

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

7 May 2021

Asia

Korea: Renault Samsung autoworkers locked out

Renault Samsung Motors management locked out 1,900 workers at its Busan plant, 450 kilometres south of Seoul, on Tuesday morning. Management initiated the lockout in response to strike action the previous Friday, again on Monday and a planned eight-hour walk out on Tuesday.

The unionised workers voted to take strike action in February, in protest against management demands for a voluntary retirement program, a wage freeze and reduced bonus of 3 million won (\$2,700), citing reduced sales due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Workers are demanding a 70,000-won increase in basic pay, a 7 million won bonus and are opposed to the company's restructuring plans.

Renault Samsung claims that its Korean sales dropped by 22 percent in the first three months of this year compared with the same period last year.

India: Tamil Nadu rural workers demand jobs and COVID-19 relief

Poverty-stricken agricultural workers in Virudhunagar district, Tamil Nadu, demonstrated on May 1 to demands jobs promised under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) and relief payments during the coronavirus pandemic.

Under the MNREGA scheme, one person from each rural household is guaranteed 100 days of waged employment each year. Protesters' demands included job assistance for people over the age of 55 years or coronavirus relief of 7,500 rupees (\$US101) per month. The protest was organised by the All India Agricultural Workers Union.

Tamil Nadu hospital doctors strike over lack of oxygen

Doctors at the Chengalpattu government hospital, 50 kilometres from the Tamil Nadu capital Chennai, stopped work and demonstrated outside the hospital on May 5 to demand immediate supplies of oxygen. The doctors' action followed the death of eleven COVID-19 patients the previous day due to the lack of oxygen.

Pakhtunkhwa

Doctors from government hospitals in the Hazara and Khyber districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa boycotted work on Monday to demand improved workplace security measures. Their action followed a violent attack on staff at the Hayatabad Medical Complex in Peshawar by two provincial government legislators.

The doctors demanded legal action and the implementation of security measures to prevent the rising attacks on healthcare workers.

The Provincial Doctors Association, a union of doctors from government hospitals, has threatened to boycott treatment of coronavirus patients in their respective hospitals if the government fails to address their demands.

Doctors alleged that parliamentarians and top government officials from major political parties are notorious for violent attacks on health workers. They accused the government and opposition parties of attempting to blame doctors and health workers for the catastrophic failure of the healthcare system.

Bangladeshi transport workers demand food assistance and unpaid wages

Thousands of impoverished workers across various Bangladeshi transport sectors have been demonstrating in Dhaka to demand government food, financial assistance and outstanding pay.

The transport workers have been hard hit by the April 5 to May 10 nationwide COVID-19 lockdown. An estimated five million workers have been made jobless by the lockdown.

Auto-rickshaw drivers and light vehicle workers established a human chain in Dhaka on April 29 demanding food support and that they be allowed to resume their services.

Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation and Dhaka Metropolitan Road Transport Workers Union members protested in Dhaka last weekend. They were demanding a resumption of public transport services and that subsidised rice be made available at bus depots.

Bangladesh Waterways Workers Federation members demonstrated in Dhaka on Wednesday to demand all outstanding wages be paid by May 10.

Australia

Pakistan: Government hospital doctors strike in Khyber

Australian broadband network technicians walk off

Hundreds of contracted technicians employed on the government-owned National Broadband Network (NBN Co) walked off the job on Monday in a nation-wide protest against cuts in pay rates and the current sham contracting arrangements.

Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) members rallied at Parramatta, 24 kilometres west of Sydney's CBD, then drove to NBN Co headquarters at North Sydney to hold another demonstration.

According to the CEPU, NBN last year changed its employment model by contracting work to "delivery partners," who themselves sub-contract that work to "principal contractors," who would either subcontract the work again or hire low paid, under skilled workers. The existing highly-skilled technicians were forced to sign new contracts with sub-contractors at lower pay rates.

