

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

10 September 2021

Asia

India: Urban contract sanitation workers strike in Bihar

About 30,000 contract sanitation workers from urban local bodies across Bihar state began an indefinite strike on September 7 over several demands. These included equal pay for equal work, permanent jobs and an end to labour outsourcing. On August 9, sanitation workers from the Patna Municipal Corporation stopped work for five days over the same issues.

The Bihar Local Bodies Karamchari Sanyukt Sangharsh Morcha and Bihar Rajya Sthaniye Nikay Karamchari Mahasangh, the unions covering the workers, warned the government last month that members would strike if it continued to ignore their demands. Hundreds of these workers have been employed for 10 years on a daily wage basis, hoping that the government would make their jobs permanent.

The workers accused the government of unequal treatment compared to permanent employees. Currently, a contracted daily wage employee gets 9,000-rupees (\$US122) per month, and an outsourced worker gets 7,000 rupees, compared to a permanent worker who receives 30,000 rupees (\$US408) per month and other benefits. Workers are demanding a minimum of 18,000 rupees a month.

Punjab: Jalandhar Civil Hospital nurses strike against pay cut

Punjab Government Nurses' Association members protested outside the Jalandhar Civil Hospital emergency ward on September 6. There are 108 nurses at the hospital—83 regular and 25 on contract.

They were demanding permanent jobs and changing the classification of staff nurses to nursing officers with grade B remuneration. The nurses were recently placed in pay grade C following Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. Other demands were for a 7,200-rupee nursing care allowance, 2,010 rupees travel allowance and a 1,800-rupee dress allowance in line with central government pay grades.

Nurses said cuts to their pay began in January 2006 when their grade was paid 4,600 rupees (\$US62). In 2011, it was reduced to 3,200 rupees and following the Sixth Pay Commission it was reduced to 2,800 rupees in 2021.

Sanmina electronics factory workers strike in Tamil Nadu

Workers from the US-owned Sanmina electronics factory in Oragadam, a manufacturing hub near Chennai, the Tamil Nadu capital, have been on strike since September 6. They are demanding a pay rise and recognition of their union. About 150 workers are currently occupying the factory.

Wage talks are generally held every three years. The workers want their current monthly pay of 28,000 rupees (\$US73) raised by 15,000-rupees in the first year and 10,000-rupees in the following two years. The workers rejected management's 3,000-rupee salary increase offer without negotiations.

The strike is controlled by the Maoist-controlled Left Trade Union Centre (LTUC), which betrayed the Sanmina worker's strike in March 2020.

The workers walked out on strike last year on March 3 to demand a pay rise and reinstatement of six dismissed workers and eight others suspended over their involvement in earlier struggles and for opposing a management Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS).

The union ended industrial action following a meeting with the Labour Commission and ordered the strike to end on March 23. The LTUC dropped its wage claim, opposition to the VRS and abandoned the six dismissed workers.

Punjab contract road transport workers on strike again for permanency

About 8,000 contract and outsourced workers from the state-owned Punjab Roadways and Pepsu Road Transport Corporation (PRTC) began an indefinite strike on September 6 to demand job permanency. More than 2,000 buses stayed off roads.

Workers demonstrated at many places and chanted slogans against the state government. They are demanding equal pay for equal work and that the bus fleet be increased from 2,500 to at least 10,000. PUNBUS and the PEPSU PRTC Theka Mulazim Union called a strike in Jalandhar city in July over the same demands.

Childcare workers protest in Delhi demanding wage rise

Anganwadi (childcare) workers protested outside the Delhi Secretariat on September 7 demanding increased wages and recognition as COVID-19 frontline workers. A delegation presented their demands to the minister for women and child development.

Workers alleged their workload increased during the pandemic, but they haven't received their full honorarium. They said they generally get a monthly honorarium of 9,678 rupees (\$US131) but in the past few months were paid only 7,003 rupees monthly. Protesters demanded that the anganwadi honorarium be increased to 18,000 rupees per month.

They also want permanent jobs with government employees status, inclusion in the labor laws, promotion for eligible workers and restoration of the old system of nutritional allocation.

Anganwadi workers' duties include conducting online classes for pre-school children, providing food supplements to pregnant and lactating

women and children, providing counselling on pregnancy and infant care and facilitating immunisation and health checks.

