

Pakistan university workers fight government cuts; Sri Lankan health workers protest over COVID-19 safety; Western Australia power distribution workers strike for better pay and conditions

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

4 June 2021

Asia

India: Punjab state administration workers strike

Striking workers from the Punjab State District Commissioner's (DC) Office in Fatehgarh Sahib demonstrated outside the DC Office building on May 28 over several long outstanding demands. They chanted slogans denouncing the revenue minister and the chief minister and burnt an effigy. The workers had been on casual leave since May 24 in support of their demands.

The DC Office Employees Union is demanding implementation of the 6th Pay Commission recommendations, payment of outstanding dearness allowances, promotions and restoration of the previous pension system. Workers said 55 percent of positions in the DC offices were vacant but management had made no move to recruit workers.

Visakhapatnam steel workers' anti-privatisation protests enter fifth month

Steel workers and supporters in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh are continuing protests and demonstrations against the Modi government's moves to privatise the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant (VSP). June 1 marked 110 days of a hunger protest against privatisation. The plant employs almost 18,000 workers and can produce 7.3 million tons of steel per annum.

Indian Prime Minister 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 widely supported demonstrations have been ongoing since February 1.

Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa university workers hold province-wide strike

Academic and non-academic staff from various universities in Khyber

Pakhtunkhwa province walked out for two days on Tuesday to protest a brutal police attack on their protests the previous day. Workers from universities across the province had been holding demonstrations since May 27 to demand the reversal of government reforms forcing universities to generate their own finances. The strike was called by the Federation of All Pakistan Academic Staff Association.

On the fifth day of demonstrations, the workers marched to the Peshawar provincial assembly but were violently attacked by heavily armed police who fired tear gas and used batons. Many protesters were injured, with at least 16 requiring hospital treatment. Twenty-four protesters, including the Peshawar University Teachers Association president, were arrested.

The government reforms include cuts to, or the complete elimination of, allowances paid to university staff. The university workers are demanding withdrawal of the higher-education budget cuts and increased tuition fees and substantial government resources be allocated to expand free higher education.

Sri Lankan hospital health workers protest

All Ceylon Nurses Union members held a 24-hour national sick-leave strike on Monday over inadequate protection and allowances for nurses involved in COVID-19 treatment. Sri Lankan maternity nurses picketed hospitals demanding leave in accordance with the Public Administration Circular.

Nurses are concerned over the life-threatening conditions both in and outside COVID-19 treatment centres.

Around three hundred non-medical staff who are members of the Colombo South Teaching Hospital Combine Health Workers' Union protested outside the hospital on Tuesday demanding COVID-19 risk allowances, proper transport facilities and for reserve employees who completed 180 days of service to be made permanent. Colombo National Hospital workers are holding an indefinite sit-down protest outside the facility.

The Health Trade Union Confederation, an alliance of over 20 health unions, threatened to strike on June 3. They have called for COVID-safe working conditions, risk allowances for all health workers and other related demands.

Hospital nurses have refused to perform COVID-19 specimen testing

until they are provided with personal protective equipment (PPE). They also want proper transport facilities, a holiday allowance, vaccinations of about 4,000 colleagues and guaranteed treatment if they are infected.

On Monday, all health workers, including doctors and junior staff from Teldeniya COVID-19 hospital near Kandy, picketed the hospital demanding vaccination of all staff. Sri Lanka reported 2,882 new COVID-19 infections and 43 deaths on Monday.

Sri Lankan hospital paramedics hold nationwide protests

Hospital paramedics across the island protested on Thursday, condemning the government for not implementing eight long-pending demands which are still held up in committees.

Radiology technicians have been on strike since May 26, accusing the government of ignoring their demands made through the Joint Council for Professions of Supplementary Medicine.

The paramedical professionals' demands include special allowances, salary increases for supplementary medical graduates and for management to stop interfering with the duties of complementary medical service supervising officers.

Australia and New Zealand

Power distribution workers in Western Australia protest

Western Power (WP) workers demonstrated outside state parliament in Perth on Thursday over a proposed enterprise agreement by the state-owned power distribution company. Negotiations over the agreement began last August but Western Power has refused to continue talks since January.

Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members walked out on a 48-hour strike on May 20 over the issue. Ninety-eight percent of WP's 800 workforce across 26 depots voted against the proposed agreement.

The union has called for higher than inflation wage increases, extreme weather work allowances and a security of employment clause against outsourcing work to private contractors. Workers have called for increased employment in understaffed regional areas.

South Australia's power distributor stands down workers

South Australia's privately-owned monopoly power distributor SA Power Networks (SAPN) has begun standing down workers for taking industrial action over a proposed enterprise agreement. The workers are directly employed by Enerven, a SAPN subsidiary.

ETU members have imposed work bans, including working-to-rule and not working on rostered days off, along with four- and eight-hour strikes along with protests outside SAPN's head office in Adelaide.

The ETU has called for 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.

The company has offered a 2 percent pay increase in a 12-month agreement, an effective wage cut, and – as part of Enerven and SAPN's

moves to establish a two-tier wage structure – new recruits to be paid 20 percent less. ETU members have twice rejected this “offer,” which also removes limitations on the use of third-party contractors—increasing job insecurity for permanent employees.

Municipal workers in rural Victoria take industrial action

Over 100 Moorabool Shire Council workers in rural Victoria began industrial action on Monday demanding a better enterprise agreement offer. The industrial action includes bans on street cleaning, collecting fees, issuing fines and collecting garbage and 30 other duties. The workers in mid-May voted to take industrial action, which includes 24-hour stoppages. It has been almost two years since their last pay rise.

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 Zealand: Union puts Wellington bus drivers' strike “on hold”

Planned strike action by Wellington bus drivers has been put “on hold” by Tramways Union while NZ Bus attempts to work out a funding deal with Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) and the NZ Transport Agency. A 24-hour strike by bus drivers in April was met with a lockout by NZ Bus, which was lifted by the Employment Court after the union filed an injunction.

The negotiations follow a 204–3 vote by drivers late last month to reject the company's latest pay offer. The Tramways Union had set a deadline to strike after May 27 but agreed to defer any industrial action for at least a week. The union and NZ Bus met twice last week without a mediator. The talks were reported as “amicable.”

NZ Bus is seeking to gut valuable overtime and penalty rates and reduce annual leave from five weeks to four for new drivers. Weekend penalty rates of time-and-a-half on Saturdays, double time on Sundays and after midnight would be slashed to time-and-a-quarter. Drivers would lose thousands of dollars annually.

The meetings between the GWRC and the company could signal further subsidies or policy changes. The GWRC agreed early this year to pay a subsidy to the company to top-up wages to bring drivers' pay above the minimum wage of \$20 per hour.

NZ Bus is owned by Australian private equity firm Next Capital, which purchased the public transport provider for \$229 million in 2018. The company holds a contract to provide around a quarter of the bus routes on the region's Metlink network.



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