

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

28 May 2021

## Accredited Social Health Activists hold second India-wide strike

Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers held a one-day national strike on Monday to demand on-time payments of their honorarium, permanent jobs, personal protective equipment and compensation for the families of ASHA workers who have succumbed to COVID-19.

There are close to one million ASHA workers in India. Around 600,000 ASHA workers held a two-day national strike in August last year over the same issues.

The strike was called by the All India Coordination Committee of ASHA workers, a union affiliated with the Centre for Indian Trade Unions, which is the trade union federation of the Stalinist Communist Party of India Marxist.

The highly-exploited workers provide basic health care to deprived sections of the population in rural and urban slum areas. As the first line responders in the detection of COVID-19, many ASHA workers have died from the coronavirus.

## Madhya Pradesh contract health workers strike

About 19,000 contract health workers in Madhya Pradesh state began an indefinite strike on Monday over several demands, including pay parity with permanent workers.

A union spokesman said that the state government pays contract employees in ten other departments on the basis of its 2018 parity policy but this rate is not extended to health department workers.

According to the union, there are 2,500 other associated health department employees who are supporting the strike. While some have worked on contract for 12 years, the government in 2019 ended their outsourced jobs to an agency that is now exploiting them. The union wants these employees rehired and the services of the outsourced agency terminated.

## Tamil Nadu spinning-mill employees demand safe working conditions

About 400 workers from a private spinning mill in Karaikudi, an urban centre in Sivaganga district, Tamil Nadu state, stopped work and protested outside the factory on May 21 to demand COVID-19 safe working conditions.

Workers demanded a reduction of shifts from two to one, and a 50 percent cut in the number of workers at the mill. They complained that

there was practically no social distancing in the workplace factory. The workers ended their demonstration following intimidation from police, who claimed protesters demands would be met.

## Punjab power generating engineers impose work bans

Punjab State Electricity Board (PSEB) engineers protested on Tuesday over the failure of the Punjab State Power Corporation Limited (PSPCL) to constitute a wage formulation committee (WFC) and recommend a better pay scale for its employees.

PSEB Engineers Association members met and decided that engineers at all thermal stations would turn off their mobile phones for three hours each day, and begin work-to-rule from June 1.

The association has accused the corporation of delaying the formation of the WFC to delay the introduction of new pay scales. The engineers also complained about shortages of staff, materials and how authorities are handling the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Sri Lanka: Village government officials strike

Grama Seva Officers (GSOs or village government officials) walked out nationally on Tuesday over the failure of authorities to organise COVID-19 vaccinations of its workforce.

GSOs alleged that the vaccine was being given to external parties, bypassing the official COVID-19 priority program. Several hundred GSOs are believed to have been infected with the virus and three have died. The officers threatened to remain on strike until all government officials who work closely with the public, such as GSOs, Samurdhi officers and agriculture officers, are vaccinated.

GSOs are the main first response officials who deal with people infected with COVID-19. They do the necessary coordinating work required by Public Health Inspectors related to the pandemic.

## Colombo: Hospital health workers demand provision of transport

Health workers at the Colombo South Teaching Hospital protested on May 22 over the lack of transport facilities following late shift work, a long pending issue. Workers threatened to strike the following day if transport were not provided the next day.

The protesters also demanded leave, in accordance with the Public

Administration Circular, pointing out that public servants are given eight days leave per month. Health workers have been denied this right.

### **Sri Lankan public hospital workers demand PPE**

Sri Lankan nursing staff refused to perform COVID-19 specimen testing on Tuesday, demanding that they be provided adequate personal protective equipment (PPE). They also demanded provision of transport facilities, a holiday allowance, and the vaccinations of about 4,000 colleagues, as well as guaranteed treatment if they are infected.

On May 11, workers at the Badulla base hospital, 220 kilometres from Colombo, struck for four hours over these issues, while a day earlier, health workers at the Karawanella base hospital held a two-hour protest.

Karawanella health workers said they were forced to wash and wear their own PPE equipment. Following the protest, hospital management agreed to give them access to washing machines.

The health workers alleged that more than 300 of their colleagues have been infected with COVID-19 because of hospital and health institutions' failure to implement adequate safety measures.

### **Pakistan: Punjab transit workers shutdown services to demand outstanding salaries**

Workers from the Metro Bus Service, that operates transit between Islamabad and Rawalpindi, shut down the system, including ticketing counters, on Monday to demand three-months' outstanding salaries. They also called for the reinstatement of 200 colleagues they claimed management had fired for protesting over the outstanding salaries.

The Punjab Mass Transit Authority blamed private outsourcing firms, providing ticketing, sanitation, operational and security services for not paying the workers.

Government departments are outsourcing an increasing portion of services to private companies, which hire workers on temporary contracts for poverty-level wages. One such company, Prime HR, has failed to pay Metro Bus Service workers for two months, and issued termination notices to 300 workers upon the expiry of their contracts on May 31.

The strike ended after eight hours, following promises by the government and private companies to pay the salaries. Metro Bus Service workers suspended services for two days last November, when they were similarly not paid for three months.

### **Hyderabad power workers strike against privatisation**

Hundreds of workers from three thermal power plants near Hyderabad, in Sindh province, Pakistan, struck for two days on Monday, in protest against government plans to privatise the plants.

The facilities are operated by the Pakistan Electric Power Company, a branch of the Water & Power Development Authority. Large demonstrations were held outside the Jamshoro plant, where a protest camp was established.

Thermal power plant workers held similar protests this week in Faisalabad. In January, thousands of workers in Punjab demonstrated against the privatisation of power distribution companies. Protesters in

both cities claimed hundreds of workers were placed in a "surplus pool" as the authority prepares to privatise the plants.

