

1.5 million Indian power workers strike against privatisation; Korea: Seoul subway workers threaten to walk out; QUBE port terminal workers remain on strike in Western Australia

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

13 August 2021

## Asia

### Korea: Seoul subway workers to vote for strike

Subway workers at Seoul Metro will vote between August 16 and 19 on whether to launch a full-scale strike to protest Seoul Metro's plan to reduce its workforce by over 1,500. Union members who work for subway corporations in Busan, Daegu, Daejeon, Incheon and Gwangju will participate in the vote.

Seoul Metro's plan is aimed at cutting 10 percent of its 16,700 employees and mitigating its accumulated loss of more than 1 trillion won (\$US875.81 million). The plan would also reduce benefits, freeze wages and outsource work to the private sector.

Subway workers are demanding metropolitan transit authorities be treated the same as the Korea Railroad Corporation (Korail) in terms of government support. Around 60 percent of Korail's annual losses are covered by government funds.

### India: Power workers hold national strike against privatisation

Over 1.5 million power workers across India struck on August 10 to oppose the Modi government's Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2021. The strike, called by the National Coordination Committee of Electricity Employees and Engineers, followed a series of one-day relay strikes across India running over four days beginning on August 3 over the proposed Bill. The planned legislation would delicense state-run power utilities and open the way for full privatisation of power distribution.

Power workers in Chandigarh, the capital of Punjab and Haryana, stopped work and protested the city administration's decision to hand over power distribution to a private company, Kolkata-based Eminent Electricity Distribution.

### Tamil Nadu fishermen oppose fisheries bill

About 500 Tamil Nadu fisherman demonstrated in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, on August 9 to protest the Indian Marine Fisheries Bill and present a petition to the Collectorate. Fishermen in Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi and Kanyakumari districts struck work, leaving over 5,000 boats at 13 coastal villages idle for the day.

Protesters called on the Modi government not to table the Bill because it does not consider the traditional rights of fishermen and criminalises them for working where they have always fished. They will be restricted to fishing within a 12-nautical mile limit from the shore, forcing them to remain in polluted waters.

Fishermen accused the government of having an ulterior motive of decimating India's country boat and mechanised boat fishermen while giving major incentives to fishing trawlers owned by corporate companies and international firms.

### Punjab childcare workers demand better wages and allowances

Anganwadi (childcare) workers in Abohar defied a heavy police mobilisation to hold a sit-down-protest and chant slogans outside the Legislative Assembly member's office on August 5. They were demanding better pay and allowances and mobile phones like those issued to anganwadi workers in Haryana. The protest was organised by members of the All-Punjab Anganwadi Workers' Union.

Protesters used their blood to sign a memorandum of demands addressed to the state's chief minister. They said 2.8 million anganwadi workers in the state had received low salaries for several years.

### Junior doctors at Gujarat state-government medical colleges strike

At least 2,000 resident doctors from six government medical colleges in Gujarat, most of whom recently finished their post-graduate courses, have been on strike since August 4 over their bond service period and to demand emoluments in line with the 7th Pay Commission. The doctors are from Ahmedabad, Vadodara, Surat, Rajkot, Bhavnagar and Jamnagar.

On July 27 last year, a Gujarat health department resolution said periods worked by bonded doctors in COVID-19 designated hospitals would be

considered as double time. The resolution, however, was withdrawn on July 31.

As a part of their protest doctors have been returning government certificates given to those who served COVID-19 duties in the past year. The certificates were handed out during Doctor's Day celebrations.

### **Karnataka government school midday meal workers demand permanent jobs**

Midday meal workers from Karnataka state government schools demonstrated in Mysore on Wednesday calling for permanent jobs and payment of outstanding wages. The predominantly women workers were organised by the All India Trade Union Congress. The workers serve midday lunches to impoverished school children as part of the central government's scheme in every state.

### **Delhi: Safdargunj Hospital contract nurses protest**

Contract nurses from the government-run Safdargunj Hospital in Delhi demonstrated on August 11 for high pay and against harsh working conditions and job outsourcing. Protesters said they have not had a pay increase for five years. The nurses want pay parity and the same conditions as nurses in other government-run hospitals.

### **Pakistani power workers protest over safety and privatisation**

Workers from the government's Water & Power Development Authority (WAPDA) and its power distribution companies demonstrated in several cities on August 3 over widespread safety violations and against the government's plans to privatise power utilities. Workers say management's understaffing policies and lack of maintenance have led to increased casualties and other safety problems.

The All Pakistan WAPDA Hydro Electric Workers Union called demonstrations in Hyderabad, Larkana, Sukkur and Peshawar. The union has accused authorities of attempting to scapegoat workers for a recent transformer blast that killed 10 in Hyderabad.

### **Pakistan: Punjab university workers demand allowances**

Academic and non-academic staff of government-run universities across Punjab held demonstrations on August 4 demanding that the government pay disparity/special allowance without discrimination to all workers and for it to be 25 percent of their salary.

All Pakistan Universities Academic Staff Association called the protests. Demonstrators warned that they would expand the protests after August 10 if the government failed to pay the allowance.

### **Sri Lankan university teachers and students demonstrate**

Hundreds of university students and teachers from the Sri Jayawardenapura University in Colombo demonstrated outside of the university on Monday as part of the ongoing national "online learning" strike by over 200,000 teachers and principals. The teachers and principals are demanding a salary increase, abolition of existing "salary anomalies" and withdrawal of the Kotalawala Defence University (KDU) Act.

University teachers also began boycotting "on-line learning" on July 12 and have stopped marking students' exam papers over the same issues. Students and teachers from the University of Peradeniya also demonstrated on Monday at George Park in Kandy.

