

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

8 October 2021

India: Kerala government doctors impose work bans

Doctors from the Kerala Government Medical Officers' Association imposed work bans on October 4 to protest cuts to pay and allowances. Doctors have banned participation in e-Sanjeevani (an online teleconsulting system) and other online meetings as well as all training, VIP duty and meetings of the Local Self Government Department.

The association said a protest was planned outside the state secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram on November 1, followed by mass casual leave on November 16, if their grievances were not addressed. The doctors allege that their salaries remain stagnant and that various allowances have been withdrawn by the government despite working relentlessly to confront the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Uttarakhand power transmission workers strike

Engineers and other workers from the Power Transmission Corporation of Uttarakhand, in northern India, began an indefinite strike on Wednesday to demand a pay rise, revision of allowances and permanent jobs for outsourced employees. The strike was called after the government allegedly backed away from written commitments given in July.

The Uttarakhand government responded to the strike by implementing the draconian Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) in an attempt to stop the strike at the state's three power corporations.

Meanwhile, engineers and technicians in the neighbouring state of Haryana who are employed at the Haryana Vidhyut Prasaran Nigam (HVPN) power utility protested in five districts against the state government's decision to send them to Uttarakhand as strike breakers. Demonstrations were held at company offices in Hissar, Rohtak, Bhiwani, Panipat, Kaithal and other locations.

Maharashtra resident doctors end strike

The Maharashtra Association of Resident Doctors (MARD) called off a state-wide strike by government hospital and medical college members on Monday after the government said some demands would be met.

Around 4,000 doctors walked out on October 1 over four demands. These included a waiver of academic fees, payment of a risk incentive during the COVID-19 pandemic, improved hostel accommodation and for TDS (tax deduction at source) not to be imposed on resident doctors in Brihanmumbai Mumbai Corporation hospitals.

The state government agreed to improve hostel accommodation and pay

a COVID-19 incentive back-dated to the beginning of the pandemic in 2020. It rejected the other demands, however.

Jammu and Kashmir contract health workers strike to defend jobs

Over 1,500 National Health Mission (NHM) workers recruited by the Jammu and Kashmir state government during the COVID-19 pandemic went on strike on September 30 to protest pending terminations. Workers accused the government of exercising a "use and throw" policy with NHM employees who began work at the Government Medical College (GMC) during the first wave of COVID-19 last year.

NHM contract employees said they had been promised job permanency if they worked hard during the COVID-19 pandemic. They returned to work after two days when the government agreed to extend their job contracts by three months.

Andhra Pradesh construction workers demand COVID-19 relief

Construction workers in Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh marched to the Collectorate on October 1 to demand COVID-19 relief measures. This included resumption of welfare board payments and immediate payment of outstanding compensation. They also demanded payment of 10,000 rupees (\$134) per month to workers who lost employment during the pandemic, and a one-million-rupee compensation payment to families of building workers who died of COVID-19.

The protest was organised by the Building and Other Construction Workers Union affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions. It followed protests in Bangalore last month by over 10,000 construction workers with similar demands. Affected workers currently only receive a one-off 3,000-rupee government assistance payment.

Pakistan: Islamabad police attack doctors' demonstration

Police used teargas and batons to disperse a peaceful demonstration of government doctors in Islamabad on Tuesday. About 20 doctors were detained until after the protest was dispersed.

The Young Doctors Association called on members from around the country to mobilise in Islamabad against new regulations imposed on medical practices. The doctors denounced the new regulations, which they said prevent many people entering the profession, and the impact of

budget cuts to education programs at medical training institutes. The YDA accused the government of attempting to force those institutions to raise their own funds by systematically cutting back funding.

In October 2019, the Imran Khan government dissolved the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council and used police to forcefully remove 220 sacked employees from its premises. The government then formed the Pakistan Medical Commission (PMC) which brought in a new National Licensing Examination for those seeking to enter medical and dental practices.

Young doctors in Balochistan protest against privatisation

Last Saturday and Sunday, Young Doctors Association (YDA) members boycotted outpatient departments in Balochistan government hospitals in protest over the government's privatisation policies. The YDA limited its opposition, however, to simply attacking the rundown of free health services, and claiming it is possible to pressure the government to change course.

