

Pakistan: Balochistan government workers strike for pay; Baggage handlers walk out at India's Goa International Airport; South Australian power workers strike for higher wages

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

9 April 2021

Asia

Pakistan: Striking Balochistan government workers block major highways

Ignoring calls from authorities to return to work, thousands of government workers in Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province, are continuing their struggle for a 25 percent across the board pay increase and the same allowances paid in other provinces. On Monday the strikers, including health and education workers, enforced a virtual cut-off of Balochistan from the rest of the country with a blockade of the main highways.

A sit-down protest was held outside the provincial assembly in the capital Quetta with other demonstrations held across the province. Education workers have said they will boycott high-school exams scheduled to begin on April 10. A polio vaccination campaign due this week was also postponed as workers conducting mobile vaccination campaigns joined the strike.

The government initially attempted to stop the protests by declaring a ban on all public gatherings. When that failed, it deployed large numbers of armed security personnel to intimidate demonstrators. Counting on poor communication infrastructure in the province, the government is also attempting to spread misleading instructions and false news to break the strike.

Despite five failed rounds of talks and the government's insistence that it does not have the money to pay for increased wages, the unions are continuing to negotiate with the government. Balochistan is by far the poorest province in Pakistan as a result of government negligence and exploitation. The strike was called by the All Balochistan Employees and Workers Grand Alliance, an umbrella union.

Nepalese hospital workers demand COVID-19 allowance

Front-line health workers from the state-run Dhaulagiri Zonal Hospital in Baglung, Nepal protested outside the hospital on April 4 to demand the COVID-19 risk allowance promised by the government last May. There are currently 18 coronavirus infected patients receiving treatment at the

hospital.

The Health Ministry last April announced that doctors, health workers and sanitation workers deployed on frontline COVID-19 services would receive the payments. There 25 doctors and nurses at the hospital who have not received the special payment and are refusing to expand swab collection and testing services.

India: Karnataka public transport workers strike again over salaries

Workers from four major Karnataka state government transport corporations walked off the job on Wednesday over the government's failure to increase their salary in line with the 6th Pay Commission recommendations.

A total of more than 130,000 workers are employed at the Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC), the Bangalore Metropolitan Transport Corporation, North Western Karnataka Road Transport Corporation and the North Eastern Karnataka Road Transport Corporation. This week's walkout followed a three-day strike which began on December 10 by KSRTC workers to demand a wage rise and improved benefits, including health insurance.

Baggage loaders at Goa International Airport strike

About 250 baggage loaders at low cost airline IndiGo suddenly walked out on strike at Goa International Airport on Tuesday. They are employed on contracts by Agile, an IndiGo subsidiary.

Strikers protested outside the airport terminal and demanded a wage increase and removal of the station manager. Flight schedules at the airport were delayed.

IndiGo is India's largest airline by the number of passengers carried and fleet size with a 59.24 percent domestic market share as of August 2020.

Telangana hospital contract workers strike for pay parity

More than 600 contract healthcare workers at the state-run MGM Hospital in Warangal began an indefinite strike on April 1 to demand pay parity with government employees at the hospital.

They allege that Agile Security Force, their employer, has not been paying salaries, bonuses and workers' provident fund (PF). They have accused the agency of only depositing 400 rupees (\$US5.37) a month into their PF accounts, instead of the 1,500 rupees that is deducted from their 7,000-rupee monthly salaries.

Visakhapatnam steel workers continue anti-privatisation protests

Protests continue against the Modi government's move to privatise the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant (VSP) in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh with an April 4 rally in Vizag. The protest was organised by the Visakha Ukku Parirakshana Porata Committee.

Workers and family members are maintaining a hunger protest near the Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation which began on February 15 and on March 9 thousands of workers picketed the steel plant's administrative offices.

The plant, which employs almost 18,000 workers, has the capacity to produce 7.3 million tons of steel per annum.

Migrant workers in Punjab protest against discrimination

Migrant workers demonstrated on April 4 in Amritsar, Punjab state, 25 kilometres from the Pakistan border, over the Modi government labelling them as bonded labourers hooked on drugs. They raised slogans and burnt an effigy of Amit Shah, the Indian minister for home affairs, demanded the government end its divisive statements, and restated their support for protesting farmers.

