

Bangalore sanitation workers demand PPE; LNG production workers in north-west Australia to strike; New Zealand retail workers locked out

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 April 2021

### Asia

#### **India: Bangalore sanitation workers protest for personal protective equipment**

Sanitation workers in Bangalore, the Karnataka state capital, protested on Tuesday to demand personal protective equipment, such as masks and gloves, whilst at work. The sanitation workers, popularly known as pourakarmikas, are frontline employees, daily exposed to possible infection from COVID-19 and its variants.

Workers said they were forced to handle dangerous and hazardous medical waste with their bare hands and that many households did not separate their waste. The highly exploited, mainly female employees complained that they do not have access to toilets, sanitisers or canteens during working hours.

#### **National Health Mission workers strike for permanent jobs**

National Health Mission (NHM) workers struck on Tuesday in Punjab state and protested outside the Civil Surgeon's office in Tarn Taran to demand permanent jobs and higher wages. Those on strike included staff nurses, medical officers, homeopathy Ayurveda doctors and ministerial staff.

The NHM, previously known as the National Rural Health Mission, was established in 2009 to address the health needs in rural and urban areas in 18 Indian states classified as under serviced and with weak public health indicators.

#### **Tamil Nadu brick workers strike over murder of colleague**

At least 2,500 workers from a brick making factory in Mayiladuthurai, a small town 280 kilometres from Chennai, have been protesting since April 16 over the alleged murder of a colleague. Workers claim that the man, known as Srinivasan, was killed by the factory owner. The strike was

called after medical authorities said he had committed suicide.

The workers are protesting outside the collector's office to demand the arrest of the factory owner. Srinivasan was Dalit, a member of the so-called untouchable caste. There are 200 million Dalits in India.

#### **Tamil Nadu hairdressers demand financial relief during lockdown**

Hairdressers in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu demonstrated on April 26 to demand financial relief during India's current limited coronavirus lockdown. While the government has ordered salons in corporation and municipal areas to remain closed until further notice, the government relief of just of 2,000 rupees (\$US6.8) per family is only accessible to a few and grossly inadequate.

Protesters demanded either 15,000 rupees relief for each hairdresser's family or allow them to open their salons in line with strict COVID-19 guidelines.

#### **Tamil Nadu fishermen protest against encroaching shrimp farms**

Coastal fishermen in Tamil Nadu demonstrated at the offices of the Fisheries Department and the Coastal Aquaculture Authority in Chennai on April 21. They were demanding the government stop shrimp hatcheries being established close to the shore and near the high tide line.

The protesting fishermen said vast tracts of common land meant for use by fishing villages were being usurped by the shrimp farming industry. The demonstration was organised by the Tamil Nadu Meenavar Iyakkangalin Orunginaippu Kuzhu, an umbrella association of fishermen organisations.

#### **Visakhapatnam steel workers continue anti-privatisation protests**

Visakhapatnam steel workers and their supporters are continuing protests and demonstrations against the Modi government's moves to

privatise the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant (VSP) in Andhra Pradesh. The plant employs almost 18,000 workers and currently has the capacity to produce 7.3 million tons of steel per annum.

Modi's Hindu-fundamentalist government has approved a 100 percent disinvestment of Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Limited, VSP's corporate entity, and private management of the steel plant. The demonstrations, which now include a hunger protest, have been ongoing since February 1.

### **Korean migrant workers oppose harsh working conditions and demand basic rights**

A group of migrant workers marched to the Seoul Regional and Labor Office on April 25 in protest over exploitation and poor working conditions. The workers demanded the right to change jobs and freely move between workplaces, control of work permits be taken away from employers and for the enactment of anti-discrimination legislation.

The march followed a February demonstration in Seoul by migrant workers following the death of Cambodian woman. She froze to death after being forced, along with other workers, to live in a vinyl tent at a farm where they were employed in Pocheon, Gyeon Province.

### **Online retail and delivery workers in Korea protest against fatal working conditions**

Members of the Committee for Coupang Workers' Human Rights and Health held a press conference in Seoul last week accusing Coupang, a South Korean online retailer, of being responsible for the deaths of several employees.

The committee allege that nine Coupang workers, including two subcontractors, have died in the past year due to an "inhumane working environment." The mother of one logistics centre employee who died from alleged overwork called for the company to improve its working conditions.

In an effort to prevent delivery drivers for Coupang Eats resigning during the coronavirus pandemic, the company announced in January it would provide new protective measures for drivers. Up until this announcement, all responsibility for accidents or problems that occurred while making deliveries, were blamed on the delivery riders.

