

India: Tens of thousands of public sector insurance workers oppose privatisation; Sri Lankan teachers and health workers strike; New Zealand midwives to walk out for higher pay

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

6 August 2021

Asia

India: General insurance sector workers strike against privatisation

Tens of thousands of workers from India's four public sector general insurance companies—National Insurance, New India Assurance, Oriental Insurance and United India Insurance—held a national strike on Wednesday against Modi government moves to privatise the sector. The four companies employ 60,000 workers.

The strike, which was called by the Joint Forum of Trade Unions, was in response to the passing of the General Insurance Business (Nationalisation) Amendment Bill, 2021 by the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) on August 3.

The Modi government previously promised to strengthen state-owned general insurers and guarantee job security and benefits. The unions said the amendment paved the way for selling one of the insurers, leading to the future privatisation of the rest.

Delhi University teachers strike over funding cuts

Delhi University (DU) college teachers walked out on August 3 to demand the release of grants to 12 DU colleges that are fully funded by the Delhi government. The teachers allege that salaries, pensions and medical bills have not been paid because of the outstanding grants.

The Delhi University Teachers' Association has threatened to step up industrial action if the government failed to release the grants.

Odisha state public bus transport workers demand wage increase

Bus drivers and crew from the Odisha state-run Mo Bus service in Bhubaneswar staged a sit-in protest at their bus depot on August 2 for their long-pending demand for a pay rise. Over 100 of the city's 300 buses remained off the road that morning. The department of Capital Region Urban Transport (CRUT) had previously announced restoration of

25 bus routes following the state government's easing its COVID-19 lockdown.

Workers said that while their current monthly wage was about 12,000 rupees (\$US162) this was reduced to around 11,500 rupees following deductions for the EPF pension fund and taxes. They demanded that their wage be increased to 18,000 rupees a month.

Kerala postgraduate medical college students strike

Postgraduate students employed at the Government Medical Colleges held a state-wide 12-hour strike in Kerala on August 2 over several demands, including the retention of senior resident seats at the college. The striking students complained that the government had not allocated posts for 76 senior resident doctors. Outpatient services at the colleges were impacted by the strike.

The students are concerned about the impact on their academic work of senior doctors from the colleges being allocated to Intensive Care Units and emergency wards because of the COVID-19 pandemic. They want COVID-19 treatment to be decentralised to other government hospitals and training doctors and other staff trained at those hospitals.

The Kerala Medical Post Graduate Association demanded restoration of the four percent increase in their stipend and the appointment of doctors in medical colleges on a contract basis.

Indian power sector workers walk out over privatisation

Thousands of power sector workers and engineers across India began a series of one-day relay strikes running over four days on Tuesday to protest the Modi government's proposed Electricity (Amendment) Bill 2021. Power workers from the northern region states started the industrial action and held a sit in protest at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on Tuesday. Workers from the eastern and north-eastern region walked out on Wednesday, the western region on Thursday and the southern region on Friday.

The strikes were called by the National Coordination Committee of Electricity Employees & Engineers (NCCOEEE). A spokesman for the

committee said the Electricity Act 2003 had allowed the privatisation of generation through delicensing and the proposed Bill would delicense and therefore privatise power distribution. The unions have threatened a national strike involving 1.5 million workers on August 10.

Andhra Pradesh workers hold anti-privatisation demonstrations

Visakhapatnam Steel Plant workers and supporters from various trade unions marched in Visakhapatnam on August 1 against the privatisation of the steel plant and other public corporations.

Protesters condemned the government for privatising the steel plant and plans to sell off the Life Insurance Corporation of India and the railways. The city's mayor and corporation workers demonstrated on August 2 to express solidarity with the steel workers. The steel workers also held a sit down protest in New Delhi on Monday.

Contract transport workers in Punjab call for permanent jobs

Contract workers from the Punjab Road Transport Corporation (PRTC) long-distance bus service held a two-hour strike on July 26 in Bathinda. They were demanding equal pay for equal work and permanent jobs. The workers blocked the Bathinda bus stand and prevented buses from leaving or entering the transport hub. PRTC contract workers in Jalandhar held a two-hour strike on the same day with similar demands.

Ludhiana municipal workers strike again in Punjab

Administrative workers from the Ludhiana Municipal Corporation (LMC) struck work on July 29 for higher pay. Government department workers in Patiala also demonstrated that day. The protests were part of ongoing state-wide action by workers from various Punjab government departments over the issue.

LMC office workers held a three-hour strike on July 15 complaining that demands they had submitted had been ignored. The Municipal Employees' Sangharsh Committee demanded that the LMC not force employees to sign an option form to accept the amended pay scales as per the pay commission's recommendation.

Sri Lankan public school teachers and principals continue online education strike

About 242,000 teachers and 16,000 school principals from 14 unions are maintaining their national boycott of online classes which began on July 12. In-school classes were officially suspended in April and replaced with online teaching in response to an upsurge in COVID-19 infections.

