

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 May 2021

India: Striking health workers in Punjab sacked

Around 1,400 striking National Health Mission (NHM) workers, including staff nurses, medical officers, homeopathy Ayurveda doctors and ministerial staff, were sacked by the Punjab government on May 10 for refusing to end their week-long strike.

About 3,000 NHM workers walked out on strike to demand higher wages and permanent jobs. The sacked workers, who were fired through the draconian Disaster Management Act, were from seven districts in Punjab.

Last September over 30,000 NHM contract workers held a national stoppage over the same demands. Although many have had ten years' service, they are paid meagre salaries and are denied entitlements available to regular government employees.

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.

East Delhi teaching hospital nurses protest over COVID-19 workloads

Off-duty nurses from the 1,700-bed government-run GTB (Guru Teg Bahadur) hospital in East Delhi demonstrated outside the facility on Wednesday to demand more nursing staff to handle the increased COVID-19 workloads. The overworked and exhausted nurses also demanded changes in the current duty roster. While hospital administration later agreed to the nurses' demand it made no concrete commitments.

Like hospitals throughout India, the GTB has had a massive influx of COVID-19 patients but no increase in medical staff. On April 20, the hospital came within an hour of running out of oxygen for coronavirus treatment.

Bangladeshi police fire on garment workers in Gazipur

Police opened fire and baton-charged hundreds of protesting garment workers on Monday, injuring at least 20 at Tongi in Gazipur, near Dhaka. Fifteen of those injured were from the Ha-Meem Group garment factory.

The garment workers were demanding extension of the Ramadan holiday for up to 10 days, against the government's recommended three days. Star Link Design garment workers at Kaliakair in Gazipur demonstrated demanding a 12-day Ramadan break. On May 8, garment

workers from several factories at Bhashantek and Kafrul in Dhaka staged a sit-down protest demanding early payments and extended holidays.

While garment sector trade bodies claimed 90 percent of their plants had paid workers wages for April by Monday evening and 92 percent had cleared festival allowances, the Industrial Police said that only 75 percent of factories paid wages and allowances. The government had set May 10 for the payments to be made.

Bangladeshi jute mill workers demand compensation

Hundreds of temporary workers from shuttered mills of state-owned Amin Jute Mills Limited demonstrated on May 8 outside the mill in Chattogram to demand payment of salary arrears.

The Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) closed all state-owned mills in July last year, retrenching about 3,000 temporary workers and same number of permanent workers from the Amin Jute Mills. The workers had been promised compensation by September last year.

Twenty-five plants were closed with BJMC claiming they were operating at a loss. About 50,000 workers lost their jobs overnight, including 25,000 permanent employees, and thousands of jute farmers were left with no income. Jute mill workers and farmers, facing poverty without an income, have been holding ongoing protests demanding the mills be reopened.

Bangladeshi hotel and restaurant workers protest for unpaid wages

Bangladesh Hotel Restaurant Sweetmeat Workers' Federation (BHRSWF) members warned on Tuesday that they will hold national demonstrations to demand unpaid wages and the Ramadan festival bonus. The demonstrations will follow a protest in Dhaka in January by federation members demanding implementation of the labour law and the end to terminations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The federation accused the hotel and restaurant owners of exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown to avoid timely payment of wages while cutting staff.

Sri Lankan hospital non-medical health workers demand improved COVID-19 safety

Non-medical (junior) staff at several major Sri Lankan hospitals have

been boycotting work over the failure of health authorities to implement COVID-19 safety measures.

On May 11, workers at the Badulla base hospital, 220 kilometres from Colombo, struck for four hours over the issue. A day earlier, health workers at the base hospital in Karawanella, 70 km from Colombo, held a two-hour protest outside the hospital over the same demands.

Workers alleged that more than 300 health workers have been infected with COVID-19 due to hospital and health institutions failures to implement the safety measures.

Karawanella health workers said they are forced to wash and wear their own PPE equipment because authorities claim there's no other option. Following the protest, hospital management agreed to give them access to washing machines.

Thousands of junior hospital workers held a national sick-leave protest on April 7 over several demands, including proper COVID-19 safety measures. The same workers held a national protest in January to demand permanent jobs, increased overtime payments, uniforms, risk allowance for handling coronavirus-infected equipment and proper PPE equipment.

Sri Lankan public health inspectors strike

Public Health Inspectors (PHIs) in Badulla district and Galle stopped work on Monday and Wednesday respectively over interference in their duties by health authorities. They denounced the government over its COVID-19 mitigation response.

