

Unions call off strikes in Sri Lankan banks, Indian mines; New Zealand bus drivers locked out; Australian hospital workers implement work bans

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

23 April 2021

### **Sri Lanka: State bank workers' union calls off strike without resolution**

The Ceylon Bank Employees Union called off a nationwide strike of state bank employees which had been planned for Thursday. The union made the last-minute cancellation after a discussion with the finance ministry in which an "assurance" was given that the issues in dispute would be dealt with.

Workers are demanding that the state bank revise pensions of employees who joined it after 1996, establish a pension for employees of banks and offer new recruits permanent status after two years of training.

The union was never genuine about fighting for the demands of state bank workers. Under pressure from members, it called several localised lunch-time protests between March 16 and April 7 which were attended by hundreds of bank employees.

### **India: Bauxite mine workers union calls off 83-day strike**

The union covering workers at Kodingamali bauxite mines in Orissa state called off an 83-day strike on Tuesday without any resolution of the dispute.

The workers are employed by Myntra Infrastructure, which is contracted by the state-owned Odisha Mining Corporation to run the mines. They walked out in January and have since maintained a continuous protest in front of the Collector's office demanding that wages be increased to the minimum set by the Central government and that retrenched workers be reinstated.

The Kodingamali Mine Workers Association (Kodingamali Khani Shramik Sangathan) alleged that 34 workers had been transferred abruptly to the Jharkhand uranium mine the day they put forward the demand for a wage increase. Their names had been removed from the attendance punching machine and they were prevented from entering the mine from December 29, 2020.

The workers are still waiting for the results of a complaint lodged with the Labour Commission that was due to be heard on April 9.

### **Faridabad municipal workers strike over delayed wages**

More than 5,000 employees from the Municipal Corporation of Faridabad in Haryana state stopped work on April 16 to protest the delay in the disbursal of their salary for March. Class III and IV employees also claimed that their salary for February was not paid until March 31.

Workers said they will observe a four-hour strike every day until the authorities release their salary. The workers are members of the Municipal Employees' Union, which claimed it would call more intense action if the wages are not released immediately.

### **Tamil Nadu municipal conservancy workers demand overdue wages**

More than 200 contract conservancy workers from the Coimbatore City Municipal Corporation refused to commence work at 6 a.m. on Tuesday to demand payment of wages for March.

The workers, including domestic breeding checkers engaged in anti-mosquito operations, drivers and cleaners, demonstrated in front of the corporation's office in Vadavalli. They ended the strike three hours later when the sanitation officer from the West Zone promised the issue would be resolved.

### **Steel plant workers in Tamil Nadu protest for wage revision**

More than 150 workers at the Salem Steel Plant in Tamil Nadu protested in front of the facility on Tuesday. They are calling for a 15 percent increase in minimum benefits, 35 percent for fringe benefits and a nine percent pension contribution.

Workers have already waited 53 months for this wage revision, which they say was meant to have been conducted in 2017. The issue remains unresolved despite four rounds of talks between the company and the National Joint Committee for Steel Industry.

Workers plan to strike on May 6 if their demands remain unmet.

## **Tamil Nadu boatmen demand financial support during COVID-19 pandemic**

Boatmen at the Ooty (Udhagamandalam) Lake resort in the Western Ghats mountains protested on Tuesday demanding financial support following the closure of the boathouse due to restrictions necessitated by the coronavirus pandemic.

The workers said they were staring at financial ruin as they had already endured nine months without income last year.

The boatmen receive just 50 rupees (\$US0.6) per ride, while the Tourism Department charges 680 rupees for eight passengers and 1,150 rupees for a 15-seat boat.

The boatmen demanded that they be paid a minimum wage for the duration of the lockdown by either the district administration or the Tourism Department.

## **Bangladesh: Rickshaw pullers in Barishal demand COVID-19 financial aid**

About 500 rickshaw pullers held a protest march in Barishal, south-central Bangladesh on April 17, to demand compensation for loss of work due to the pandemic.

Protesters marched from Ashwini Kumar Hall to the Barishal City Corporation where they demonstrated.

Protesters said that during the previous lockdown they had received some help from the city corporation but this time they had received nothing. They called for food rations, 5,000 taka (\$US59) per month in compensation and free medical treatment for those infected with the coronavirus.

Many of the city's 5,000-6,000 rickshaw workers have moved to villages or are living in dire conditions in slums, according to the Rickshaw-Van Drivers' and Workers' Union.

## **South Australian hospital support workers implement bans**

Thousands of non-medical workers at state-run hospitals in South Australia began work bans on Wednesday in a dispute over the state Liberal government's proposed enterprise agreement.

