

Contract doctors strike in Malaysia; Sri Lankan nurses hold island-wide protests; QUBE port terminal workers strike in Australia

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

30 July 2021

Contract doctors strike in Malaysia for permanent jobs

About 7,000 contract doctors employed in Malaysia's public hospitals walked off the job across Malaysia on Monday to demand changes in their terms of employment. About 23,000 frontline contract doctors are employed under a temporary system established by the government in 2016.

The strike, which also affected COVID-19 care centres, was in defiance of threats from health authorities and police. Clothed in black, the doctors returned to wards soon after the walkout, having ensured patients were being looked after.

The contract doctors' strike (*Hartal Docktor Kontrak*) demanded that these doctors be given permanent jobs. Currently in a career limbo, short-term contract doctors are blocked from professional advancement and their pay is at least 30 percent lower than permanent public health doctors.

In a late attempt to prevent the strike, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin suddenly announced that all contract doctors would have their contracts extended two years. Strike leaders declared that this was not enough and the walkout would go ahead.

The doctors are bearing the full brunt of Malaysia's worsening COVID-19 crisis which has pushed the public health system to the brink of collapse. A day before the strike, Malaysia recorded 17,045 new infections, its highest daily tally, and 92 deaths. This week the total number of COVID infections in Malaysia hit one million. The Selangor Health Department confirmed that 163 doctors had resigned due to burn-out.

India: Uttar Pradesh ambulance workers on strike

Over 19,000 ambulance workers are on indefinite strike in Uttar Pradesh leaving around 4,600 ambulances off the road in 75 districts. Between four and five ambulances are operating in each district for emergency cases. GVK EMRI, the agency operating the government-owned ambulances, has dismissed at least 570 striking contract workers. The workers are demanding job security.

The strike was called after the government awarded Ziqitza Healthcare Limited (ZHL) the contract to operate 250 advanced-life support (ALS) vehicles. Workers have accused the company of below standard employment conditions and lower wages.

The strikers want a guarantee of job security before ZHL begins hiring

employees. They also want experienced ALS ambulance staffers, currently employed by GVK EMRI, to be given preference in the recruitment process.

Childcare workers in Punjab and Assam protest

Anganwadi (childcare) workers and helpers across the Tarn Taran district in Punjab held a one-day hunger protest on Tuesday to demand better pay and placement in nursery teachers' posts. Children currently attending anganwadi centres are being moved to primary schools. The protest was organised by the All Punjab Anganwadi Mulazam Union.

A day earlier, anganwadi workers and helpers in Udalguri district, Assam, protested to demand budget funds to modernise the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and increase their remuneration. They said wages have not been revised in the past 10 years. They also want the infrastructure of anganwadi centres modernised, an increased honorarium, and a one-time 500,000-rupee (\$US6,719) payment on retirement.

Punjab contract road transport workers demand permanency

Contract and outsourced workers from the Punjab Road Transport Corporation (PRTC) protested at Jalandhar city bus stand on Monday to demand permanent jobs. Management has ignored workers' calls for permanent jobs for several years. The bus stand remained closed for two hours starting at 10 a.m.

The workers also called for equal pay for equal work and for the bus fleet to be increased to 10,000 vehicles. They have been demanding permanent jobs for the past several years but to no avail.

The protest was called by the PUNBUS and PEPSU PRTC Theka Mulazim Union which said workers would take unofficial holidays for August 3 and 4 and hold a state-wide strike from August 9 to 11.

Para teachers in Goa state demand permanent jobs

Goa Para Teachers Association members demonstrated at Azad Maidan,

Panaji, on July 26 to demand permanent jobs. Almost 130 para teachers hired by the government in the last 10 to 15 years said authorities had promised that they would be given preference when positions fell vacant. The teachers said that they were not being considered when permanent positions were being allocated, despite having the required qualifications and experience.

Punjab midday meal workers demand permanency

Midday meal workers in Amritsar protested outside the Cabinet minister's residence on July 25 to demand the state government keep its promise to make their jobs permanent.

The midday meal workers allege that Punjab's chief minister had previously promised that he would make all contract employees permanent at his first cabinet meeting. The protest was organised by members of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Midday Meal Office Employees' Union.

Bhilai Steel Plant workers demand COVID-19 compensation

Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP) workers in Chhattisgarh state, protested in Bhilai on July 21 to demand compensation for the dependents of BSP workers who were compelled to work during the coronavirus pandemic but died after being infected with COVID-19. The protest, which was organised by the BSP Workers Union, involved a hunger protest at the Equipment Chowk in Sector-1.

The steel workers also want the company to recruit a family member of a deceased worker on compassionate grounds. The union told the media it had sent a memo outlining their demands to the chairman of SAIL, BSP's parent company and India's minister of steel.

