

Malaysian government doctors threaten strike action; Madhya Pradesh health workers demand pay rise and job permanency; New Zealand nurses vote on further strikes

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

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Asia

Malaysian government doctors threaten strike action

Tens of thousands of young contract doctors employed in Malaysia's public hospitals have threatened to strike on July 26 to demand changes in their terms of employment.

The strike threat was made by an independent group of contract doctors who are facing a surge of coronavirus infections in Malaysia. On June 29, coronavirus infections in Malaysia set a record daily high of 6,437.

On Monday, other contract doctors established an on-line social media page—"Contract Doctors' Strike"—that trended for hours. MMA Schomos, the official union representing all government doctors, has begun its own social media campaign but limited to calling on all Malaysians to wear black on a Monday in solidarity with doctors.

The 23,000 frontline contract doctors are employed under a supposed temporary system established by the government in 2016. The original group of doctors hired under these arrangements five years ago remain on contract and earn half the pay of permanent employees.

Only four percent of doctors have been made permanent in that time with the health authority claiming that additional permanent employees would lead to over staffing, a lie exposed by the pandemic.

India: Punjab Roadways commuter transport workers on strike

Punjab Roadways/PUNBUS contract workers began a three-day state-wide strike on June 28 to demand permanent jobs. No government buses operated for four hours on each day of the walkout.

Punjab Roadways/PUNBUS Contract Workers Union members said they have been on contract for over a decade. They allege that management had previously promised to make them permanent within three years.

Punjab municipal sanitation workers strike

Around 450 sanitation workers from the Patiala Municipal Corporation in Punjab state, began an indefinite strike on June 24 for permanent jobs. Workers said that contractors who hired them had exploited them for four years on a poverty salary of 7,633 rupees (\$US103) a month.

The strike was called by the Punjab Sanitation Workers Federation which threatened to continue the strike until their demands are met.

Punjab state government employees protest over pay

Punjab state government employees, including doctors, protested in Tarn Taran on June 23 against the recommendations of the 6th Pay Commission report, alleging it is an anti-worker ruling. The Punjab State Ministerial Services Union (PSMSU) called a week-long "pen-down" strike at various workplaces on June 22.

The district unit of the joint Punjab Government Doctors' Coordination Committee held protests at various district hospitals. The 6th Pay Commission, non-practice allowance (NPA) had been reduced from 25 percent to 20 percent, and delinked from the basic pay, which will result in reduced salaries for doctors.

Vishakhapatnam steel workers maintain anti-privatisation protest

Anti-privatisation protests at the Vishakhapatnam Steel Plant (VSP) in Andhra Pradesh have been continuing for six months. At least 85 percent of VSP's 11,500 non-executive workers and 16,000 contract workers held a one-day strike on Tuesday opposing privatisation of the plant and to demand a 15 percent pay increase, a 35 percent bonus on basic pay and 9 percent pension.

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. Widely supported demonstrations against privatisation have been ongoing since February 1.

Madhya Pradesh social health workers demand permanent jobs and pay increase

Around 75,000 Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) and Urban Social Health Activist (USHA) workers staged a state-wide strike on Thursday to demand permanent jobs and a higher honorarium. The strike followed a mass demonstration in Bhopal on June 24.

The workers want a fixed honorarium of 18,000 rupees (\$US242) and 24,000 rupees for senior workers (Shahyogini) until they are made permanent.

Other demands included the government paying the medical expenses of family members of ASHA and USHA workers, and five million rupees ex-gratia if workers die as a result of their employment. They presented a memorandum of their demands to the Bhopal Collector's office.

Tamil Nadu water utility workers protest over unpaid wages

Contract workers from various pumping stations in Madurai protested outside the residence of their contractor on June 28 demanding immediate payment of three months' outstanding wages.

There are about 360 pumping station workers in the city who are employed on a contract basis. They alleged that the contractor did not pay the full wages fixed by the authorities and receive a meagre 10,500 rupees (\$141) a month.

Pakistan: Peshawar railway workers protest job cuts

Pakistan Railway workers demonstrated outside the Peshawar Press Club on Monday against the government's proposed rationalisation plan. The Pakistan Railway Employees Union claimed that the plan would lay off or force into retirement hundreds of workers.

Pakistan Railways is among the many state-run enterprises earmarked for privatisation under the government's agreement with the International Monetary Fund. Despite the privatisation program affecting an overwhelming majority of government sector workers, the unions have refused to initiate joint industrial action but limited their opposition to toothless appeals to the government.

Islamabad health workers demand COVID-19 risk allowance

Health workers including nurses and paramedics from government-run hospitals and other medical services in Islamabad protested on Wednesday for the third consecutive day to demand the government pay a health risk allowance.

The frontline workers, who are battling COVID-19, say that they have not been paid the allowance for 11 months. Up until March, nearly 150 health workers have died after contracting the virus.

The cash-strapped government, in an attempt avoid paying the allowance, has made it conditional on workers having been given a COVID-19 vaccination. Vaccine availability in the country is limited with only a few able to afford the vaccine in the private market.

The government commitment, however, was a fraud. After several

workers received the vaccine, the government refused to pay the allowance, which prompted the protests.

Health workers have threatened to boycott all COVID-19 related services, including the vaccination program and virus testing even at Islamabad airport, if the government refuses pay the allowance.

