

India: Farmers and workers strike against Modi government laws; Sri Lankan postal workers walk out; Health workers in Australia demand better pay and conditions

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

2 April 2021

Asia

India-wide strike by farmers and workers against Modi government's agriculture and labour laws

Workers across India joined a nationwide 24-hour strike led by farmers and supported by the trade unions on March 26 against the Modi government's free market anti-farmer and anti-labour laws. The new legislation makes it easier for employers to sack workers, increases the working day to 12 hours and imposes bans on strikes and other industrial action.

The all-India shutdown (Bharat bandh) was called by the United Peasants Front (SKM), an umbrella body of farmers' organisations that is coordinating the ongoing protests across India. Demonstrators blocked roads and railways and closed markets nationwide between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. Farmers have been holding protests, marches and demonstrations over the past four months against the Indian government's big-business policies.

India: Punjab police attack unemployed teachers

Several people were injured and hundreds detained after police used canes to attack a demonstration of unemployed teachers as they marched towards the Punjab chief minister's residence in Patiala on March 28. Teachers held a sit-down protest near the residence, alleging that the government had not considered their demands which are more than three years old.

The unemployed teachers, who have passed the Elementary Teacher in Training and the Teacher Eligibility Test, are demanding repeal of the Bachelor of Education entry provision to elementary schools and for 10,000 new jobs to be immediately advertised. Elementary Teacher Training is a diploma-level course for teaching the preschool curriculum and equips teachers with required skills.

Cleaning service workers in Karnataka protest exploitation

More than 70 "service professionals" in the cleaning category of a

service firm protested over pay on March 29 in Bangalore. The mainly migrant workers allege that they failed to receive a living wage after the company deducted a monthly subscription fee and commission from their wages.

Demonstrators said that the company also recently began demanding that they buy cleaning products from the firm. The protest was organised by Migrants Workers Federation of Karnataka. The workers currently have to pay the company a monthly subscription of between 4,000 (\$US55) to 6,000 rupees and a commission of 15 to 20 percent for each job.

Amritsar municipal workers strike

Municipal Corporation Amritsar (MCA) employees in Punjab walked out indefinitely on March 19 in protest against privatisation and to demand the recruitment of more cleaning workers. A large number of employees wearing black badges to observe the Holi festival gathered outside the council's auto workshop. They chanted slogans denouncing the mayor and MCA officials and demanded action over the alleged corrupt practices of MCA administrators.

Pakistan: Balochistan government employees demand pay rise

Thousands of government employees held sit-down demonstrations and blocked vehicles leaving or entering multiple government facilities in Quetta on Tuesday. They were demanding an immediate 25 percent pay rise as mandated by the federal government. The protest prevented the functioning of civil services in all 34 districts in Balochistan province. Large numbers of schools remained shut because teachers joined the demonstrations.

Government attempts to stop the protests by declaring a ban on all public gatherings from Sunday night failed. It then deployed large numbers of armed security personnel to intimidate the peaceful demonstrators. The action was organised by the Balochistan Employees and Workers Grand Alliance, an umbrella organisation covering many government sector unions.

Pakistan rail workers demand unpaid wages

Workers from the state-run Pakistan Railways protested outside the Press Club in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, on March 25 to demand outstanding pay and protest against the government's privatisation plans. Members of the Pakistan Railway Employees Association denounced the government for not paying benefits for the past two-and-a-half years.

Pakistan Railways is just one of the many government enterprises earmarked for privatisation by the Imran Khan government and in line with International Monetary Fund dictates.

Bangladesh: Rajshahi University employees demand loan interest rate cut

Fifty employees from the Rajshahi University in Bangladesh protested on Monday by locking the university's entrance gate for five hours.

The Sohayok Karmachari Samity and Technical Department workers demanded that the interest rates on corporate loans for employees be reduced from nine to five percent and for the deputy director of the accounting department to be transferred.

The workers claimed that the vice-chancellor had assured them several times that the loan interest rate would be lowered but these promises were never fulfilled.

