

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

16 July 2021

Asia

India: Punjab public sector workers strike for better pay

Workers from several Punjab state government departments stopped work for two days on July 8 in protest over the Sixth Pay Commission's recommendations. The action followed demonstrations by public sector workers and doctors on June 23 and a week-long strike by the Punjab State Ministerial Services Union on June 22 over the commission's recommendations.

Mass Media Employees and Officers Association members from the Health Department's mass media wing stopped work and demonstrated on July 8. The association complained that their demand that workers in jobs with the same educational qualification be paid the same as workers in the Public Relations Department had been ignored.

Karnataka childcare workers demand permanent jobs

Anganwadi (childcare) workers demonstrated near the office of the deputy commissioner in Udupi on July 12 demanding permanent jobs and pensions. They condemned the government for the delay in providing uniforms and demanded access to health facilities, education for their children, housing facilities and creation of a grievances committee.

The Anganwadi Workers Association accused the government of discrimination, saying that while it pays five million rupees (\$US67,141) COVID-19 compensation to Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers, Anganwadi workers only receive three million rupees.

Punjab-UT Employees and Pensioners Sanjha Front members also joined the two-day strike demanding restoration of the old-pension scheme and all vacant posts be filled in the department.

Karnataka construction workers protest for COVID-19 assistance

For the second time in two weeks construction workers in Karnataka state have demonstrated to demand a relief package during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following a protest on July 2 in Hassan, construction workers on Monday in Bengaluru demonstrated outside the Construction Workers Welfare Board on Monday over the issue.

The workers' main demand is for a 10,000-rupee (\$US133.97) monthly relief payment for the next three months, as well as supplies of groceries and other essential commodities. The affected workers currently only

receive a one-time 3,000-rupee government assistance payment.

Other demands were for a 500,000-rupee cash payment for workers to construct their own homes and extension of the child delivery benefit to workers who have a labour card. The protests were organised by the Karnataka State Construction Site Workers Association.

Pakistan: Islamabad health workers strike for COVID-19 risk allowance

Health workers from government-run hospitals in Islamabad, including doctors and nurses, walked out on Monday to demand the government pay the risk allowance they were entitled to at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. They were still on strike on Wednesday, forcing the closure of outpatient departments, including vaccination centres, for three hours a day.

The Imran Khan government previously agreed to pay the allowance on a monthly basis but now refuses to pay anything. In an attempt to avoid paying the allowance, the government made it conditional on workers receiving a COVID-19 vaccination. Vaccine availability in Pakistan is limited, however, with only a few able to afford to pay for it in the private market. Even after several workers were given the vaccine, the government still refused to pay the allowance.

Health workers are demanding that the allowance be paid as a lump sum with future allowances paid on a monthly basis and with their regular salaries. They also want the allowance paid to all healthcare workers, including trainees and irrespective of their pay grade.

Strikers pointed to the death of many health workers, including doctors, who caught the virus while treating infected patients while the pandemic was spreading unchecked. The strike was called by the Grand Health Alliance, an umbrella union of health workers.

Bangladeshi garment workers fight for unpaid wages

Hundreds of garment workers in Narayanganj and Gazipur, two cities on the outskirts of Dhaka, demonstrated on July 8 demanding several months of unpaid wages.

Workers from the Opex and Sinha Group Kanchpur factory held a sit-down protest on the Dhaka-Chattogram Highway and the Dhaka-Sylhet Highway demanding four months' unpaid wages.

In Gazipur, Style Craft workers in Lakkhipura struck work for a day demanding eight months wages. They blocked the Dhaka-Gazipur Highway for about two hours. Workers accused factory authorities of failing to fulfil previous promises to pay.

The police intervened, insisting that they had reached agreements with authorities at both factories and three months of wages would be paid by July 15. Garment workers rejected these claims and maintained their protests.

Sri Lanka education sector workers hold national strike

Fourteen unions in the education sector called an island-wide strike on Monday over government suppression of planned demonstrations against privatisation of education on the pretext of violating COVID-19 health guidelines.

Union members held demonstrations in Colombo and Kalutara in support of the strike which has shut down online teaching in all parts of the country, including the North and East.

Teachers demanded resolution of teacher-principal salary anomalies and withdrawal of the Kotalawala Defence University (KDU) Act, which will privatise the university and hand it over to the military to govern. The KDU Act will give the military-controlled Kotalawala Defence University the same powers as universities under the University Grants Commission.

The KDU will also be allowed to set up a network of universities and offer courses to non-military students on a large range of subjects. While the KDU will function like other universities, it will be governed by the university and be subject to its culture and ethics. Unlike other state universities, however, will become a full fee-paying institution.

Australia and New Zealand

Strike by Applus workers at Woodside LNG plant in Western Australia in fourth week

Australian Workers Union members employed with maintenance contractor Applus on Woodside LNG's Burrup and offshore facilities in northern Western Australia are in their last week of rolling stoppages which began on June 18. The dispute, which involves 48 workers, is over the company's proposed enterprise agreement. The walkout was the fifth since workers began rolling work bans and stoppages in February.

Applus workers, including non-union members, have overwhelmingly rejected four proposed substandard EAs from the company. The Offshore Alliance (an alliance of the AWU and the Maritime Union of Australia) claimed Applus have cut inspectors' pay rates by 30 percent and tied workers to sub-standard pay rates for four years.

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. Applus have cancelled their latest bargaining meeting on the pretext of COVID-19.