The workers, including orderlies, cleaners, food service employees, sterilisation technicians and aged-care and disability support staff, are seeking a backdated 2 percent wage rise and a guarantee to maintain all current conditions and job security.

A United Workers Union (UWU) spokesperson said the low-level bans limiting some cleaning and the emptying of bins would initially affect seven hospitals and warned they will spread to more than 80 sites throughout the state unless a deal is reached.

Negotiations between the Marshall government and the UWU have been ongoing for 14 months.

Despite the limited nature of the bans, the state government applied to the South Australian Employment Tribunal on Wednesday morning for an urgent order to stop the industrial action.

This follows a mass protest by ambulance officers, nurses, doctors and other public sector workers on April 1 demanding more resources amid warning of safety concerns for patients and workload fatigue that has created a crisis in the state's health system.

## **Mater Hospital maintenance workers in Brisbane protest over wage freeze**

About 25 maintenance workers from the privately-owned Mater Hospital in Brisbane, Queensland's capital, protested on Monday to oppose management's proposed enterprise agreement (EA), which if accepted would reduce conditions and impose a two-year pay freeze with only a 1 percent pay increase in the third year. Accounting for 1.6 percent annual CPI increases, the offer equates to more than a 4 percent pay cut.

The workers are covered by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Electrical Trades Union, Plumbers Union and the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU). In separate ballots members voted nearly unanimously to take protected industrial action ranging from limited work bans to rolling 24-hour stoppages.

## **Western Australian port workers impose bans on handling iron ore**

About 100 workers from Fremantle Ports, in Perth, Western Australia have placed a ban on handling iron ore at the port's outer harbour in a dispute with the company for an improved enterprise agreement offer.

The CFMMEU claims that Fremantle Ports is trying to limit a pay increase to the state government's wage cap and that it has rejected all demands for better working conditions. The McGowan state Labor government revealed in October that wage increases for WA public servants would remain frozen at \$1,000 per year for a further two years, and would then revert to inflation. The cap has been in place for three years.

Fremantle Ports is a state government trading enterprise that manages the Port of Fremantle. The workers insist that they are not public sector employees and should not be included in the government's wage freeze.

## **New Zealand bus drivers locked out ahead of strike**

NZ Bus issued an indefinite lockout notice to bus drivers in Wellington on Thursday, preempting a 24-hour strike planned to begin on Friday at 4 a.m..

The lockout shut down commuter services across the New Zealand capital, particularly in the eastern suburbs. Services run by rival operator Tranzurban were not affected.

The "surprise" strike was announced Thursday morning after drivers employed by NZ Bus voted 204-2 in favour of taking industrial action at a meeting on April 14.

The agreement proposed by NZ Bus would move drivers onto the same conditions as its operation in Auckland. This includes a higher base wage of \$23.75 an hour, increased to \$25 per hour after 2 years. However, drivers will lose key penalty rates and conditions, including double pay after midnight, time and a half on weekends, and strict controls around hours of work without extra pay. The loss of penalty rates could mean a \$7,000 reduction in annual pay.

Tramways Union secretary Kevin O'Sullivan said the union's members had "just had it." However, in September 2020, the union praised the Auckland pay agreement, which included pay increases of between 2 and

3 percent and overtime rates of just 1.25 times the ordinary rate and 1.5 times when a sixth day is worked.

Last month, NZ Bus rejected a deal with the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) and Tramways Union which would have seen the GWRC “top up” the base rate for drivers from \$19.40 to \$22.10 per hour, which the unions promote as a “living wage.” NZ Bus is owned by Australian private equity firm Next Capital, which acquired it for \$229 million in 2018.

### **New Zealand nurses reject pay offer**

Nearly 30,000 district health board (DHB) nurses have rejected the first employers’ offer in collective agreement negotiations, which began in June last year. The NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) said the overwhelming feedback from members was that this offer would be rejected out of hand.

The DHB package offered an annualised increase of just 1.38 percent, in reality a pay cut given the large increases in housing and other living costs. NZNO members had authorised 63 claims around pay, better sick leave and safe staffing, but all have been ignored. An NZNO spokesman said the offer would do nothing to recognise the tremendous workload and highly pressurised conditions workers endure and fails to address the DHB staffing crisis.

Far from preparing an industrial and political campaign to fight for better pay and conditions, however, the union immediately declared it will proceed straight to mediation with the DHBs. The backroom manoeuvre follows a sell-out agreement imposed by the NZNO in 2018. The union had to overcome widespread opposition among nurses who held an historic nationwide strike against the deal which limited wage increases to 3 percent and ignored demands for safe staffing levels.



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