Competition for hiring and retaining drivers is fiercely contested between the four major food delivery companies, Coupang Eats, Woowa Brothers' Baedal Minjok and Delivery Hero's Yogiyo.

## **Australia and New Zealand**

### **Victorian mental health workers to hold state-wide strike**

The Health and Community Services Union (HACSU), which covers over 2,400 mental health workers at 16 state-owned hospitals and mental institutions in Victoria, has called a state-wide stoppage for May 26.

The industrial action is part of a long-running campaign for an improved enterprise agreement. A mass rally will be held on the same day in front of the state parliament in Melbourne.

The stoppage 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.

HACSU served its enterprise agreement log of claims in February last year. HACSU members in November voted near unanimously for strike action following a series of failed negotiations.

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 has been sporadic and limited to short-duration strikes and protests on different days at each hospital.

### **Steel plant workers in New South Wales strike**

About 70 workers employed by labour contractor Ventia at the BlueScope steel plant in Port Kembla, south of Sydney, walked off the job for four hours on April 22 for higher wages in the company's proposed enterprise agreement. The strike followed an overtime ban begun a week earlier.

The workers are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and the Australian Workers Union (AWU).

An AMWU spokesman said negotiations began in November but the company is refusing to increase its low wage offer. Ventia workers complained that they are paid less than BlueScope workers doing the same job.

### **Wollongong City Council workers hold mass rally**

About 700 workers from the Wollongong City Council, 70 kilometres south of Sydney, stopped work and rallied at the local sports stadium on April 22 to demand a "consistent approach" to enterprise agreement negotiations. The United Services Union said members were calling for a fairer and more equitable agreement, in particular, for staff on lower levels of pay.

Workers want the agreement to include guaranteed minimum shift hours, better carer's provisions and better provisions for female staff.

### **Nurses and midwives rally in Newcastle over pay and inadequate staffing levels**

About 200 members of the New South Wales Nursing and Midwifery Association (NSWNMA) from public hospitals in the Hunter Region, 70 kilometres north of Sydney, rallied in Newcastle on April 24 over low pay and excessive workload due to inadequate staffing levels.

The demonstration followed a pay increase offer from the state Liberal government of just 1.04 percent in its proposed enterprise agreement. The low pay offer followed a cap on wage increases of 0.3 percent last year. The association said the government has rejected all demands for improvements in the health system and state legislated nurse-to-patient ratios in hospitals.

The nurses and midwives also want the nurse-to-patient ratio to be one nurse for four patients, on par with Victoria and Queensland conditions, and safer personal protection equipment.

Inadequate staffing levels at state government-run hospitals are a major issue for public sector health workers. In November, traumatised and overworked nurses at the state-owned Blacktown Hospital, in western Sydney, walked out on a 24-hour strike demanding that staffing at the hospital be increased to safe levels. At least 20 senior obstetricians at the hospital threatened to resign in the first week of February 2021 if their concern about understaffing is not addressed.

### **LNG production workers on Barrow Island, Western Australia vote to strike**

Production and maintenance workers employed by contractor UGL at Chevron's Barrow Island LNG plant in north-western Australia this week voted unanimously to strike for an improved enterprise agreement. Action will commence with a 24-hour stoppage on May 5.

UGL cut off negotiations earlier in the year but were forced back to the negotiating table after workers rejected the company's enterprise agreement offer last month.

The dispute is controlled by the Offshore Alliance (OA), which includes the Australian Workers Union and the Maritime Union of Australia. Other unions involved are the Electrical Trades Union, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Construction Forestry Mining Maritime and Energy Union. The OA claims that UGL is demanding workers accept a 6.5 percent cut in pay and allowances, following a 10 percent pay cut in 2016.

### **New Zealand retail workers locked out**

Retail workers at three H&M stores in Auckland took partial strike action this week as part of an ongoing pay dispute. H&M responded on April 23 by suspending all workers involved in the strike. At the Sylvia Park and Commercial Bay stores, suspended workers walked off the job together.

The FIRST Union has been negotiating with H&M for a new agreement for several weeks, pushing for what the unions are claiming is a "living wage" of \$22.10 an hour.

The so-called "living wage" figure is woefully inadequate given the rapidly escalating housing and living costs. A FIRST Union spokesperson said H&M was able to afford paying staff a living wage but was choosing not to. In 2019, workers at H&M were locked out after wearing stickers in stores during a previous dispute.



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