About 100 workers are affected by the enterprise agreement negotiations but because of Australia's reactionary, union endorsed industrial relations laws, only union members can legally strike.

Spotless workers at New South Wales army training base strike

Workers employed by Spotless, the facility arm of defence contractor Downer, at the Kapooka army training base in south-west New South Wales, began strike action on July 9, with further action planned until an agreement is reached on the company's proposed enterprise agreement. The workers undertake various roles at the base, such as firefighting, operating the firing range, grounds keeping and cleaning.

The United Workers Union (UWU) claimed that 80 percent of the workforce had already voted down a previous 22-cent per hour wage increase on multiple occasions. A union spokesman said most workers are paid at the award rate, which can be as low as \$21.71 an hour. Other workers who are only slightly above the award by a matter of cents, have gone two years without a pay rise.

The UWU has limited industrial action to 15-minute stoppages, bans on performing overtime and replacing their uniform with union shirts and badges.

G&S Engineering workers in Queensland vote to strike

G&S Engineering workers in Mackay, on Queensland's central coast, and Biloela in central Queensland, have voted overwhelmingly to take industrial action to protest the company's proposed enterprise agreement. Ninety-seven percent voted for industrial action.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union said these workers accepted a pay freeze during the downturn in the coal industry and their base rate has not risen in seven years. The union claimed that the company's current offer fails to properly address disparities between Mackay and Biloela workers.

Future industrial action could include work bans on overtime and paperwork, and an unlimited number of strikes for up to 24 hours. The union has not indicated when strike action will commence. G&S Engineering manages infrastructure projects in the coal mining industry.

New Zealand midwives vote to strike

Hospital midwives who are members of the Midwifery Employee Representation and Advisory Services (MERAS) are currently voting on an offer from the 20 District Health Boards (DHBs) to settle their Multi-Employer Collective Agreement.

The DHB offer contains meagre pay increases of between 1.5 and 2 percent, effectively a pay cut, and no back pay. MERAS' claim is for a 50 percent pay increase, saying this is required to stop midwives quitting the profession. The union is recommending its members reject the DHB offer.

The ballot includes a vote on a series of eight-hour rolling strikes, starting in Northland, Auckland and Southern DHBs from 9 August and ending in Wellington on 12 August. Another day of industrial action is proposed for 19 August if negotiations remain unresolved.

Senior doctors to hold stop work meetings in New Zealand

Senior hospital doctors and dentists, who are members of the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS), will hold a series of stop work meetings starting on August 2 to discuss stalled contract negotiations.

ASMS has been in talks with DHBs over a new collective agreement, but the DHBs have offered a zero percent pay increase and no improvement to conditions. An ASMS spokesperson emphasised the union is asking for “a very modest pay rise to simply reflect cost of living increases and inflation.”

Like nurses and midwives, doctors are fatigued and suffering high levels of burnout with entrenched staffing shortages, overflowing hospitals and overstretched services which cannot keep up with patient demand. They have also absorbed additional pressures due to the COVID backlog. The ASMS says it would continue negotiations in there was a “genuine” employer offer.

Anaesthetic technicians issue strike notice

Anaesthetic technicians at three private hospitals plan to walk off the job for 24 hours, following a breakdown in talks with employer Evolution Healthcare. Members of the Allied Scientific and Technical (APEX) Union employed at Wellington's Bowen and Wakefield hospitals and Royston Hospital in Hastings have issued a strike notice for July 27 should the scheduled mediation fail.

Evolution Healthcare offered a pay increase of 2 percent each year for two years. The union is seeking 5 percent. An APEX spokesman described Evolution Healthcare as “chronically understaffed” and struggling to recruit anaesthetic technicians, who mainly work in operating theatres assisting anaesthetists.

New Zealand nurses’ union cancels strike after pay offer

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) announced Friday that it has cancelled strike notices for July 29–30 after talks with District Health Boards this week. Some 30,000 nurses and health care assistants struck on June 9, after rejecting a derisory pay offer of just 1.38 percent, and voted for more strikes in July, August and September.

NZNO told the media that “significant progress” had been made on wages and safe staffing in negotiations with District Health Boards this week and that a revised offer would be presented to members to vote on. The offer was “conditional” on the late July strike notice being withdrawn. Notices for strikes on August 19 and September 9 remain in place.

While no details have been released, Health Minister Andrew Little indicated the deal is within the government’s “expectations”—that is, a wage freeze. Many nurses have already turned to social media demanding to know why the union cancelled the strike before they had seen and voted on the offer.

Wellington bus drivers hold stop work meetings

Drivers employed by two bus operators in Wellington held separate stop work meetings this week as part of ongoing employment contract negotiations. Drivers from Mana Coach met on Monday, followed on Tuesday by Transurban drivers.

The Tramways Union is seeking to establish a regional pay agreement that would apply across the four bus operators in the Wellington area. The

union has intended to base the agreement on a sell-out deal reached with operator NZ Bus to raise hourly wages to \$22.10 (only slightly above the \$20 minimum wage) while reducing overtime and weekend rates and removing other conditions.

At a meeting on June 23, NZ Bus drivers angrily denounced the union for promoting the agreement and voted it down by 150 votes to 73. The union has since called no further industrial action. Workers have been told the revised offer currently being negotiated will be better, even though Tramways Union previously declared there was no chance of a better offer. There is no word if or when drivers will see the details.

While promoting the multi-employer agreement, the union has kept the groups of drivers separate from each other and refused to mobilise support for NZ Bus drivers who were earlier locked out after voting for strike action.



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