pakistan Wapda Hydro Electric Workers Union. Further protests are planned for February 3 and 11 and a protest march to Islamabad on February 18. The union said it would shut down power supply if the government failed to withdraw its privatisation plan.

The government, at the behest of the International Monetary Fund, intends to privatise all profit-making state-owned enterprises. While this has drawn widespread protests from workers across the country, the unions have refused to initiate any nationally coordinated campaign.

Bangladeshi bidi workers protest against tax increase

Hundreds of Bangladeshi bidi (hand-rolled cigarette) workers protested at the Kustia Public Library in western Bangladesh on Monday with six demands including withdrawal of a 4 percent government tax increase on each packet of bidi. They also called for a wage rise and for bidi-making to be declared a cottage industry.

The workers held protests over these issues in September, August and June. The COVID-19 pandemic, along with the tax increase, has severely reduced the income of hundreds of thousands of these highly-exploited workers as well as cultivators and traders.

Cambodian factory workers return to work after winning demands

Over 200 workers at the Master Blacksmith Metal Products toy factory in Cambodia's Shandong Special Economic Zone returned to work on Tuesday after the employer granted workers' nine demands. The workers had picketed the factory for three days, blocking the remainder of the 600-strong workforce from entering the plant.

Their demands including improved facilities at the plant, an end to dismissals without valid reasons, reinstatement of unfairly sacked workers, easier leave applications, non-compulsory overtime and for workers to be paid for the whole of their contract if terminated early.

The workers agreed to the three strike days being deducted from their annual leave accrual in government-approved negotiations on Monday that endorsed the list of demands.

Australia and New Zealand

South Australian roadside assist workers hold third strike

About 60 roadside breakdown assist workers from the Royal Automobile Association (RAA)-South Australia walked off the job for three hours on January 20 after management refused to negotiate a new enterprise agreement and applied to terminate the current enterprise agreement. The current agreement expired in June 2019. Workers' last pay increase was 1 July 2018.

The RAA employees walked off the job in January last year after management broke off negotiations with the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU). Union members had rejected a management enterprise deal which included cuts to conditions and allowances.

AMWU members walked out again for four hours in March after management came back with another offer that included a two-tiered wage system with cuts to allowances and pay for new employees. It also dropped a former commitment that all new employees had to be trade qualified. Workers are demanding that RAA management withdraw the application to terminate the expired agreement and restart negotiations.

If the Fair Work Commission terminates the current agreement the workers will be forced onto the vehicle industry award on much lower pay and conditions.

RAA's revenue increased by 13.5 percent last year and it is reported to be a top five business in South Australia. RAA management argued it needed to cut wages and conditions to be "flexible" and "profitable" during a global pandemic.

New Zealand: Lifewise home care workers face lockout

Homecare support workers employed by Auckland-based Lifewise Trust are going ahead with more strike action in defiance of a threatened lockout. The trust has issued a two-week lockout notice to about 90 workers from February 2 following a series of one-day strikes earlier this month.

The workers held a three-day strike on January 23 and picketed the Lifewise offices in Mount Eden. One worker said the move to lock out workers is "extreme," but they will not back down.

Lifewise, which is part of the Methodist Church, is a community social development organisation that cares for the elderly and people with disabilities in the Auckland District Health Board areas.

The E t? union has been involved in 18 months of negotiations for a collective agreement that increases sick and bereavement leave. Workers are also demanding guaranteed hours as they struggle to survive financially, with some on as little as nine hours of work a fortnight.

E t? is keeping the Lifewise workers isolated while announcing last week that it was "seeking advice" on the legality of the lockout and calling for mediation through the business-friendly Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. Lifewise is organising strike-breakers to cover the lockout period.



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