India: Bokaro steel workers demand pay rise; Sri Lankan water workers demand living wage; New Zealand home care workers strike

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

26 March 2021

India: Bokaro steel workers in Jharkhand state demand pay rise

Hundreds of employees demonstrated inside the Bokaro Steel Limited (BSL) plant on March 19 to demand a wage rise outstanding since 2017. BSL employs nearly 8,000 workers. Workers said they have been holding protests in every department and have threatened to strike if management does not consider their demands.

BSL made a net profit of $1.38 billion in the third quarter of the 2020–21 financial year, the highest of all Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) subsidiaries. A meeting between SAIL management and the National Joint Committee for Steel on March 16 failed to win any agreement. A second meeting has been organised for March 31.

Tamil Nadu: Royal Enfield workers protest

Royal Enfield motorcycle manufacturing workers began a lunch boycott inside the Oragadam plant near Chennai, Tamil Nadu on March 22. The boycott was in protest against management attempts to create a company union at the plant and undermine the worker-initiated Royal Enfield Employees Union.

Management has registered its union and has conducted elections for office bearers. A majority of workers, however, have boycotted the so-called election process.

In 2018, the motorcycle workers led a historic strike, along with Yamaha workers and MSI employees, after management attempted to reclassify company apprentices as FTE (Fixed term employment) and NEEM workers. In 2019, workers led another strike to stop management transferring union leaders and union militants to various other factories and showrooms across in India.

Patna hospital nurses demonstrate over cancellation of leave

Patna Medical College and Hospital (PMCH) nursing staff protested on March 21 near the office of the hospital superintendent over the health department’s decision to cancel all leave during the Holi festival.

The department cancelled leave of all medical staff, including doctors and nurses, until April 5 in what it said was a COVID-19 precautionary measure. The protest forced the closure of all outpatient services and operating theatres.

Punjab government employees rally for better pay

Clerical staff at all state government departments wore black badges on March 22 and rallied at the District Administrative Complex to demand implementation of the 6th Pay Commission. The demonstration was called by the State Ministerial Services Union.

Revenue, finance, irrigation, social security and horticulture workers who attended the rally said they wanted immediate implementation of the 6th Pay Commission report and payment of the dearness allowance. They denounced the state government for cutting jobs in government schools and offices.

Andhra Pradesh staff demand ongoing employment

Laid-off medical staff protested outside the state collectorate in Guntur on March 21. The demonstration was organised by Andhra Pradesh Medical Covid Warriors Association members. Last year, staff nurses, anaesthetists, lab technicians and nursing orderlies were hired on a six-month temporary basis to boost health services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The medical workers, however, were dismissed in January, despite the worsening COVID-19 crisis. The now unemployed medical workers have been staging demonstrations, including hunger protests, over the past month.

Demonstrators said there are numerous vacancies in teaching hospitals, district hospitals, community health centres and primary health centres throughout the state.

New Delhi insurance employees oppose privatisation

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Insurance sector workers protested across the country on March 18 against foreign direct investment (FDI) limit increases. The All India Insurance Employees Association and other finance sector unions called the strike.

The Life Insurance Corporation employees also participated, denouncing the government's proposal to privatise the corporation and lift the current FDI limit from 49 percent to 74 per cent.

Sri Lankan educators protest appointment of untrained principals

Thousands of Sri Lankan educators demonstrated against government moves to appoint 4,600 principals and 300 education administrators without holding proper qualification examinations.

The March 19 protest began near the Buddhadasa Stadium in Pelawatta and marched to the Isurupaya ministry of education. The demonstration continued in defiance of police obstruction and harassment.

Bank of Ceylon Employees demand a living wage

Hundreds of Bank of Ceylon employees protested on March 23 outside the bank headquarters demanding a living wage, permanent jobs for temporary staff and the provision of pensions.

Carrying flags and banners, they marched from the bank's head office to Temple Trees, the prime minister's official residence. Police blocked the march, allowing only two representatives to the building to present a message with their claims.

Government dental surgeons strike in Sri Lanka

About one hundred government dental surgeons walked out on strike across the country on March 22 to demand government action to prevent the service collapsing.

The Government Dental Surgeons Association released a press release voicing the grievances and accusing the deputy director general of dental services of causing an unprecedented collapse in the system. Dental surgeons want the retirement age to be increased to 63 years, all vacant dental surgeons' vacancies to be filled and other basic demands.

Sri Lankan water workers demand pay rise

Hundreds of workers demonstrated outside the National Water Supply and Drainage Board Head Office in Ratmalana on March 23.

Their claims include an immediate 30 percent salary increase and resolution of past salary anomalies, removal of inequities in the new service constitution and a decent pension scheme for all employees. The workers threatened future strike action if these demands are not met.

Sri Lankan government workers march for salary increases

Over hundreds of government workers held a rally and marched to the Ministry of Finance on March 23 to demand a 15,000-rupee ($US75) monthly salary increase for public sector workers and 25,000-rupee minimum wage for private sector employees.

They also want health workers to be given a COVID allowance, increased uniform allowances, permanent jobs for the temporary health employees and pensions for all state sector workers. Health workers, development officers, Unemployed Graduates' Union members and private sector employees addressed the rally.

Western Australia mental health workers strike

More than 100 mental health workers in Perth, the state capital, walked out on Wednesday over inadequate funding for child mental health services. Strikers included clinical psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists from eight different services, as well as staff from Perth Children's Hospital mental health ward.

The health workers are concerned that the underfunded services have propelled case numbers to unsustainable and dangerous levels. Two days prior to the strike, Western Australia's largest hospital issued a code yellow, meaning it was unable to treat patients in its emergency department.

The Health Services Union (HSUWA) told the media that clinics had taken 92 referrals this month and seen a growing number of young patients attempting to take their own life because they had to wait three months for treatment. The under-funded system has been blamed for the suicide last year of a 13-year-old Perth girl who had not received support or treatment in time.

The HSUWA and the state Labor government have presided over the recent rapid increase in referral numbers from 300 in 2013 to over 800, leading to the current crisis.

New Zealand home care workers strike

Homecare support workers employed by Auckland-based Lifewise have begun limited strike action over the organisation's refusal to offer liveable pay and better conditions. The workers began striking from midday until 3 p.m. from March 24, for up to 13 days.

Lifewise is a charitable trust which is a part of the Methodist Church and employs over 200 support workers. Workers who are members of E Tu union have been striking and picketing since December for increased sick and bereavement leave and fair hours of work in the collective agreement.

The carers have to be available to work for up to 42 hours, yet are only guaranteed a fraction of that. One worker told *Newsroom* she is paid $25.50 an hour for her 25 guaranteed hours, plus any additional hours the employer might give her. She gets nothing for the remaining time (usually 17 hours) that she is available. Between client visits there are often gaps of two or three hours, for which she isn't paid but which is never long enough to go home.

Another grievance is the way Lifewise calculates payment for travel time between clients. From every client visit, 8.5 minutes is deemed as travel time and paid at the rate of only $19.40 an hour. Client visits can be as short as 15 minutes, in which case more than half that time is paid at the lower rate. Lifewise has threatened three separate lockouts of workers during the course of the dispute.

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