

India: Satyam auto parts workers demand higher pay; Punjab contract workers fight for jobs permanency; New Zealand medical laboratory workers protest

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

12 March 2021

### India: Workers protest privatisation of Visakhapatnam Steel

Thousands of workers picketing the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant (VSP) administrative office on March 9 were confronted with large numbers Central Industrial Security Force personnel and police. The demonstrating workers stopped the car of the company's director of finance and surrounded him when he got out of the vehicle.

VSP employees and their family members and supporters, who have been holding protest hunger strikes and demonstrations over the past few weeks, stepped up their agitation on March 8 after India's finance minister told parliament that the government planned to sell its stake in the state-owned company.

On February 8, thousands of workers and supporters held a sit-down protest in Vijayawada over the Indian government's approval for a 100 percent disinvestment of Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Limited (RINL), VSP's corporate entity. Two other demonstrations were held last month including one on February 26 which blocked the National Highway (NH-16) to demand the Modi government abandon its plan to privatise the plant.

### Satyam auto parts workers in Gurugram step up pay demands

Satyam Auto Parts Component workers protested in Gurugram on March 1 over the company's failure to increase their wages and honour other promises outstanding for the past two years. Workers staged a demonstration outside the company premises and said they would not leave until their demands were granted. About 500 police officers were deployed in Gurugram to contain the protest.

Workers said their wage increase had been promised in March 2019 but the company, despite repeated promises and meetings, had failed to keep its word. The employees, who had been boycotting lunch in the company premises since February 22, decided to strike on March 1.

### Uttar Pradesh health workers demand outstanding salaries

Around 50 housekeeping and security workers at a COVID-19 treatment hospital in Noida protested on March 9 over salary non-payments. The workers alleged that their salaries have not been paid since November.

Hospital officials claimed that the salaries were delayed because the hospital had not received funds from the state government. The demonstrators were third-party contract workers hired by a private company.

### JNS factory workers in Manesar demand better pay for permanent jobs

Over 600 contract workers demanded job permanency and other benefits at a protest in Patiala on March 7. The demonstration, which involved members of about 15 contract employee unions from across the state, was organised by the Punjab UT Mulazim Sangharsh Morcha umbrella group. As well as job permanency, the workers want a dearness allowance, implementation of the sixth pay commission increases, and monthly salaries for facilitators and midday meal workers.

Workers from across the state travelled to Patiala and planned to march to the chief minister's residence. Police attempted to block the march from reaching the chief minister's home by offering the protesters a meeting with higher officials in the residence. When workers rejected this offer and surrounded the chief minister's home, police brutally attacked the protest and broke it up.

### Childcare workers protest across Himachal Pradesh state

Hundreds of childcare (anganwadi) workers held a state-wide protest in Himachal Pradesh on March 9 to demand the appointment of workers for pre-primary classes. They struck work and held a rally at the state secretariat in Shimla. The demonstration was organised by All India Federation of Workers and Helpers which sent a strike notice to the Director of Women and Child Development Department days before their strike.

### **Delhi private educator staff protest over non-payment of full salaries**

Private school teachers and staff from Summer Fields School in Delhi protested on March 3 over the non-payment of full salaries and other arrears. The educators said they have been receiving only 50 percent of their salaries since April 2020 and were yet to receive arrears payments for the 7th pay commission salary structure. The protesting teachers and staff later submitted a memorandum to the Delhi Directorate of Education, south east zone.

### **Thousands of JNS factory workers in Manesar demand better pay and conditions**

Over 2,000 JNS factory workers—most of them women—in Manesar stopped work and occupied the plant at 6 a.m. until nightfall on March 8 in protest over contract work, long working hours, management harassment and arbitrary sackings. A similar demonstration was held by women workers at Keihin factory in the Bawal industrial area.

### **Pakistan: Sindh irrigation workers fight for permanency**

Sindh Irrigation Department workers marched to the provincial assembly on March 4 after four days of protests outside Karachi Press Club. They were demanding permanent jobs. Workers accused the Pakistani government of repeatedly renegeing on previous promises to make their positions permanent. Management continues to employ temporary workers throughout the irrigation department's various divisions. Over 650 officers have been on temporary contracts since 2005.

The Sindh state government deployed a large contingent of police to blockade and break up the protest march.

### **Bangladeshi jute workers demand outstanding pay**

Temporary workers from the shuttered state-owned UMC Jute Mills demonstrated at the mill gate at Nagoriakandi for several hours on Monday to demand immediate payment of their outstanding arrears.

