

Over 150,000 Indian government steel workers strike; Rajasthan zinc miners protest over workplace deaths; New Zealand nurses vote for more strikes

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

9 July 2021

### Asia

#### Over 150,000 Indian government steel workers hold national strike

Over 150,000 workers at the public sector plants of Steel Authority of India (SAIL) and Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Limited (RINL) walked out across India on June 30 after negotiations for a pay rise deadlocked. The wage increase has been outstanding since December 2017.

The collective wage and conditions agreement is usually revised every five years by the National Joint Committee for Steel, made up of SAIL management and the five central trade union federations of India.

Workers' demands included higher wages for permanent and contract workers, increased employer's contributions to the pension scheme, compensation and employment for family members if a worker dies from COVID-19, the withdrawal of workers' suspensions in Bhilai and Bokaro steel plants and no privatisation of SAIL and RINL.

SAIL has over eight steel plants in India while RINL has a major plant in Visakhapatnam. At least 90 percent of the companies' steel workers were involved in the strike.

#### Tamil Nadu Ola and Uber cab drivers demand compensation

Ola and Uber cab drivers used their vehicles in a protest blockade of Anna Salai Road in Chennai, Tamil Nadu on July 2. They were demanding that the cab aggregators increase tariffs to compensate for current high fuel prices.

Drivers said that cab aggregators take 30 percent commission per ride and demanded that this be reduced to compensate for the high fuel prices and economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

A section of Ola and Uber drivers have been on strike since July 1 protesting against the hike in diesel prices.

#### Outsourced Punjab public works employees fight for higher pay

Members of the Public Works Department (PWD) Electrical Outsourcing Employees' Union in Punjab demonstrated in Jalandhar on July 3 to demand implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations.

Workers allege that the commission's recommended wage increase had already been paid to all other state government employees. The outsourced workers were usually given a small annual pay rise, but this was stopped by the government in May 2019. The PWD has been outsourcing employees in its electrical wing for 15 years.

The workers are only paid between 7,000 rupees (\$US93.5) and 8,000 rupees per month. The union has demanded this be increased to 18,000 rupees a month, without any conditions, and that the annual Dearness Allowance be applied.

#### Maharashtra university non-teaching staff protest

Non-teaching staff at the Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University (BAMU) in Aurangabad demonstrated outside the university's main building on July 1 to demand Seventh Pay Commission benefits.

The demonstrators alleged that they haven't been paid benefits for almost 60 months. Examinations were postponed because of the protest. They also demanded that non-teaching staff be treated according to the service rules that apply to other government employees.

In September, non-teaching staff from colleges across Maharashtra walked out to demand payment of the Seventh Pay Commission benefits.

#### Manipur state government college teachers boycott online classes and examinations

Government college teachers in Manipur state have been boycotting online classes and examinations since July 1 demanding increased salaries in line with the University Grants Commission (UGC) Pay and Regulations, 2018.

The protest was organised by the Federation of Government College Teachers' Associations (FEGOCTA) which gave authorities until June 30 to grant their demands. It was the sixth time FEGOCTA had organised

protests over the issue.

### **Telangana state transport workers protest driver suicide**

Thousands of Joint Action Committee of the Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC) members participated in a state-wide protest at bus depots on June 30 to demand justice and compensation for the family of a driver who committed suicide the previous day. The driver had not been given work since June 22 and in desperation consumed poison outside a bus depot. TSRTC workers wore black arm bands and held depot sit-ins.

### **Zinc miners in Rajasthan protest over workplace deaths**

Hundreds of workers from the Rampura Agucha zinc and lead open cut mine in Rajasthan state demonstrated on June 29 over the death of two miners the previous day. The two workers were hit by a boulder and buried under rubble during a blast at the mine. One of the workers died on the spot while the other died during treatment.

### **Karnataka building workers demand COVID-19 assistance**

Construction workers in Hassan, Karnataka demonstrated on July 2 demanding relief package for workers for COVID-19 infected workers. They want 10,000-rupee (\$US133.97) month relief package for the next three months as well as supplies of groceries and other essential commodities.

Infected workers currently only receive a miserable one-time 3,000-rupee government assistance payment. The protest was organised by the Karnataka State Construction Site Workers Association.

### **Andhra Pradesh sanitation workers demonstrate for outstanding wages**

Sanitation workers in Ongole, Andhra Pradesh, employed under the Swachh Bharat Mission, protested outside the district Collector's office on July 5 to demand unpaid wages. The workers said that between 6 and 28 months of wages have not been paid at different workplace locations in the district.

The protesters complained that although being hailed as "corona warriors" by authorities, they cannot survive on current wage rates. They want their wages fixed at 10,000 rupees from January 2021, as currently mandated by the government.

Other demands included provision of proper PPE and sanitation kits. "We were on the roads cleaning, when the whole nation was under curfew, but still we don't get paid on time," one worker said.

### **Thailand garment workers demand severance pay**

About 300 former Brilliant Alliance Thai Global (BAT) garment workers demonstrated in Thailand on June 28. The workers produce lingerie for the Victoria's Secret company.

