

Philippines health workers protest over unpaid allowances; Pakistan public transit workers strike; Ausgrid power workers escalate industrial action in New South Wales

## Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

3 September 2021

### Asia

#### Health workers protest as Philippines government fails to pay promised allowances

Scores of health workers dressed in PPE protested outside the Department of Health in Manila, the Philippines capital, on Wednesday after the government failed to pay promised COVID-19 related allowances. Workers held placards demanding the allowances and resignation of the health secretary.

On August 21, Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte ordered the health and budget departments to pay the COVID-19 allowances within 10 days. The allowances included risk and hazard money, life insurance, accommodation, transportation and meal payments for nurses, doctors and other frontline health workers. The decision followed mass protests and resignations by health workers treating COVID-19 patients.

An Alliance of Health Workers spokesperson said many health workers had been infected whilst others had resigned or retired early. Philippine Nurses Association members also held an on-line protest demanding better working conditions and more hospital personnel. Health officials tried to head off further protests claiming that funds for the allowances had been requested but had not arrived.

On Monday, the Philippines recorded 22,366 new cases COVID-19, bringing the overall total to two million with 33,533 deaths, including 103 health workers.

#### India: Government doctors in Kerala protest against pay cuts

Kerala government doctors held a state-wide protest outside district medical offices on Tuesday against cuts in benefits and to demand a pay rise. They claimed to have suffered a pay cut following the implementation of pay commission recommendations, and also accused the government of axing several allowances and benefits.

The Kerala Government Medical Officers Association said it's opposed to cuts in the basic salary in entry level cadre, termination of personal pay and the removal of ratio promotion. Protesting doctors complained that the government continued to ignore their demands and has not acknowledged their heavy workloads during the coronavirus pandemic.

#### Andhra Pradesh outsourced health workers demand permanent jobs

Outsourced health workers terminated by the Andhra Pradesh government after a supposed decline in COVID-19 cases protested near the residence of the tourism minister in Visakhapatnam on Tuesday. Police arrested 17 workers after they tried to submit a memorandum to the minister.

The workers were originally hired on an outsourcing basis at 26 urban Public Health Centres (PHCs). They were demanding permanent jobs, claiming that their services should be permanent because the number of urban PHCs had increased from 222 to 560.

#### Terminated teachers in Tripura state demand reinstatement

Teachers whose jobs were terminated in 2014 demonstrated in Agartala, the Tripura state capital on August 28 to demand reinstatement. Members of the Joint Movement Committee travelled from all over the state to participate in the protest.

Over 10,300 government teachers with graduate, post-graduate and under-graduate educational qualifications had been inducted into Tripura government schools in different phases since 2010. The recruitment process subsequently went to litigation and the Tripura High Court in 2014 terminated all the 10,323 teachers, ruling that the selection criterion had discrepancies.

#### Andhra Pradesh workers continue anti-privatisation demonstrations

Thousands of workers from a range of industries rallied in Rajampet, Andhra Pradesh on August 29 against the Modi government's planned privatisation of the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant (VSP), the Life Insurance Corporation of India and the railways.

The government has approved a 100 percent disinvestment of Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Limited (RINL), VSP's corporate entity, and private management of the steel plant. Widely supported demonstrations against privatisation have been ongoing since February 1. The latest demonstration was organised by the All India Trade Union Congress and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

## **Pakistan: Lahore public transit workers strike**

For the second time this month, Metro Bus Service drivers in Lahore held a two-day strike on August 29 to demand payment of bonuses and gratuities, and the issuing of experience certificates. Drivers had previously struck on August 16 and 17.

The Metro Bus Service is a division of Punjab Mass Transit Authority, but outsourced to a private contractor, Al-Bayrak, which in turn uses labour hire companies. Drivers complained that this administrative set up had allowed extreme exploitation of the workforce. Transit workers took similar strike action in Lahore and Islamabad after not being paid for several months.

## **Pakistan: Power utility workers in Sindh province oppose privatisation**

Water & Power Development Authority (WAPDA) workers demonstrated in multiple cities in Sindh province on August 26 in opposition to the Imran Khan government's plans to privatise the public utility. They also demanded permanent jobs for all contract and temporary workers, immediate filling of vacant positions and the establishment of safety standards.

Workers claimed that authorities had dangerously understaffed the utility leading to safety hazards and many deaths of workers as a result. They accused the government of delaying the transfer of workers into permanent jobs.

The All Pakistan WAPDA Hydro Electric Workers Union plans to hold a demonstration in Islamabad on September 15 if the government fails to address their issues. The union, however, has been doing everything in its capacity to prevent a joint struggle of government workers across cities and provinces against privatisation. This has allowed the government to advance with its plans, despite the overwhelming opposition among rank-and-file workers.