### **Australia**

#### **QUBE port terminal workers' strike continues in Western Australia**

Over 120 members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) at the QUBE Fremantle Port container terminal in Western Australia have been on strike since July 30 for an improved enterprise agreement. Workers said they will not return to work until a decent agreement is reached.

The workers are virtually locked out. They are refusing to report for duty if management fails to allocate the following day's workforce by 2 p.m., one day prior. QUBE management has refused to agree to this arrangement.

QUBE workers are not on fixed rosters and are currently only told their schedule at 4 p.m. on the day prior. This system operates 7 days per week, 52 weeks per year.

Prior to the lockout, industrial action included 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.

QUBE management have rejected all 42 of the union's claims. The MUA said workers wanted rosters that give 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.

#### **Power distribution workers in New South Wales take industrial action**

Workers from the power distribution company Endeavour Energy, which services Greater Western Sydney and other regions in New South Wales, imposed bans this month in their campaign for an improved enterprise agreement.

Management at Endeavour Energy's Moss Vale depot began docking workers a full-day's pay from August 5, after they banned "switching" i.e., restricting non-emergency network maintenance, even though they were still performing other work duties.

In May, Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members voted down the company's two proposed agreement offers. An ETU spokesman said members want an improved wage rise that matches the cost-of-living and brings conditions in line with industry standards.

#### **Konecranes locks out maintenance and installation workers in Tasmania**

Ten electricians and fitters employed by Konecranes in Tasmania have been locked out without pay following the imposition of work bans on August 5. Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) members want a 30 percent pay increase and improved conditions in the company's proposed enterprise agreement (EA) to bring them into line with other workers in the industry.

The company wants the Tasmanian Liberal government to break its COVID-19 border exclusion regulations to allow the company to use fly-in fly-out scab workers from mainland Australia to intimidate the locked-out workers.

Konecranes is a huge multinational corporation with operations in Australia and New Zealand. It specialises in the installation and maintenance of heavy-lifting equipment at building construction sites and overhead gantry cranes at ports.

### **Australia FedEx and StarTrack workers threaten to strike**

About 6,000 drivers and warehouse workers employed by logistics companies FedEx and StarTrack have applied to the Fair Work Commission for separate ballots to undertake protected industrial action, following failed negotiations at both companies for improved enterprise agreements (EA). Around 7,000 truck drivers employed by Toll Group are currently voting to undertake industrial action in their push for an improved enterprise agreement.

Permanent workers at all three companies are resisting attempts by their employers to outsource work to lower-paid labour hire contractors, depriving permanent employees of overtime. The Transport Workers Union claims that the companies want changes to dispute procedures that will threaten job security.

StarTrack, the major contractor to Australia Post, has offered workers a minimal 3 percent per year pay increase and refuses to offer back-pay from 2020.

According to the TWU, FedEx has refused to include job security provisions in a new agreement and wants all workers paid at the same rate.

### **Northern Territory public sector workers protest wage freeze**

Northern Territory (NT) public sector workers from various unions have planned a protest rally in Darwin on August 17 to oppose the Labor government's plan to freeze public servants' wages for four years. The protest will involve members from the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Electrical Trades Union.

The government's 2021–22 budget includes a four-year wage freeze on public servants in exchange for a \$1,000 annual retention payment. The government has declared 1,800 jobs are threatened if public servants reject the pay freeze when their current agreement expires this month.

The CPSU wants 2.5 percent annual pay increases in a two-year agreement. The government said it will stop negotiations at the end of August and put its offer to workers. The CPSU is urging members to vote "no" to the wage freeze.

### **New Zealand midwives strike over pay and workloads**

About 1,500 New Zealand hospital-based midwives held a series of eight-hour strikes this week. The strikes began on Monday in the Northland, Auckland and Southern district health boards (DHBs), and moved progressively across the country. The strikes culminated on Thursday when about 150 midwives marched through Wellington to rally outside parliament.

The midwives say they are underpaid and overworked and feel disrespected by both the DHBs and the government. The mood at Thursday's rally was defiant, with many pointing out the Labour government, not the DHBs, holds the purse strings. Labour is enforcing a three-year pay freeze across the public sector.

The Midwifery Employee Representation & Advisory Service (MERAS) union has refused to put the DHBs' latest offer to members, saying it was worse than offers members had already rejected. The offer, of two increases of \$1,200 over two years, is the same as one recently rejected by nurses.

"All we're asking for the actual pay increase is to meet the cost of living," MERAS leader Jill Ovens said. This is woefully inadequate. Last month Ovens told TV1 that midwives need a 50 percent pay increase as the profession struggles to retain workers.

The midwives have resolved to join the nationwide strike by 30,000 nurses scheduled for August 19 if talks with DHBs are fruitless.

### **Senior doctors reject health boards' nil pay offer**

Senior hospital doctors and dentists held a series of stop work meetings across New Zealand this week to discuss their response to a nil pay offer from the DHBs.

More than 5,000 medical specialists represented by the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS) declared they would not accept a zero percent offer on principle and were especially concerned about measures to address short-staffing and burnout.

The specialists want a clause to ensure minimum numbers of senior doctors in each hospital unit, which the current contract is not achieving. They rejected a DHB proposal for a two-year working group to collect information to be used towards "better workforce planning."

An ASMS spokesperson said the union has asked for a 1.5 percent pay increase for the first year and two percent the following year, which is below the current inflation rate. The union said it will "survey members" about what action to pursue next. Possible national industrial action by the doctors would be a first in New Zealand.



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