Punjab government contract and outsourced workers demand permanency

Punjab government workers, including contract, outsourced and part-time workers from several government departments, held a protest march in Patiala on September 2 to demand permanent jobs. Protesters included workers from Health and Medical Research Education, along with Class IV employees.

As well as job permanency, protesters demanded equal pay for equal work, revival of government posts and reimplementation of the old pension scheme. Workers from the Water Supply and Sanitation Department, along with members of the Powercom and Transco Contractual Union, said the government had denied them permanency even after many years of service.

Public sector workers, including teachers and sanitation workers, from across Punjab also demonstrated in Tarn Taran and Armur on August 14 and 15 for permanency.

Ashok Leyland metal workers still on strike in Tamil Nadu

Ashok Leyland Foundry Division-Ennore workers in Chennai have been on strike since August 13 for a pay increase. They alleged that a wage revision has been outstanding since August 2018. There are about 840 workers at the plant.

Workers accused management of discrimination and not paying Ennore unit employees bonuses given at all other Ashok units. They said two of their striking committee members were dismissed. Ashok Leyland bus assembly line workers in Hosur demonstrated in July demanding “equal wages for equal work” and a yearly bonus based on the company’s profit.

Ashok management forced the Ennore dispute into the Joint Commissioner of Labour for a three-party meeting on August 23, with no resolution.

Tamil Nadu: Madurai municipal sanitary workers protest

Municipal sanitary workers and other contract workers from the engineering and health department of Madurai corporation demonstrated at the corporation’s office on September 6. They demanded a weekly day off without a cut in wages and for workers employed on contract for over ten years to be made permanent with no cut in wages. Workers also demanded their pay be given by the corporation and not by the contractor.

Karnataka: Sanitation workers in Bangalore walk out

Around 15,000 sanitation workers from the Bangalore corporation struck on September 6 to demand permanent jobs and a pay increase. There are around 18,000 sanitation (pourakarmikas) workers employed in the

municipality, most of them women.

Strikers demanded a minimum wage of 25,000 rupees (\$US340), one sanitation worker for every 500 residents in the city, 3 million rupees compensation for workers who die of COVID-19 and one million rupees on retirement.

Bangladeshi sugar mill workers demand full-time work

About 100 part-time workers from the North Bengal Sugar Mills held a march and demonstrated outside the mills at Lalpur in Natore on Monday over several demands. These included full-time work at the mill and cancellation of transfers to the mills of 61 workers from a recently closed sugar mill. The transfers were ordered by the Bangladesh Sugar Food Industries Corporation.

Part-time workers who have been employed at the mills for a long time fear they will lose their jobs because of the transferees.

Bangladesh: Truck and van transport workers and owners protest

Transport workers and owners of goods-carrying vehicles demonstrated in front of the Chattogram Press Club on September 4 with multiple demands. These include punishment of responsible persons for the recent death of two transport workers, an end to extortion and harassment by the police and withdrawal of all murder cases filed over road accidents under Section 302.

The Bangladesh Truck-Covered Van Owners and Workers union has threatened to stage a countrywide 48-hour strike on September 27 and 28 if authorities fail to grant their demands by September 26.

Union members also want expedition of the driving licence issuance process, collection of operating expenses by the council, designated truck terminals, designated roadside places with resting facilities and document checking, and for only highway police to patrol the highways.

Australia

Bus drivers close Sydney depot over COVID-19 exposure

Bus drivers at the Transit Systems depot in Smithfield, a suburb west of Sydney in New South Wales (NSW), forced the closure of the depot on Thursday after learning that a driver had tested positive for COVID-19. They accused the operator and the Berejiklian state Liberal government of not taking enough steps to protect drivers from COVID-19 exposure.

Close to 200 drivers operate out of the Smithfield depot. It is located in the epicentre of the current Delta COVID-19 outbreak. Drivers called for rapid antigen testing to be urgently deployed at all bus depots.

The Smithfield drivers’ action followed a two-hour stop work safety meeting by Transport Workers Union (TWU) members at four western Sydney bus depots on Monday against the state government’s decision to end workplace testing of drivers. Drivers pointed out that rapid antigen testing has been deployed at the NSW Parliament.