Educators drove in a protest motorcade to President Gotabaya Rajapakse's office on August 4. Close to 50 teachers, including mothers, were arrested by the police on their return from the demonstration.

Teachers and principals are demanding resolution of long-outstanding teacher-principal salary anomalies and the withdrawal of the Kotalawala

Defence University (KDU) Act, which will privatise the military-run Kotalawala Defence University giving it the same powers as universities under the University Grants Commission.

Sri Lankan health workers strike

Tens of thousands of health workers, including nurses and ancillary staff, including lab technicians, walked out of government hospitals nationally on Tuesday against withdrawal of a special leave meant to compensate for the increased workloads during the COVID-19 pandemic. The health union leaders called off the strike within a few hours, declaring that their demands had been granted by the health authority.

Thousands of health workers from around 60 government hospitals held a sick-leave strike on the same day over several long-outstanding demands. The Combined Health Workers Union is calling for legitimate promotions, improved facilities in COVID-19 wards and a five-day working week.

Australia and New Zealand

McCain ends lockout at Tasmanian food processing plant

About 90 workers from the McCain food processing plant in Smithton, Tasmania returned to work on Monday after management lifted a four-day lockout. The lockout was imposed after workers gave notice that they would begin limited strike action for improved pay.

The food processing workers want a pay increase to compensate for a wage cut endorsed by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) last year during the coronavirus pandemic.

The workers were also locked out on July 22 after giving notice of their intention to begin industrial action. The AMWU failed in an appeal to the Fair Work Commission to have the lockouts ruled illegal.

McCain workers in Smithton who produce potato chips want pay equity with McCain employees on the Australian mainland and employees at Simplot, a nearby food manufacturer. Simplot workers are paid 15 percent more than McCain's Smithton employees.

QML Pathology workers in Queensland demand a better agreement

Scientists, technicians and other workers at QML Pathology have held a series of protests this year to demand an improved enterprise agreement offer. QML management, following negotiations with the United Workers Union, released a proposed agreement in April. The offer was rejected by workers.

QML, which is Queensland's leading pathology laboratory service provider, has offered annual wage increases of 2.25 percent over the life of the four-year agreement with sign-on bonuses of \$1,000 for full-time employees, \$750 for part-time employees and \$250 for casual employees. There will be no back pay, a reduced notice period for change of rosters from 21 days to 14 days, cuts in leave entitlements for new recruits and other trade-offs.

According to the UWW, workers want a fair wage, secure work and

proper staffing of QML COVID testing clinics. The highly skilled workers are paid low wages, for some only \$23 an hour, and are kept on “flexible” contracts that offer no secure income or job security.

Elevator manufacturing and maintenance workers strike in Western Australia

Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members at the Schindler Lifts plant in Perth, walked off the job on July 28 in their dispute for a new enterprise agreement. The seven-day walkout at the Swiss-owned company was extended on Wednesday after management refused to negotiate an improved offer.

New Zealand nurses to walk out again over low wages

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) has issued a formal strike notice for 30,000 nurses and health care assistants to strike nationwide on August 19.

The nurses overwhelmingly rejected a third pay offer by the District Health Boards (DHBs) in a ballot following a strike on June 9. The NZNO lifted a notice for a further 24-hour strike on 29/30 July after reaching an agreement on the amended offer and holding a membership vote.

The deal failed to 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 \$1,800 and a back-payment of \$1,200. There were also too many “vague promises” over safe staffing, according to the NZNO.

Labour’s Health Minister Andrew Little made a direct appeal via video for the strike to be called off. Attempting to intimidate the nurses, he declared the strike will be “hugely disruptive to public health services, and to the people who need them.”

The DHBs have taken the NZNO to the Employment Court, accusing them of not doing enough to guarantee safe staffing levels during the strike. So-called “Life Preserving Services,” which are a legal requirement, are organised and overseen by the union.

The NZNO has resumed talks with the DHBs and said that the coming strike, and another on September 9/10, will go ahead “unless an acceptable offer is made.”

New Zealand hospital midwives to strike next week for higher pay

Hospital midwives across New Zealand will hold rolling eight-hour strikes next week. Industrial action involving midwives at district health boards (DHBs) in Northland, the three Auckland DHBs and Southern DHB will begin on Monday. The strikes will run from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Midwives at other DHBs will strike throughout the week, culminating with a march to parliament on Thursday. The Midwifery Employee Representation and Advisory Service (MERAS) union said, however, that 95 percent of midwives must be available to maintain legally required “life-preserving services.” The midwifery multi-employer collective agreement expired on January 31.

MERAS says that it is asking for an additional \$800 a year per midwife.

If talks are still unresolved by August 19, there will be another day of industrial action, coinciding with the scheduled nurses’ strike.



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