PHIs complained that regional health authorities in many instances prevented them from carrying out quarantine regulations.

In September, the Association of Public Health Inspectors called an 11-day national strike by its 2,000 members to protest the government's failure to implement adequate legal procedures to contain the coronavirus pandemic.

The inspectors were concerned that the government had failed to gazette health-care guidelines for dealing with the coronavirus and that they did not have enough legal authority to conduct COVID-19 mitigation procedures. PHIs are the main officials responsible for carrying out all basic on-the-ground activities related to the control of the pandemic.

The September strike was called off after the Ministry of Health accepted a false explanation from the Attorney General's Office regarding the legal powers of the inspectors.

South Australian power workers strike again over pay

Power maintenance workers from the state-owned South Australia Power Networks (SAPN) walked off the job on May 6 in opposition to management's proposed enterprise agreement. Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members stopped work for four hours on April 1 and imposed work bans that included working-to-rule and not working on rostered days off.

ETU members have twice rejected the company's initial offer to maintain current conditions with a 2 percent pay increase in a 12-month agreement. Their main concern is SAPN's moves to include a two-tier wage structure in which new recruits would be paid 20 percent less in the new enterprise deal.

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 alleges that the latest offer cuts wages and allowances and removes limitations on the

use of third-party contractors—increasing job insecurity for permanent employees.

The ETU wants 4 percent annual pay increases in a three-year agreement, no two-tier wage structure and further negotiations to resolve issues pending from the 2018 agreement.

Downer EDI workers in Melbourne hold second strike

About 130 members of three unions at Downer EDI Rail's rolling stock construction plant in Williamstown walked out on May 7 and picketed the premises to demand job security for long-term casuals in a new enterprise agreement. The action followed a walkout a week earlier on the issue.

Workers are demanding to be taken off fixed-term contracts and made permanent employees. The workers pointed out that the buildings are fixed, the contracts are secure, the work is ongoing, but they are individually engaged and reengaged temporarily.

In mid-April, Electrical Trades Union (ETU), Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members overwhelmingly voted for future industrial action.

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.

Municipal workers in Victoria vote for industrial action over pay cut

Moorabool Shire Council workers in rural Victoria last week voted to take industrial action for a better enterprise agreement (EA). The industrial action by 103 Australian Services Union (ASU) members could include work bans and 24-hour stoppages. Workers rejected the council's EA "offer" that would limit their future annual pay increases to as little as 1.2 percent.

When negotiations began in early 2020 the council offered a meagre 2 percent increase in wages, increase in allowances as per the consumer prices index (CPI) and no changes to conditions. The agreement was to end in June 2021.

Using the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse, the ASU collaborated with Moorabool management and agreed to put negotiations on hold for 12 months, a virtual wage freeze. On April 13, council management reduced its pay increase offer to 1.2 percent per annum, below the current CPI of 1.6 percent.

New South Wales power distribution workers prepare to strike

About 100 ETU workplace delegates from the state-owned power distribution company Ausgrid, voted on May 4 for a membership ballot on possible strike action for a new work agreement. At least 1,700 workers will be involved in the vote.

Negotiations between the ETU and Ausgrid for a new enterprise agreement (EA) have stalled after 26 meetings over the past six months. Following the axing of 2,000 jobs since the utility was privatised in 2015, and another to 500 to go by 2022, workers are demanding that a job security clause be inserted into the proposed EA.

Ausgrid has rejected this and demanded workers agree to a 12-month wage freeze with increases in the following two years limited to the

consumer prices index (CPI) increases. Ausgrid also wants to restrict the amount of annual leave that workers can accrue and include forced shift work.

New Zealand nurses vote to strike

About 30,000 New Zealand public sector nurses and health care assistants have voted to strike for eight hours on June 9 over their pay negotiations. The ballot was under way last week when the Labour-Greens government announced a three-year pay freeze for public servants earning more than \$NZ60,000.

A spokesman for the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO), said nurses were “absolutely furious” at the announcement as most have already progressed to the last step of their pay scale. NZNO members had already rejected a derisory annualised increase of 1.38 percent offer from the 20 District Health (DHBs).

Nurses in Managed Isolation and Quarantine (MIQ) facilities for COVID-19 will not be involved in the strike but those working as a part of the vaccination rollout will. The union says DHBs have been given “ample notice” to make alternative arrangements for the eight-hour period.

The NZNO’s limited industrial action portends a repeat of the sell-out agreement imposed by the union in 2018. 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.

Mediation between the NZNO and DHBs remains scheduled for May 18–19, with the union expressing “hope of finding a solution” to avoid a strike.



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