Ambulance paramedics last month threatened to take industrial action after being told they would not be supplied with rapid antigen test kits

even though the kits have been deployed at NSW Ambulance offices.

Mater Hospital maintenance workers in Brisbane hold third strike

For the third time in 12 weeks, 25 maintenance workers from the privately-owned Mater Hospital in Brisbane, the Queensland state capital, walked out for 24 hours on September 6 and protested outside the hospital in opposition to management's proposed enterprise agreement. Workers held placards stating "Same Job, Same Pay."

They are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Electrical Trades Union, Plumbers Union and the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union.

The workers held a 24-hour stoppage on June 3 after rejecting a management offer. The proposed management enterprise agreement contained a two-year pay freeze followed by a meagre 1 percent pay increase in the third year with reduced conditions, equating to more than a 4 percent pay cut.

They walked out again for 24 hours on July 16 after rejecting the hospital's revised pay offer of annual increases of 1.8, 1.8 and 2 percent in a three-year agreement. Management is refusing to resume negotiations. Workers want annual pay increases of 3.5 percent to bring them on par with public hospital workers doing the same job, no loss of conditions, and consultation on rosters.

South Australian health workers protest over health system crisis

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) members demonstrated in Adelaide on September 4 to protest against the lack of resourcing that has put South Australia's hospitals in crisis. Nurses and doctors, supported by ambulance paramedics, fire fighters and other public sector workers, rallied outside an Adelaide convention centre in which the ruling state Liberal party was meeting.

Protesters were demanding an increase in resourcing and appropriate staffing levels in health and emergency services. The ANMF demanded the provision of additional acute and subacute beds in hospitals to ensure the required flow of patients from the emergency department, which will relieve the ongoing unsafe problem of ramping of ambulances at hospitals waiting for hours to offload patients.

About 50 nurses at the Eastern Community Mental Health Service commenced industrial action in the form of limited work bans on September 1 in response to safety and workload issues caused by serious staffing shortages. A spokesperson from the ANMF said excessive workloads and associated psychological risks experienced by these nurses is a result of the appalling state of mental health care across the state.

Years of government underfunding has left South Australia's health system in crisis forcing overworked and traumatised health workers and emergency workers to take action. Over 500 paramedics and other emergency workers rallied at parliament house in Adelaide in April over the issue.

In February, exhausted nurses and midwives at the Women's and Children's Hospital in Adelaide called for suspension of elective surgery at the hospital in order to ease pressure on overworked staff. ANMF members said they were understaffed, overworked and concerned about patient care. Nurses said some were working over 100 hours a fortnight, suffering from stress and fatigue and could no longer take on extra shifts.

South Australian water utility workers strike

About 40 members of the United Workers Union (UWU) from the government-owned South Australian Water Corporation (SA Water) stopped work for one hour on September 3 at depots, locks, water treatment plants, reservoirs and pipelines. Members of the UWU, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Electrical Trades Union are in dispute with the company after rejecting its proposed enterprise agreement (EA) in July.

A spokesman from the UWU said members had twice rejected SA Water's "substandard" EA offer which proposed introducing flexible start and finish times between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. He said the wages and conditions the company proposed needed to be substantially improved. The agreement affects around 1,500 workers.

Australian Community Media journalists vote to strike

Australian Community Media (ACM) journalist have voted to take industrial action in their dispute with the company over its proposed enterprise agreement. Eighty-five percent of the 69 Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) members who participated in the ballot approved taking future strike action ranging from 24 hours to an unlimited number of stoppages of indefinite duration.

An MEAA spokesman said ACM has so far refused to commit to any pay rise in 2020 or 2021 and wants to make cuts to conditions which would effectively create a two-tiered workforce. Their current EA expired in June 2020. Journalists want pay raises in real wages and to protect current terms and conditions for current and future staff.

After seven meetings the company has refused to offer a pay increase. According to the MEAA, ACM management threatened that an increase in wages would "put at risk not just the future of 600 journalists in the organisation but the other 1,000 employees across the business."

In a media statement the MEAA said members in the *Illawarra Mercury* and *Newcastle Herald* newsrooms have already had copyright payments unilaterally removed by the company weeks prior to Christmas 2020, and claimed that the company now seeks to remove the same payment for staff at the *Canberra Times*. Members are opposed to these reductions which amount to a real wage cut.



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