

Indian power workers, government employers and insurance employers oppose privatisation; Australia: Melbourne dock workers vote to strike

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

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Asia

## Millions of power workers across India strike against privatisation

Power workers organised by the National Co-ordination Committee of Electricity Employees and Engineers (NCCOEEE), held a nation-wide strike on Wednesday to oppose privatisation of the power sector. Around 2.7 million power workers, including engineers from over 100 power utilities and distribution corporations, participated in the walkout.

A NCCOEEE spokesman told the media that all electricity employees in Kerala and Chandigarh states participated in the strike with a majority of power workers walking out in Tamil Nadu, Haryana, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Bihar and Assam. The spokesman said the strike was in solidarity with the struggling peasants and farmers protesting in Delhi and throughout the country.

Other demands were for the reintroduction of the old pension scheme and scrapping of the new scheme, and 2.5 million rupees (\$US34,246) in compensation to the families of field workers who died from COVID-19.

## Indian government employees and pensioners hold national protest

Hundreds of thousands of Indian government employees and pensioners held a "Call Attention Day" protest on February 1 to denounce the central government's anti-labour policies. It was called by the National Joint Council of Action (NJCA), an umbrella body of central government employees, and representing over 3.2 million workers, including from the railways, defence, postal, atomic energy, Indian Space Research Organisation and other departments, and around six million pensioners.

Protesters demanded the government withdraw plans to corporatise railway production units and the 41 Ordnance Factories Board plants, end its GOCO (government owned-company operated) model at the eight Army Base workshops, and stop the privatisation and outsourcing of permanent jobs.

They also demanded that all employees be made permanent, even if absent at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and compensation be paid to families of employees who died from COVID-19.

## Life insurance workers hold India-wide protest against privatisation

Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) employees protested in various parts of the country on February 2 and 3 against the central government's decision to increase the foreign direct investment (FDI) cap in the insurance sector from 49 percent to 74 percent.

LIC workers alleged that the Modi government's decision to call an Initial Public Offer (IPO) or increasing FDI will undermine LIC, its employees and policyholders and enable foreign investors or a small number of billionaires to control LIC's valuable resources. The government want to secure 1.75 trillion rupees this year by selling LIC shares.

Protesters pointed to LIC's profits and that its 3 trillion rupees surplus every year could be used by the government for social welfare schemes.

## Punjab college teachers on strike

Teachers from the non-government DAV (Dayanand Anglo-Vedic) College, BBK DAV College—Amritsar and the DAV College of Education in Jalandhar, have been on strike since January 25 demanding to be paid according to University Grants Commission (UGC) guidelines. The strike was organised by the DAV Coordination Committee.

Teachers have been trying to negotiate for these demands since September 2018, but after 11 meetings there is still no resolution. The teachers alleged allowances from the Career Advancement Scheme have been pending for the past three years.

## Doctors at Kerala government medical colleges walk out

Government medical college doctors in Kerala walked out for three hours on January 29 to demand payment of wages and allowances that have accumulated since 2016. They boycotted outpatient procedures, elective surgeries and teaching duties. The action followed a three-hour walkout on January 25 and a sit-down protest (dharna) in front of the Directorate of Medical Education (DME) office in Thiruvananthapuram.

over the issue.

### **Andhra Pradesh social health workers demand COVID-19 allowance**

Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers demonstrated near the Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation (GVMC) office on January 25 for an increase in the Modi government's National Health Mission (NHM) budget and payment of the promised additional allowance of 1,000 rupees (\$13.70) for the coronavirus lockdown period.

ASHA workers said the COVID-19 pandemic had caused the death of ASHA workers across the country. The highly exploited front-line workers complained that dependents of workers who died from the virus were not paid compensation.

### **Sri Lankan tea plantation workers strike for basic wage increase**

More than 1,500 plantation workers from several tea estates in Ann field, Dickoya, Alton and Up-Cot began an indefinite strike on February 3, to demand a 1,000-rupee basic daily wage. Striking workers blocked the transportation of tea to Colombo for shipping.

The wage demand was raised five years ago but the plantation managements are refusing to increase wages. Fearing a major eruption of estate workers, the Ceylon Workers Congress, a major union and part of the Rajapakse government, called a one-day strike on February 5 covering the whole plantation area to demand the wage increase.

### **Sri Lankan health workers in Peradeniya on strike**

Health workers from the Peradeniya Teaching Hospital walked out on February 1 to demand continuation of a special leave system implemented in December after discontinuing the two-batch work roster. Its purpose was to minimise the COVID-19 infections amongst health workers. Workers are concerned that it is being removed while the coronavirus is still a threat.

Strikers from all grades, including nurses, attendants, ambulance workers and minor staff, walked out after being told that the special leave has been cancelled from February. The workers also want personal protective equipment (PPE) provided to all health workers, including ambulance staff.

The unions ended the strike later that day after doing a deal with management to maintain the special leave system until the end of February.

### **Burmese health workers stop work to protest coup**

Workers at 70 hospitals in Burma (Myanmar) stopped work this week to protest Monday's military coup that followed the humiliating defeat of pro-military candidates in the national elections.