Protesters gave authorities seven days to grant their demands or they would step up their actions.

Sri Lankan postal workers strike

Hundreds of postal workers demonstrated on Tuesday lunch time outside the Central Mail Exchange over multiple demands. The protest was followed by a 24-hour sick leave campaign, starting at midday and which forced the closure of 653 main post offices around the country until noon the next day.

The postal workers were demanding withdrawal of arbitrary revisions of the recruitment procedure in all grades, the immediate implementation of a cabinet memorandum on recruitment procedures and an immediate end to arbitrary official transfers.

Sri Lanka: Hotel workers in Aluthgama demand a living wage

Hotel Workers Centre of Inter Company Employees Union members protested in the southern city of Aluthgama on March 24 to demand they be provided a living wage. The campaign continued in Dickwella, Matara six days later on March 30 where hotel workers demonstrated outside the main public bus stand.

Tourist industry workers want the Rajapakse government to intervene and ensure a living wage, job security and allowances for those in the sector who have been hard hit the COVID-19 pandemic and falls in tourist numbers.

Sri Lankan state bank employees step up demands for a decent pension

Hundreds of state bank workers held a series of lunch-time protests between March 16 and 23 to demand pensions for all bank employees and that the training period for new workers be limited to two years, according to previous practices.

Bank workers forced the Ceylon Bank Employees' Union to hold the demonstrations and strike because the government and state bank authorities have ignored workers' long-pending demands.

Australia

Fremantle city municipal maintenance workers walk out

About 45 maintenance workers from the Fremantle City Council, 20 kilometres south of Perth, the Western Australian capital, stopped work and demonstrated at the council's headquarters on March 24. The dispute is over a new enterprise agreement (EA). The Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) members want removal of an already existing clause in the next agreement.

The clause, which was endorsed by the CFMMEU and another council workers' union a decade ago in 2011, allows the council to force workers to take unpaid leave if they do not have sufficient holidays during any partial shutdowns. The clause was used to stand down about 60 workers when Western Australia went into COVID-19 lockdown in April last year.

Deliveroo riders protest in Sydney

Deliveroo riders in Sydney joined an international protest and strike on March 26 over poverty pay and lack of rights. The action coincided with Deliveroo's float on the London stock exchange valued at approximately \$AU16 billion. Deliveroo's own IPO prospectus lists 24 pages of risks, including legal battles brought by workers and unions in nearly every country the company operates.

The Transport Workers Union is currently supporting two Australian Deliveroo riders in separate legal challenges in the Fair Work Commission over wage theft and unfair dismissal.

Eligible Deliveroo riders have now been informed that they could receive a small payment as part of Deliveroo's IPO, aimed at making the company more appealing to investors. One Deliveroo rider said, "I've worked for Deliveroo for four years and in that time my pay has been slashed over and over without any ability for me to challenge the cuts. Deliveroo told me I'd delivered more orders than 90 percent of riders but I will receive the second lowest amount in the IPO payments. At best, that's around 10 cents per delivery."

Victorian health workers continue industrial action

Over 2,400 members of the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) at 16 state-owned hospitals and mental health institutions in

Victoria are maintaining limited industrial action that began on November 16 for an improved enterprise agreement. The action includes rolling strikes—from 15 minutes to 24 hours—bans on certain paperwork, refusing to work in unpaid breaks and outside normal working hours and bans on non-clinical duties.

The action follows a long period of failed negotiations between HACSU and the state Labor government. The union wants maintenance of current conditions, minimum four percent annual wage increases over the life of the four-year agreement, a one-off immediate pay increase to bring them in line with other health workers, as well as recognition of current skills and qualifications and an increase in parental leave.

The state government's Royal Commission Interim Report into Victoria's mental health system last year pointed to decades of government defunding, privatisation, exploitation of mental health workers and failed service delivery. The workload of these critical health workers has exploded since the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

The HACSU has deliberately restricted industrial action in order to wear down workers' resolve so they will accept an agreement that satisfies the government. Industrial action is sporadic and limited to short-duration strikes and protests on different days at each hospital.



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