As well as demanding a reversal of the pay cut and removal of the alleged sham contracting scheme, workers want NBN to change its "dodgy" work dispatch app. Sub-contracted technicians alleged that it is taking them up to three hours to book off work, further reducing their income and causing them to miss scheduled appointments.

Angry technicians struck again on Wednesday and protested outside the Comms Day Summit in Sydney where NBN executives were featured speakers. NBN executives last year paid themselves and staff around \$77 million in bonuses, while announcing that they planned to cut 800 jobs.

Train manufacturing workers walk out in Melbourne

About 130 members of three unions at Downer EDI Rail's rolling stock construction plant in Williamstown stopped work on April 29 to demand job security for long-term casuals in a new enterprise agreement. They picketed the plant's main gate demanding to be taken off fixed-term contracts and made permanent employees.

Members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) overwhelmingly voted in mid-April for future industrial action, ranging from overtime bans to unlimited strikes.

Downer EDI has been contracted to build 65 high-capacity metro trains for Melbourne's suburban rail network upgrade at a cost of \$2.3 billion.

PGH brick-manufacturing workers in Melbourne on strike

About 40 workers at the PGH Bricks manufacturing plant in Thomastown walked out indefinitely on Tuesday in protest against the company's proposed enterprise agreement. AMWU and the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) members said they would not return to work until PGH returns with a fairer pay offer and a better agreement.

South Australian hospital support workers maintain work bans

Thousands of non-medical workers at state-run hospitals in South Australia are maintaining work bans imposed on April 21 in their dispute over the state Liberal government's proposed enterprise agreement. Negotiations between the Marshall government and the United Workers Union (UWU) have been ongoing for 14 months.

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

Workers are concerned that the government wants to remove clauses in their existing enterprise agreement that blocked privatisation and gave some protection against job cuts.

A UWU spokesperson said the low-level bans affecting eight hospitals could spread to more than 80 sites throughout the state unless a deal is reached. Bans include paperwork completion, rubbish and linen collection, receipt and restocking of stores. Currently only six hospitals are affected by the bans.

Tasmanian private hospital nurses walk out over unsafe staffing levels

About 20 nurses employed by Healthscope at the Hobart Private Hospital walked off the job on Wednesday and demonstrated outside the hospital against unsafe staffing levels. Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) members and supporters held placards saying "Patient safety before profit" and "Safe staffing levels".

The walkout was part of a campaign by Healthscope nurses begun in February against excessive workload and for safe nurse-to-patient ratios. Nurses complained of having to care for ten patients on night shifts, excessive overtime, and feeling obligated to work double shifts. One traumatised nurse who resigned because of the workload said nurse/patient ratio failed to provide safe patient care.

New Zealand nurses vote in strike ballot

About 30,000 New Zealand public sector nurses and health care assistants are currently voting in a ballot for a Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA). The ballot, which is being run by the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO), includes a resolution for a "total withdrawal of labour" starting at 11 a.m. on 9 June and ending at 7 p.m.

The limited eight-hour strike proposed by the union portends a repeat of the sell-out agreement imposed by the NZNO in 2018. The union had to overcome widespread opposition among striking nurses. The union agreed to wage increases limited to 3 percent and ignored demands for safe staffing levels. The NZNO's initial claim was for a 17 percent pay rise.

In negotiations which began last June, nurses overwhelmingly rejected a derisory offer by the 20 District Health (DHBs) for an annualised increase of 1.38 percent, in reality a pay cut given the large increases in housing and living costs.

While NZNO members also authorised 63 claims for improved sick leave, workload and safe staffing, these demands were ignored. Far from organising an industrial and political campaign to fight for better pay and conditions, the union went into mediation with the DHBs.

Nurses fighting to improve pay and conditions will have to fight both the union and the Labour-led government. On Wednesday, the government announced a three-year pay freeze for all public sector workers earning more than \$60,000 annually. The government claims this is needed to "pay" for the accumulated costs and payouts to big business during the coronavirus pandemic.



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