Bangladeshi garment workers demand transport during COVID-19 pandemic

Garment workers from several factories at Savar and Ulail in Dhaka district demonstrated on Monday to demand public or factory-arranged transport to workplaces. Transport has been reduced due to restrictions imposed by the government during the COVID-19 pandemic. Protesting garments workers, who were joined by others, blocked the Dhaka-Aricha highway's Radio colony and Savar Bazar bus-stand areas.

Workers blamed factory authorities for not providing transport, saying they were forced to use rickshaws and other vehicles at a high cost. Many workers said they had been forced to walk to their plants.

Garment workers have demanded that their factories close during a government-imposed lockdown which became effective from Thursday.

Bangladeshi communications workers protest over retrenchments

Around 100 retrenched Grameenphone staff employees protested outside the National Press Club in Dhaka on Sunday to demand reinstatement. The protest was in response to a management notice sent to 159 employees on June 20 laying them off. Grameenphone, a mobile phone operator, began outsourcing work last year and offered a voluntary retirement scheme for 100 employees in mid-June.

Bangladeshi tea estate workers oppose victimisation

Tea estate workers from the Luhauni Tea Garden at Molvibazar's Kulaura in north-eastern Bangladesh have been demonstrating since June 22 over 11 demands and the sacking and victimisation of a worker.

The owner closed the tea estate and locked out workers after they approached him with their demands. When workers began protesting inside the estate, authorities called police and issued a notice declaring an indefinite suspension of work.

The dismissed worker, Shyamal Pachi, told the media on May 20 that the assistant manager and gatekeeper cut down a tree he had planted inside the estate. When Pachi opposed management's actions, he was terminated using a draconian Bangladesh Labour Act which allows management to sack a worker without reason.

Authorities falsely claimed that Pachi tried to attack the assistant general manager with a sharp weapon after an altercation. Workers alleged the tea estate management breached a promise to resolve the reinstatement issue.

Sri Lankan Railway workers walk out

Thirty-four union members, including train drivers and controllers, from the Sri Lankan Railway walked out on Wednesday over several demands, including for removal of the Colombo suburban project director. The unions called off the strike later in the day after discussions with authorities.

The secretary of the Railway Engine Drivers Association alleged that no action had been taken on irregularities and attempts have been made to outsource the Electronic Ticketing Project to a foreign company. He also said the railway workers had the support of workers from Sri Lanka Telecom and Ports and Postal Petroleum Corporation.

Sri Lankan volunteer health workers' fight for jobs continues in Northern Province

Health Services Assistants in Northern Province who have worked on a voluntary basis without compensation for many years protested on June 23 at the Vavuniya Divisional Secretariat.

The workers were dismissed following the election of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government in 2019. They have been holding a sit-down protest outside the Northern Province Governor's office at Jaffna since March 1.

Some of them had been working for over two years awaiting job permanency and without any compensation. They demanded that all the sacked volunteer workers be reappointed because of their years of service.

The Vavuniya Divisional Secretariat has been conducting interviews under the government's "100,000 jobs opportunity" program. While the government claims that its program is create jobs for the poorest youths, its purpose is to create an under-paid and "disciplined" labour pool controlled by the defence ministry.

Australia and New Zealand

Fremantle Port workers step-up industrial action

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members at the Fremantle Ports Authority (FPA) in Perth, Western Australia have been holding staggered one-hour stoppages at the Fremantle Kwinana Bulk Terminal [outer harbour] since early May. The union is demanding the company presents an improved enterprise agreement offer.

MUA members at FPA's Fremantle Inner Harbour stopped work for 24 hours on June 25 and again for 24 hours on Thursday, preventing vessels from being tied up or let go, including at the Patrick and DP World container terminals.

Extension of strike action to the inner harbour was in response to FPA's decision to stand down all workers at the Kwinana Terminal any time a workgroup undertakes any industrial action, essentially shutting the terminal for five hours a day.

According to the union, FPA, a public-owned trading enterprise, says pay rises cannot break the state government's current wage cap. The company has also rejected demands for improved 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 without any opposition from the unions. The cap has been in place for three years.

The MUA says that FPA workers have been underpaid thousands of

dollars since 2014. According to the union, an independent audit found more than 100 Fremantle Ports workers had been underpaid millions of dollars, with some short-changed more than \$10,000 a year.

New Zealand nurses vote on further strikes

Some 30,000 New Zealand nurses and health care assistants have begun voting on three proposed strikes beginning on July 29, ahead of a return to mediation this week by the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) with the district health boards (DHBs).

NZNO members struck on June 9 for eight hours, but industrial action could escalate significantly after a new ballot was released on Monday. The ballot is for three strikes—for 24 hours on July 29, eight hours on August 19 and 24 hours on September 9.

An NZNO spokesman said the strike proposals were based on "feedback" from members, which showed they favoured multiple strikes lasting 24 and eight hours.

When negotiations began last year, nurses authorised the union to fight for a log of 63 claims, including pay rises of 17 percent. The June 9 strike occurred after DHBs offered an insulting pay increase of just 1.38 percent, below the inflation rate. The strike also coincided with the imposition of a wage freeze across the public sector by the Labour-led government.

A fresh round of talks took place on Wednesday and Thursday with a new mediator. NZNO lead negotiator David Wait said if an "acceptable" offer is made by health boards during bargaining, the strikes will be called off. NZNO members have until July 6 to vote on the ballot.



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