Protesters held placards with messages like 'where is our owner?' and demanding that the global and highly profitable lingerie company pay outstanding wages and severance pay to the sacked workers and in accordance with Thai law.

The factory suddenly closed on 10 March, dismissing almost 1,400 workers. They were not given their outstanding wages, overtime or holiday and severance pay. BAT, whose parent company is Hong Kong-based Clover Group, offered to pay back the owed amounts over a 10-year period. This was rejected by the workers.

### **Australia and New Zealand**

#### **Victorian library workers strike for better pay and improved safety**

About 90 members of the Australian Services Union (ASU) from the Geelong Regional Library Corporation (GRLC) walked off the job on July 2 and picketed the Geelong Library to demand higher wages and improved safety in a new enterprise agreement. GRLC oversees seventeen libraries and two mobile libraries in the Geelong area.

The workers are reportedly the lowest paid librarians in Victoria. When the current enterprise agreement expired in June last year, management offered a four-year agreement with annual pay increases of 0 percent, 0 percent, 1 percent and 1 percent.

The corporation's latest offer, which has been rejected by workers, was for pay increases of 1 percent, 1.4 percent, 1.6 percent and 1.8 percent, reduced evening penalty rates and management's right to force library staff to work more nights and weekends.

The ASU is demanding equal wages with public library workers and improved safety, including a minimum of two staff on duty at all times.

#### **Municipal workers in rural Victoria strike for higher pay**

Over 100 Moorabool Shire Council workers in rural Victoria stopped work on June 30 to demand an improved enterprise agreement. Australian Services Union members are maintaining bans on street cleaning, collecting fees, issuing fines and collecting garbage and 30 other duties. It has been almost two years since their last pay rise.

When negotiations began in early 2020 the council offered a meagre 2 percent pay rise, allowance increases 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 in 2020 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. It has since slightly improved the pay offer to 1.5 percent.

#### **New South Wales power distribution workers impose work bans**

Over 1,700 members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) from the state-owned power distribution company Ausgrid imposed work bans on Thursday in their push for an improved pay offer. These include bans on a new network management system, some customer connections and no work outside normal shift hours or higher duties.

Negotiations between the ETU and Ausgrid for a new enterprise agreement have stalled after 30 meetings since October last year. Following the axing of 2,000 jobs since the utility was privatised in 2015, and another 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 increases. Ausgrid also wants to cut more jobs, restrict the amount of annual leave that workers can accrue and compulsory shift work.

### **South Australian power distribution workers protest**

Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members at Enerven, a subsidiary of the privately-owned monopoly power distributor SA Power Network (SAPN), protested outside Enerven's offices in Adelaide on Monday. They held another protest in front of Enerven's training centre on Thursday. They are demanding an improved enterprise agreement offer.

On Thursday workers rejected, for the third time, the company's latest 3 percent pay rise offer. Enerven and SAPN want to establish a two-tier wage structure with new recruits to be paid 20 percent less. Managements also want the removal of limitations on the use of third-party contractors—increasing job insecurity for permanent employees. The union 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.

### **Woodside offshore maintenance workers' strike in Western Australia enters third week**

Workers employed by contractor Legeneering at Woodside's LNG floating platforms Ngujima Yin and Okha in Western Australia are maintaining four weeks of rolling strikes begun on June 25. Unions threatened that the action could extend into 8 weeks if an agreement is not reached.

Electrical Trades Union and the Offshore Alliance (OA) members, which include the Australian Workers Union and the Maritime Union of Australia, are fighting for a decent enterprise agreement. The OA claims that Legeneering's contract wages are the lowest in the industry at \$14 per hour below industry standards.

After several attempts by Legeneering to sign up workers to its new contracts last year, the Fair Work Commission (FWC) ordered the company to begin negotiations with the unions. Workers want industry standard wages, negotiations on rosters and reduction of Legeneering's casual workforce.

### **New Zealand nurses vote for more strikes**

In a strike ballot that ended last Monday, some 30,000 New Zealand nurses and health care assistants voted in favour of three more national strikes in their ongoing pay dispute with the country's 20 District Health Boards (DHBs).

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) said the vote numbers were "very high." The strikes will take place on July 29/30 for 24 hours, August 19 for 8 hours and September 9/10 for 24 hours.

Nurses struck for eight hours on June 9 after the DHBs offered an insulting pay increase of just 1.38 percent, below the inflation rate. That strike also coincided with the imposition of a wage freeze across the public sector by the Labour-led government. The NZNO had entered bargaining with a claim for a 17 percent pay increase, plus measures to address workload and staffing.

The strike ballot occurred as talks between the union and DHBs were under way. NZNO advocate David Wait said talks would continue, with mediation scheduled for July 14-15. He described the negotiations as "promising", giving the union "some hope a resolution can be found" and the strike action would be avoided. A DHBs spokesperson said they also believed a deal can be reached.

In 2018, a bitter pay dispute led to a 24-hour strike—the first nationwide nurses strike since 1989. The deal eventually agreed to by the NZNO was a sellout, with wage increases of just 3 percent per annum and nothing to alleviate the staffing crisis in hospitals.



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