## **Australia**

### **New South Wales: Power workers at Ausgrid escalate industrial action**

After two months of limited industrial action, Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members at Ausgrid, New South Wales's largest power distribution company, voted this week to hold 24-hour stoppages. Workers began industrial action in early July with work bans and rolling stoppages of one hour and four hours.

The union told Ausgrid that there would be one-hour stoppages every day next week but these could be extended if the company does not pay workers for the whole day. ETU members are to vote next week on whether to ban switching off power, which is necessary for network repairs and could affect consumers.

Negotiations between the ETU and Ausgrid for a new enterprise agreement have stalled after 30 meetings since last October. About 2,000 jobs were axed since the utility was privatised in 2015 with 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 bring in compulsory shift work.

### **New South Wales commuter rail workers vote to strike**

Over 90 percent of workers from the state-run commuter train networks—NSW Trains and Sydney Trains—voted this week to take industrial action in their dispute for a new enterprise agreement. The Rail Tram and Bus Union has said that NSW Trains and Sydney Trains managements are insisting on negotiating two separate agreements. Workers are determined that they should be under one agreement.

In June, the state Liberal-National government restricted pay increases to 0.3 percent. Rail workers are demanding wage increases in line with inflation and also want improved compensation for working on public holidays. They also oppose driver only operations and have called for improved safety. NSW Trains and Sydney Trains management failed to turn up for scheduled talks this week.

### **BSH Electrical workers locked out in Tasmania**

Thirty-four workers from the electrical contractor BSH Electrical in Tasmania were locked out on Thursday in response to partial work bans planned to begin that morning. Communications Electrical and Plumbers Union (CEPU) members had voted unanimously to strike for improved wages and conditions in a new enterprise agreement.

According to the CEPU a major part of their demands has arisen around unrealistic deadlines in the industry. The union alleged that the industry in which they work has increasingly become reliant on exhausting amounts of overtime on 6 days a week sites and workers have had enough. Workers want a 9 day fortnight written into their new agreement to bring them in line with fellow workers in other states.

BSH Electrical is currently involved in electrical installations on Tasmanian building sites at the Vibe Hotel, Parliament Square, the Derwent Entertainment Centre and the Southern Remand Centre. BSH claims to be a service based company but workers argue that 80 percent of the company's work is in construction and their pay and conditions should be lifted to be on par with that industry.

### **QUBE's Fremantle terminal workers still locked out in Western Australia**

The lockout of 120 members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) at the QUBE Fremantle Port bulk terminal in Western Australia has entered its fifth week.

MUA members, who began industrial action on July 30 for an improved enterprise agreement, 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 even though other terminal operators at the port have that arrangement with their employees.

QUBE has assigned its management and supervisory staff to do

stevedoring work to try and keep the terminal operating. The MUA claimed that safety regulations are being ignored and vessels are taking twice as long as normal to unload, causing a bottleneck at the port.

QUBE management has rejected all 42 of the union's EA claims. The MUA said workers wanted rosters that give a better work-life balance, improved fatigue management, improved job security and tightening-up of the old agreement which allowed QUBE to undermine long-standing employment standards and conditions.

### **Lockout at Konecranes in Tasmania in fifth week**

Transnational company Konecranes Demag has locked out its ten Tasmanian maintenance workers without pay since August 5 in a dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement.

The lockout was the company's response to low-level work bans that followed 12 months of negotiations between the Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) members. Workers are demanding their wages and conditions be brought in line with other maintenance fitters and engineers doing similar work in Tasmania.

The company has been using fly-in fly-out workers from other Australian states. The state Liberal government allowed the company to overcome COVID-19 travel restrictions by reclassifying the fly-in fly-out strike breakers as essential workers.

The CEPU has made no attempt to run a united campaign amongst its thousands of members in other states to prevent scabbing and provide concrete support. Instead, it is calling on the Tasmanian community to support the locked out workers.

Konecranes Demag 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.

### **Queensland municipal workers strike for better pay**

Outside workers from the Toowoomba Regional Council, 100km west of Brisbane, walked off the job on Thursday after rejecting management's latest enterprise agreement offer. About 100 workers rallied outside the CEO's office demanding a 2.5 percent pay increase, the same amount administrators awarded to themselves.

The council employs around 1,650 outdoor workers who are covered by multiple unions, the Electrical Trades Union, Plumbers Union, Transport Workers Union and the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union.

As well as a pay increase, workers want job security and compensation for working with asbestos and high voltages. The council has only offered a 2 percent pay increase and no change in conditions.



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