This protest followed similar action by workers from nine state-owned jute mills outside the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation office in Chattogram on March 3. While Mills Corporation authorities have paid arrears of about 3,000 permanent workers, 3,000 temporary workers are yet to be paid.

Last July, the government closed down 25 state-owned jute mills, sacking about 50,000 workers and leaving thousands of jute farmers with no income.

### **Hundreds of Bangladeshi garment workers protest factory closure**

Hundreds of workers from Padma Wears in the Chattogram Export Processing Zone protested on March 3 over the immediate closure of the

factory without paying any wages or arrears of the factory's 1,400 employees. The workers blocked the road and held a sit-down protest for over an hour until the Chattogram Industrial Police removed them. The factory was closed without any prior warning.

### **Western Australia: Offshore workers to strike over contract labour**

Over 40 engineers and technicians at Jadestone's Montara floating oil facility, north of Western Australia's Kimberly region, were to stop work today at 6 a.m. and remain on strike for four weeks to demand increased job security and a reduction in the use of contract labour companies to lower costs.

The Australian Workers Union (AWU), which covers the workers, says it wants to "lock in current rates and entitlements with proper indexation."

In other words, the union, using the promise of more job security, is demanding minimal wage increases. This has been rejected by Jadestone, which has begun sourcing outside contractors from Inverse Energy as strike breakers. The AWU opposes any unified action by offshore platform workers.

### **Western Australian truck drivers protest Woolworths' subcontractor decision**

Truck drivers protested outside Woolworths' state head office in Kewdale, Western Australia on Tuesday. The drivers are opposing Woolworths' use of lower paid subcontractors in order to avoid paying overtime rates, which would cut \$300 from the drivers' weekly wages.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU), which has been directly involved in negotiating sellout deals with Woolworths and other Australian supermarket giants, told the media that lowering truck drivers' wages will encourage dangerous practices such as driving longer hours, skipping rest breaks and speeding. The union cited Safe Work Australia statistics showing an increase in transport workers killed from 38 in 2018 to 58 in 2019.

The TWU is appealing to the Australian government to re-instate a so-called independent tribunal to rule on safety concerns and contracts as well as calling on Woolworths to make its supply chain "safe and fair." The real issue for the TWU is that rising workers' concern over safety and cost-cutting contracts could erupt into industrial action outside of union control. The TWU wants an official mechanism to defuse these concerns.

### **Lindsay Transport workers reject cost-cutting enterprise agreement**

Over 74 percent of Lindsay Transport workers have voted down a management cost-cutting enterprise agreement offer. The four-year deal would cut rates for weekends, public holidays, leave-loading and redundancy payments. The company, which is one of Australia's largest east coast transport companies, recently announced record revenue of \$411 million and a profit of \$5.32 million.

The Transport Workers Union has recommenced negotiations with Lindsay declaring that it is "bargaining for a better deal." The union, however, has not made public any of its demands. Several enterprise agreements for transport companies are due to expire this year with

distribution and logistics companies determined to slash costs and restructure their operations.

### **New Zealand: Auckland care workers picket**

Home care workers employed by Lifewise held a picket with supporters outside Auckland Hospital on March 12 to demand improved pay and conditions. The workers held a three-day strike in January and picketed the Lifewise offices in Mount Eden.

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 only given nine hours of work a fortnight.

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 organisation has reneged on terms formerly agreed on and threatened workers with three separate lockout periods.

While workers have described Lifewise's contract offers as "an insult," the E t? has called for mediation and is keeping the Lifewise workers isolated.

### **New Zealand medical laboratory workers protest**

After ongoing negotiations with Labtests since last September and mediation in January, medical laboratory workers have voted to picket and commence a 24-hour strike ballot. The decision comes after workers rejected two offers which failed to bring their starting rates up to the hourly "living wage" (\$NZ22.10) being promoted by the unions.

A spokesperson for the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) said once the first offer of two percent was rejected, Labtests indicated they had another offer to present. The offer did not improve the base pay and for some steps it was lower than the company's initial offer.

The NZNO said it has "exhausted formal pathways" for an offer "that fairly values these employees." By April 1, Labtests will be paying them just three cents above the hourly minimum wage of \$NZ18.90. The workers, known as phlebotomists, are regulated and skilled professionals required to hold practising certificates.

The privately-owned Labtests runs labs across the country and holds contracts with several district health boards. The workers are picketing Labtests' head office in Auckland today and will also undertake a strike ballot.



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