Sri Lankan port workers demand higher wages

About 1,000 port workers demonstrated near Khan Clock Tower in central Colombo Fort on April 1 over an inadequate pay increase. They demanded the Rajapakse government implement scheduled salary increases every three years, effective from January 1 this year. They told the media that the relevant minister had agreed to a 25 percent pay rise on March 30 but discovered that the monthly increase for lower paid employees would be only 5,160 rupees (\$US25).

Demonstrators rejected this, comparing it to a 10,000-rupee rise in 2018 and demanded that in addition to the promised 25 percent increase all workers should receive more than the 2018 rise.

Sri Lankan state bank employees continue protests for a decent pension

Hundreds of Ceylon Bank Employees' Union members demonstrated again this week to demand a pension for all bank employees and that training for new workers should be limited to two years. It followed lunch-

time protests between March 16 and 23 by hundreds of state bank employees.

This week lunchtime protests were held in Kandy and the Southern Province with state bank workers threatening national action if their demands are not granted.

Sri Lankan non-medical hospital staff protest

Thousands of junior (non-medical) hospital workers from across Sri Lanka held a sick-leave protest on Wednesday and 1,000 United Health Workers Union members marched from the Colombo National Hospital to the presidential secretariat with eleven demands.

These demands included payment of a safety allowance, increased uniform allowance and payment for Saturday work among others. The presidential secretariat has refused to discuss any of these issues. This week's action followed a protest march to the country's finance ministry on March 23. Finance ministry authorities said they could not give an assurance that any of the health workers' demands would be fulfilled.

Sri Lankan educators hold sick leave protest over salary anomalies

Five thousand Badulla District educators held a sick-leave strike and march in Badulla on April 6 to demand higher pay and an end to salary anomalies. They demonstrated outside the Uva Provincial Council holding placards and later moved their protest to the Badulla bus stop.

Sri Lankan government printing workers oppose illegal recruitment

About 100 members of the Government Printing Trade Union Confederation demonstrated on Monday lunch time outside the Government Printing Press plant. They were calling for the suspension of workers hired through arbitrary and illegal interviews and demanded jobs for professional apprentices who have completed their training.

Australia

McCormick food production workers in Melbourne end six-week strike

About 90 workers from the McCormick Foods Australia sauce and spice manufacturing plant at Clayton in Melbourne ended a six-week strike on Thursday after accepting the company's latest pay offer.

The United Workers Union (UWU) members walked out on February 26 after rejecting the company's proposed enterprise agreement (EA), which cut penalty rates, paid meal breaks and overtime with no increase in pay rates, and included an end to the four-day work week.

Although the workers' pay had been frozen for nearly five years the UWU was only seeking 3 percent annual pay increases, which falls far short of compensating for the five-year pay freeze, and retention of

existing conditions.

In the agreement accepted by workers they will receive only a 3 percent annual pay increase over the life of the three-year agreement, a \$5,000 sign-on bonus and retention of all existing conditions.

The UWU cynically claimed that this was a huge win for all essential workers who toiled through the pandemic, while their companies made massive profits. In fact, McCormick's was the winner because the UWU did not demand the company compensate its workers for the five-year pay freeze.

South Australian frontline emergency services workers protest over government funding

Over 500 South Australian emergency services workers rallied at parliament house in Adelaide at 12 noon on April 1 over ambulance paramedics' demands that the state Liberal government provide more ambulance resources and put an end to hospital ramping. Protesters included paramedics, nurses, firefighters, power workers and other supporters.

Ambulance Employees Association paramedics launched limited industrial action on March 10 in response to the ongoing safety issue of ambulance ramping outside public hospital emergency departments and the inadequate level of staffing resulting in overworked paramedics.

Just as the rally finished, South Australia Premier Steven Marshall declared in parliament that "More ambulances would only be funded if ambulances accepted reform". The government is blaming the paramedics for the chronic situation, saying it wants to change shift rosters and revise where paramedics take their breaks.