Health workers across the country have worn red ribbons to oppose the coup and call for the release of National League for Democracy politicians

and their leader Aung San Suu Kyi. An Associated Press report Thursday shows doctors and medical staff at the Yangon General Hospital, the largest in the country, posing with red ribbons in PPE gear in defiance of the military's crackdown.

On Wednesday committees formed by medical staff issued calls for support from health workers internationally.

The country's health workers, in one of the most ill-equipped health systems globally, have borne the brunt of the fight against the COVID pandemic that has produced 41,000 infections and 3,160 deaths. The workers fear that the generals' dictatorship will exploit the pandemic conditions to suppress all opposition.

## **Australia**

### **Applus LNG platform workers in Western Australia strike**

The Australian Workers Union (AWU), covering welding inspectors employed by Applus at Woodside offshore LNG facilities in northern Western Australia, has given notice that its members will commence strike action on February 9 in opposition to the company's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). Action could include rolling stoppages of 1, 2, 4 and 24 hours and bans and limitations.

The AWU, which is part of the Offshore Alliance, which includes the Maritime Union of Australia, said that 93 percent of the Applus Woodside workforce voted down the company's non-union EA and 100 percent voted for protected industrial action. The union claimed that Applus' marine and welding inspectors, rope access and engineering crew want the EA to include secure rosters and reverse the cuts in the employment contracts which Applus unilaterally carried out 2 years ago.

### **Jadestone offshore LNG workers vote to extend strike action**

Over 40 maintenance workers on the Montaro floating liquefied natural gas (LNG) platform, off the coast of northern Western Australia, have voted to extend the period in which they can take "protected" industrial action by another 30 days. There has been no date set for when strike action will resume.

Workers began rolling strike action in November in a dispute over their first union negotiated enterprise agreement and took further action on December 2 and 11. The rolling stoppages, which range from 4 hours to 24 hours, are preventing maintenance and rectification work to a damaged wellhead causing a shutdown.

The dispute is between the Offshore Alliance and Jadestone Energy. The Alliance claimed that Jadestone wants to cut pay rates, reduce superannuation, redundancy, travel and training entitlements.

Jadestone employees are currently engaged under employment contracts that have no legal standing in the Fair Work Commission. The Offshore Alliance (OA) is demanding job security, a pay increase and maintenance of existing conditions.

### **Quarry workers in Perth strike for improved pay and conditions**

Transport Workers Union members at Hanson Quarries in Rivervale, a suburb of Western Australia's capital Perth, walked out on January 27 to demand improved wages and conditions in the company's proposed enterprise agreement. Sixteen union members picketed the company's head office.

Workers said they are fighting for job security and a fair share of the company's profits. The union claimed that the construction industry, particularly residential, has been making record profits since the state and federal government announced grants to stimulate the economy.

### **Melbourne dock workers vote to strike**

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members at the Victoria International Container Terminal Services (VICT) dock in Port Melbourne have overwhelmingly voted to strike over the company's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). The original agreement was negotiated by the Australian Maritime Officers Union (AMOU), which the MUA said it wants to "tear up". AMOU members at the fully automated terminal operate container cranes from control towers.

According to the *Australian Financial Review*, the union, which covers 128 workers at the dock, wants 3.5 percent annual pay increases on top of new classifications that would lift the annual minimum salary by \$20,000, the most senior classification by \$10,000 and a reduction in the standard working week to 37 hours from 42 hours. The MUA also wants a week off every 10 weeks so that VICT's four-day-on, four-day-off roster at 12-hour shifts averages out to 37 hours a week.

VICT has offered its low paid 65 casual workers, who tie up and fasten containers, a 20 percent wage rise in the first year, 2.5 percent for the second and 3 percent for the third and fourth years. It has also offered to lift pay for the permanent workforce, mostly operating cranes from a control tower, by 11 percent over four years.

An MUA spokesman said the union wanted to provide certainty around hours of work and safe manning levels to address severe shortages of staff, and to reduce excessive hours being worked with either no or little breaks in a 12-hour shift.

Workers are yet to decide on what industrial action they will take.

### **New Zealand Family Planning workers vote to strike**

Around 100 New Zealand Family Planning Association (FPA) nurses, medical administrators and health promoters have voted to strike for 24 hours from 16 February.

The strike notice was issued by the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) this week after members rejected the latest offer in collective agreement negotiations, because it failed to fully address longstanding wage inequity and did not provide a "tangible process" to achieve this.

A NZNO spokesperson said experienced FPA nurses are paid at least 8 percent less than their counterparts employed by the District Health Boards (DHBs). FPA basic nurse practitioners earn between 10 and 27 percent less than if they worked in the DHB. Three out of the four pay rates for medical receptionist and administration roles are below the "living wage," currently deemed to be \$NZ22.10 per hour.

The FPA says the situation is the result of a decade of underfunding, including by the current Labour government. The parties will attend mediation on February 10 before the strike occurs, and the union has declared it hopes a resolution will be found.

The action is part of ongoing struggles in the grossly underfunded health sector. Around 3,200 primary health care workers in doctors' practices have been holding stoppages, which the NZNO has kept strictly limited, since late last year. Practice nurses continue to be paid up to 10.6 percent less than those in DHB hospitals, even though their work has been crucial to the COVID-19 response.



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