Accredited social health activist workers demonstrate in West Bengal

Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers protested outside the Siliguri Municipal Corporation in West Bengal on July 27 to demand COVID-19 vaccinations for all workers and 100,000 rupees compensation for every worker infected with COVID-19. This was previously promised by the government but never implemented.

Ashok Leyland bus assembly workers protest in Tamil Nadu

Ashok Leyland assembly line workers in Hosur, Tamil Nadu, demonstrated on Wednesday to demand equal wages for equal work and a yearly bonus based on the company's profit. Workers say their wage agreement expired almost a year ago but they still did not have a new agreement. Ashok Leyland manufactures long- and short-distance passenger buses. Like all other automakers in Tamil Nadu, the company was allowed to keep operating during this year's COVID-19 lockdown.

Sri Lankan nurses hold island-wide protests

Thousands of Government Nursing Officers Association (GNOA) members walked out across Sri Lanka during their lunch break on Wednesday and demonstrated outside their respective hospitals. They were protesting over the government's failure to implement approved cabinet papers granting changes in working conditions, staff status and promotions.

Nurses said there would be more island-wide protests if there was no positive response from government authorities within 25 days of cabinet approval.

The nurses' action followed several weeks of demonstrations by hospital nurses demanding COVID-19 safety equipment, guaranteed treatment if they are infected by the virus, as well as transport facilities and a holiday allowance.

QUBE port terminal workers strike for improved work agreement

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members at the QUBE Fremantle Port container terminal in Western Australia, began industrial action on Friday to win an improved enterprise agreement. The action, which will be ongoing until an agreement is reached, includes four-hour stoppages and work bans on overtime, shift extensions and weekend work and a 24-hour work ban on each of ten vessels entering the port after they have moored.

The 121 MUA members at the dock had voted unanimously for strike action in April after QUBE management rejected all of the union's 42 claims. The MUA said workers wanted a better work-life balance, improved fatigue management, improved job security and tightening up the old agreement which allowed QUBE to undermine long-standing employment standards and conditions.

Fremantle Port Authority worker's union shuts down strike

Strike action by Fremantle Ports Authority (FPA) workers in Western Australia was called off by their union last week, following more than two months of rolling stoppages. The FPA workers were fighting for an improved enterprise agreement. The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) suddenly called an end to industrial action, without approval from members, claiming that there had been a "bit of movement" in "high level" negotiations.

While talks for a new agreement began 18 months ago, during which the MUA accused the FPA of stonewalling, the union did not call any industrial action until May, following pressure from members.

According to the union, FPA, a public-owned trading enterprise, says pay rises cannot break the state government's current wage cap limited to \$1,000 a year. The company has rejected demands for improved working conditions.

Woolworths locks out supermarket night-shift shelf stackers

More than 1,800 supermarket workers are in dispute with Woolworths

in Victoria and Tasmania following management modifications to night-shift stackers' start times. The changes will see workers' wages reduced by as much as \$500 a week in lost penalties and allowances.

Seventy night-shift stackers have refused to work the new roster times and instead turned up to do their previously agreed rostered shifts. Woolworths' management responded by sending the workers home without pay and replacing them with labour hire workers.

Two unions have coverage of the workers—the Retail and Fast Food Workers Union (RAFFWU) and the larger Distributive & Allied Employees Association (SDA). Neither union has mobilised their members in a campaign to fight the lockout. The RAFFWU claims it will launch dozens of legal cases in the Fair Work Commission opposing Woolworths' roster changes.

Sydney warehouse workers walk out over COVID-19 infections

Cold storage workers at Scott's Refrigerated Logistics in Erskine Park, in Sydney's western suburbs, stopped work last week following a confirmed COVID-19 infection at the facility. Management opposed the stoppage but NSW Health authorities directed the company to send workers home and to get tested, and for a deep clean of the site. The company has subsequently refused to cover the lost wages for the workers affected.

New Zealand nurses reject third union-backed pay offer

About 30,000 nurses and health care assistants rejected the latest pay offer from the District Health Boards, with strikes planned for August and September.

New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) members held a nationwide strike on June 9, after rejecting two previous offers that would have only lifted wages by 1.38 percent, less than half the current rate of inflation.

The union provoked widespread anger when it cancelled a scheduled July 29 strike before presenting the revised agreement for a vote. The offer did not address low wages or the increasingly desperate staffing crisis in public hospitals caused by decades of underfunding.

The NZNO initially claimed it was pushing for a pay increase of 17 percent over two years but the proposed salary increase is just \$NZ1,800 and a back-payment of \$NZ1,200. The union attempted to disguise the sell-out by adding in further sums of money from an entirely separate "pay equity" deal, still being negotiated.

Nurses' rejection of the deal, by what the NZNO said was a "clear majority," is a setback for the union and the Labour government, who are attempting to impose a three-year pay freeze across the public sector. The NZNO has confirmed that strikes planned for 19 August and 9–10 September will go ahead, "unless an acceptable offer is made."



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