

India: Striking Bihar contract health workers ordered to end strike; Tamil Nadu paper-making workers demand closure of COVID-infected factory; Western Australian power distribution workers strike

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

21 May 2021

### Asia

#### India: Court orders Bihar state contract health workers to end strike

Around 27,000 contract health workers in Bihar were ordered by the High Court to end their strike on May 13, following an application from the state government. The court directed the government to establish a committee to investigate the workers' grievances and report back to the court by June 21.

Bihar State Contractual Health Employees Federation members walked off the job on May 12 demanding higher pay and a life insurance cover of 5 million rupees (\$68,296). The court had ordered the workers to end a strike last year over the same issues.

#### Tamil Nadu hospital contract workers protest

Around 150 contract workers from the Coimbatore Medical College Hospital (CMCH) protested outside the Coimbatore Collectorate on Monday demanding to be made permanent employees. The workers have been fighting for this for over seven years.

The hospital administration has rejected workers' demands declaring that they are employed through an agency and the hospital is not empowered to make them permanent.

#### Tamil Nadu paper-making workers demand COVID-infected factory be closed

Around 1,300 workers from a paper manufacturing plant in Tiruchy, Tamil Nadu, demonstrated outside the plant on May 16 to demand its temporary closure. At least 120 workers in the plant are infected with COVID-19.

The protesters also want proper compensation for the infected workers.

The demonstration was held because management has repeatedly ignored workers' demands.

#### Hospital nurses in Gujarat strike for salary increase

Nurses from the Vadodara SSG hospital and the Surat hospital in Gujarat state walked out on Wednesday to demand a salary increase and for a stop to the use of student nurses to treat COVID-19 patients. The strike was called by the Surat Nursing Association.

#### Bangladeshi garment workers demand unpaid wages

Displaced garment workers from the Padma Wears factory protested on Wednesday on the road adjacent to the Chittagong Export Processing Zone (EPZ) to demand outstanding wages. Demonstrators said management shut the factory and fled in February without paying wages in arrears.

Workers accused the government-administered Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority for their loss saying they did not get any satisfactory response when they initially registered their complaints. EPZ police officers confronted the workers, forcing them to end their protest and leave the area.

### Australia and New Zealand

#### Victorian day-surgery nurses walk out

Nurses from the privately-owned Ballarat Day Procedures Centre, in Ballarat, in the Central Highlands of Victoria, walked off the job for two hours on May 14 to demand improved wages, entitlements and working

conditions in a new enterprise agreement.

Thirty-nine members of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) have also imposed overtime bans and are distributing campaign material to patients and the community.

The ANMF called the action after five months of failed negotiations with the hospital owner, Cura Group. The last pay rise for the nurses was almost two years ago.

### **New South Wales industrial court orders ambulance patient transport workers to end strike**

The Health Services Union (HSU) called off a 24-hour strike by ambulance patient transport officers (PTOs) from the NSW state-run health services provider HealthShare on Thursday. The union shut down the strike in response to NSW Industrial Relations Court orders. The no-strike direct will remain in force until June 30.

Ambulance patient transport officers voted to strike at a stop-work meeting on Thursday and to maintain work bans on Friday. The workers are in dispute with HealthShare and the Liberal state government over its wages cap for public sector workers and an anomaly in HealthShare's proposed enterprise agreement that would leave some PTOs on lower pay rates than others doing the same job.

The HSU has called for a 4.7 percent pay increase this year and an end to the pay anomaly. The state government has limited public sector pay increases to 1.5 percent. An upcoming 0.5 percent increase to superannuation that all workers will receive nationally later this year, however, will not be absorbed by the government. This means this year's actual wage offer is a meagre 1.04 percent, well below the increasing cost of living.

### **Power distribution workers in Western Australia strike**

About 800 members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) from the state-owned power utility Western Power walked out on a 48-hour strike on Thursday in opposition to the corporation's proposed enterprise agreement. Negotiations over the proposed agreement began in August but Western Power has refused to continue talks since January.

Union demands include wage increases that are in excess of the inflation rate, allowances for work in extreme weather conditions and a security of employment clause against outsourcing work to private contractors. Workers also want resolution to the understaffing in regional areas.

### **LNG production workers end industrial action on Barrow Island, Western Australia**

The Federal Court on May 13 ordered four unions to call off ongoing industrial action by their members at Chevron's LNG production plant on Barrow Island in north-western Australia.

The court accepted claims by UGL, Chevron's production and maintenance contractor, that the strike action had created potential safety risks at the complex that had to be rectified. UGL has used multiple spurious safety claims to give the court the opportunity to order the suspension of all industrial action.

The workers are fighting for a new enterprise agreement (EA) that brings their wages and conditions up to industry standard. UGL cut off negotiations earlier in the year but were forced into negotiations after workers last month rejected the company's enterprise agreement offer.

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 and the Australian Manufacturing Workers 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.

### **Queensland aged care nurses protest over job cuts**

Queensland Nurses and Midwives' Union (QNMU) members demonstrated in Cairns, Far North Queensland, on May 11 to protest their employer's decision to shut one of its two private aged care facilities in the region, jeopardising up to 80 jobs.

The QNMU alleges that Mercy Health (owned by the Catholic Church) intends to close its 40-bed facility Mercy Place Woree and move the residents to its sister facility Mercy Place Westcourt about five kilometres away, without increasing staff numbers at Westcourt.

The union said that Mercy Health advised it that Woree staff would be made redundant and Westcourt clinical staff would be reduced by 25 percent, despite the 40 additional residents to be admitted to the facility.

### **New Zealand bus drivers reject pay offer, vote to strike**

Bus drivers in Wellington voted 204–3 to reject a new pay offer from NZ Bus and approve a new round of strikes. Drivers also passed a unanimous motion of no confidence in the management, declaring the company was not fit to run the country's public transport services.

NZ Bus offered drivers with more than five years' service a cash "bonus" of \$10,000 if the deal was accepted. Those with less than five years' service would receive \$5,000. After initially taking a "neutral" stance, the Tramways Union labelled the payment a "bribe" and said it would not accept cash payments for giving up terms and conditions. The union previously agreed, however, to lower overtime rates for 800 Auckland drivers.

The NZ Bus offer would have raised the base wage rate for Wellington drivers from \$19.29 an hour plus allowances to \$22.10 an hour, or to \$24 for drivers with more than six months' service. It would however slash overtime pay and additional benefits such as double-time pay on weekends and after midnight.

Drivers previously rejected an offer in April, which had a lower hourly wage and did not include the cash bonus. A proposed 24-hour strike was met with a lockout by NZ Bus which was then declared unlawful by the Employment Court. NZ Bus owner Next Capital has warned it will not rule out a second lockout over the new deal's rejection.

The union has already signalled that it is ready to negotiate further, saying strike action will resume only if the company does not return to the table with a "fair offer" by May 28.

### **Auckland retail workers walk out demanding higher pay**

Staff at global fast fashion brand H&M walked off the job at the company's Commercial Bay and Sylvia Park stores in Auckland on Friday and demonstrated in the central city in a pay dispute.

According to the FIRST Union, a new collective agreement remains unsigned despite months of attempts to negotiate. The highly profitable H&M, which is the second-largest global retailer of fast fashion products, has made numerous attempts to avoid paying more than the minimum wage, currently \$NZ20 per hour.

This is the first group of retail workers to go on strike over a new agreement this year. The union is directing them to campaign for the so-called "Living Wage", which is set at an absurdly low \$22.75 an hour from September. This figure was established by a grouping of unions, community groups and church organisations that falsely claim it is enough to live on. It includes an "accreditation system" for employers who comply.



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