### **Applus workers in Western Australia plan month-long strike**

Australian Workers Union members, employed with maintenance contractor Applus on Woodside LNG's Burrup and offshore facilities in northern Western Australia, are planning a four-week strike on June 18. The dispute, which involves 48 workers, is over the company's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). The walkout will be the fifth since workers began rolling work bans and stoppages in February.

Applus workers, including non-union members, have overwhelmingly rejected three proposed EAs from the company. The AWU said its Applus members want the agreement to include secure rosters and the reversal of cuts in non-union employment contracts the company imposed two years ago.

The company is demanding flexible rosters and has rejected the union claims on pay rates and conditions. About 100 workers are affected by the EA negotiations, but because of Australia's anti-democratic industrial relations laws, only union members can legally strike without being fined.

### **Australian Defence Force contract supports workers strike**

United Workers Union (UWU) members with Spotless contractor at two Australian Defence Force training facilities in Townsville, Queensland walked off the job on Monday in protest over the company's proposed enterprise agreement.

About 30 workers, including cleaners, groundkeepers and range operators, at the RAAF Garbutt and Lavarack Barracks, vowed to strike again if they are not offered a suitable pay increase.

### **Victorian library workers begin industrial action for better pay and security**

About 90 members of the Australian Services Union (ASU) from the Geelong Regional Library Corporation began low-level industrial action on May 20, to push for higher wages and improved safety in the corporation's proposed enterprise agreement.

While the workers are reportedly the lowest paid librarians in the state, the corporation has offered below inflation rate pay increases. The ASU is demanding wages on par with other public library workers, and improved safety, including a minimum of two staff on duty at all times.

### **Qube dock workers in Western Australia strike**

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members at Dampier and Port Hedland, in Western Australia's northwest, have begun an industrial campaign for an enterprise agreement with Qube. Port Hedland members have imposed bans, on working more than seven hours in any shift, starting yesterday, until June 1. Workers at Dampier port stopped work for

one hour on May 21.

The workers have twice rejected Qube's proposed non-union EA, with negotiations at both ports stalled, because management opposes every demand related to better wages and conditions.

### **Dock workers at Fremantle Ports continue rolling stoppages**

Dock workers at Fremantle Ports in Perth, Western Australia, have been holding two-hour stoppages, on each shift since early May, at the Fremantle Kwinana Bulk Terminal. They are demanding the company presents an improved enterprise agreement offer. The MUA claimed that several workers were stood down on May 15, when they walked off the job to protest over the company's offer.

According to the union, Fremantle Ports management is restricting any pay rise above the state government's current wage cap. The company has rejected all demands for better working conditions. The McGowan state Labor government declared in October that wage increases for WA public servants would be frozen at \$1,000 per year, for a further two years. The cap has been in place for three years.

### **South Australian power workers strike again over pay**

About 50 power maintenance workers for Enerven, a privately-run subsidiary of state-owned South Australia Power Networks (SAPN), walked out for eight hours on May 20 and demonstrated in Adelaide, the state capital, for a better enterprise agreement. The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members had walked out in April and on May 6 over the issue and imposed bans, including working-to-rule and not working on rostered days off.

Workers have twice rejected the company's initial offer to maintain current conditions with a 2 percent pay increase in a 12-month agreement. They are also opposed to Enerven's and SAPN's moves to establish a two-tier wage structure, in which new recruits would be paid 20 percent less in the new enterprise deal.

ETU members said 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.

### **Melbourne City Council workers vote unanimously for industrial action**

Melbourne City Council (MCC) workers last week voted unanimously for industrial action in a union ballot, calling for a 4 percent pay rise during negotiations for a new enterprise agreement.

About 1,500 workers, including garbage collectors, service personnel, gardeners, parking officers and many others, called for industrial action after three years of deferred wage increases. The average wage of a fulltime MCC worker has remained frozen at just \$48,000 per annum.

Negotiations between the Australian Services Union (ASU) and the MCC began in 2018. In early 2020 the ASU, in collaboration with MCC and the state Labor government, agreed to a 12-month deferment in negotiations and industrial action under the cover of fighting COVID 19, thus pushing a new agreement into 2021 at the earliest; in effect, the imposition of a three-year wage freeze.

During this time, the ASU endorsed and oversaw the axing of 5,000 casually employed municipal workers across Victoria.

### **New Zealand supermarket workers strike**

Workers at New Zealand's largest and busiest Pak 'n Save supermarket took strike action on May 22 and picketed the store. The individually-owned Pak 'n Save stores are part of Foodstuffs, which runs North Island and South Island co-operatives.

Just under 40 workers at the Lincoln Road store in West Auckland rejected a pay offer as not recognising the value of their work. A FIRST Union spokesman said the owner had failed to negotiate a "fair" collective contract, would not address understaffing, nor discuss a night-fill allowance for unsociable hours. Staff had been working without a signed collective agreement for nearly two months.

Workers, some of whom have been at the store for over 20 years, are paid \$20.50 per hour. The owner is proposing \$21.60 and provision for this to increase to \$22.10 in January. The union is campaigning for the so-called "living wage," which is set to go up to \$22.75 in September. The "living wage" itself is woefully inadequate, with escalating living costs, house prices and rents.

The Lincoln Road supermarket is the second Pak 'n Save franchise to take industrial action this month, after workers at its Taupō store walked out over stalled wage negotiations. The FIRST Union said that the Taupō staff's workloads had increased since the COVID-19 pandemic hit, but wages had not kept up with rising rent and bills.



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