Paramedics have rejected this, declaring that the proposed changes would have no effect and that government funding to the ambulance service has been cut by \$11.1million over the last three years.

Current limited industrial action by paramedics includes not charging patients if emergency ambulances arrive later than medical timeframes and writing slogans on the side of ambulances supporting their demands.

South Australian power workers strike for better pay

Power maintenance workers from the state-owned power distributor South Australia Power Networks (SAPN) walked off the job for four hours and implemented work bans on April 1 in opposition to SAPN's proposed enterprise agreement. The bans include working-to-rule and not working on rostered days off.

Communications Electrical and Postal Union (CEPU) members have twice rejected the company's initial offer to maintain current conditions with a 2 percent pay increase in a 12-month agreement. Workers claimed that the increase fails to compensate for the loss of the previous year's bonus and is an effective wage cut. The union alleged that the latest offer contained cuts to wages and allowances, and removed limitations on the use of third party contractors—increasing job insecurity for permanent employees.

The CEPU is demanding 4 percent annual pay increases in a three-year agreement and further negotiations to resolve issues pending from the 2018 agreement.

Nurses at major New South Wales hospital protest over paid parking

A group of over 50 frontline health workers from the state-run Campbelltown Hospital in Greater Western Sydney, demonstrated outside the hospital on Monday over a state Liberal government requirement that they pay to use the hospital's recently built car park.

Health workers said they had never had to pay to park there. The fee for full-time staff is \$23.6 per week, effectively reducing their annual income by \$1,200. Full-time spots are limited, forcing casuals and other staff to pay \$20.20 per day. Another protest is organised for April 13.

New Zealand union settles care workers' contract dispute

The E Tu Union, representing aged care workers at the Methodist-run charity Lifewise in Auckland, has reached a sell-out deal to end a long-running industrial dispute. A one-year collective agreement has now been made official.

About 90 care workers have been striking and holding pickets on and off since December amid repeated employer threats by to lock them out. The dispute has centred on working conditions and employer demands that workers be available for hours far beyond those for which they are paid.

The dispute pre-dates the emergence of the COVID-19 crisis, during which the carers were classified as essential workers. Their duties include support to seniors and people with disabilities, wellbeing checks, helping with grocery shopping and housework, assistance with showering, applying blister packs and administering medication.

An E Tu spokesperson admitted the contract terms "fall short of workers' initial demands," but claimed they represent an improvement on current conditions. The workers are currently entitled to three days' bereavement leave, and five days' minimum sick leave—the current legal minimum. Workers were demanding to have this increased to five days' bereavement leave and eight days' sick leave. Last year, E tu called for unrestricted sick leave in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The new agreement will see the creation of a bereavement leave fund, an increase in accrued sick leave days, and long service payments to workers at ten year intervals. Lifewise insisted that workers' full demands couldn't be paid for within existing funding from the Auckland District Health Board, a position E tu has accepted. On the fundamental issue of guaranteed working hours, Lifewise has only offered to "discuss" the current system of allocating hours, which E tu admitted "will be a work in progress."

New Zealand bus drivers repeat strike call

Frequent bus cancellations are set to escalate in New Zealand's capital city, Wellington, with drivers warning of an upcoming "surprise attack" strike that will shut down almost all services in the city. The Tramways Union said Wellington bus drivers will launch a strike sometime after April 14, with only 24 hours' notice, after pay negotiations with operator NZ Bus reached an impasse on March 31.

Talks over a new collective bargaining agreement have reportedly been "tense" for several months with drivers repeatedly signalling they are willing to strike. NZ Bus wants to move the drivers onto the same agreement as its Auckland drivers, which has a higher base rate but lower penalty rates and one week less annual leave. The Wellington drivers'

conditions include double pay after midnight, time and a half on weekends, and strict controls around hours of work without additional compensation.

The fresh strike threat comes after 72 bus services were cancelled one day last week, followed by more than 30 more the next morning. This was mainly due to illnesses among the drivers, many of whom are aged over 60 and having to take extra health precautions due to the coronavirus.



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