In line with International Monetary Fund and the World Bank demands, the Pakistani government is implementing an extensive privatisation program of government utilities and institutions and drastically cutting public expenditure.

Bangladeshi apparel workers demand unpaid wages

Nearly 5,000 Opex Group Sinha Garments workers began a protest hunger strike outside the Shromo Bhaban in Dhaka last Sunday, demanding four months of unpaid salaries. Authorities were quick to respond and convinced the workers to end the strike that day after claiming it would grant some demands. The Opex Group Sinha Garments, located in the Kanchpur area in Narayanganj, employs around 12,000 garment workers.

A tripartite meeting between the state minister for labour, factory authorities and trade union officials of the Bangladesh Textile Garments Workers Federation agreed that two months' salaries would be paid on October 17 and the remaining amounts paid by November.

The workers, however, were also demanding allowances for earned leave, maternity leave, service benefits for resigned workers and wage payments made within the first seven working days of each month. Police used teargas to disperse thousands of garment workers demonstrating over these issues on September 23.

Sri Lankan power and port workers protest privatisation

Petroleum, Port and Electricity Trade Unions members held a series of protests on Monday over the sale of Kerawalapitiya Power Plant to a US power company, along with the sale of port land, services and oil tanks as well as scrapping of the Sri Lanka's Petroleum Corporation.

Workers demonstrated outside Colombo port, the petroleum distribution complex, and the Colombo Electricity Board's head office. Workers have threatened to strike if the government does not abandon its privatisation of public entities.

China: Migrant workers protest in Zhejiang, Sichuan

Under surveillance of a large numbers of police, thousands of migrant workers demonstrated outside the government building in the city of Haining, in Zhejiang province, and in Fushun County of Sichuan province on Thursday.

According to the ANI news service, the protests erupted after a co-worker who sought 18,000 yuan (\$US2,831) in unpaid wages was rebuffed by management, tortured, and set on fire. The worker suffered 95 percent burns and later died of his injuries. Protesters demanded answers for the workers' mistreatment.

Cadbury chocolate workers strike again in Melbourne

For the second time in three weeks, 340 members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) walked out for 24 hours at two Mondelez (Cadbury) chocolate factory sites in Melbourne on Friday demanding more secure jobs and higher pay in a new enterprise agreement. The union accused management of "flooding the place" with outside strikebreakers following the last walkout.

Over 80 percent of workers have rejected the company's pay offer of 9.75 percent over four years, which is a pay cut when compared against projected cost of living increases. An AMWU spokesman said some workers have been in casual roles for 10 years but Mondelez International is refusing to make them permanent.

Boral Cement workers in New South Wales still in dispute

About 200 workers from Boral Cement production plants at Marulan, Berrima, and Maldon in southern New South Wales are maintaining overtime bans imposed nine weeks ago to win a better enterprise agreement. The workers are covered by various unions: the Australian Workers Union (AWU), Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU).

The company want to impose a four-year agreement that includes a total pay rise of only 3.5 percent plus major cuts to long-established conditions. Boral wants to abolish rostered days off, remove clauses restricting contract labour and job security, reduce annual leave loading and remove a Dispute Settlements Procedure clause. The Combined Unions want a three-year agreement with 4 percent annual pay increases and retention of conditions.

Boral is a major supplier of concrete and other materials in the construction and the road building industry. According to an ETU spokesman, the Boral group made \$640 million net profit last year.

New Zealand bus drivers to strike

School and urban bus drivers in New Zealand's Canterbury region will hold a rush-hour strike on October 18 after the regional council failed to pay them a "living wage."

The Amalgamated Workers Union (AWUNZ), which represents 90

percent of the South Island's public transport workers, has given notice to bus operators contracted to Environment Canterbury (ECan) of a four-hour work stoppage starting at 5 a.m.

Last year, the Labour-led government's then-transport minister, Phil Twyford, said that the Transport Agency (NZTA) would top up pay packages, ensuring all urban bus drivers were paid the so-called "living wage." This moved to \$22.75 an hour in September, just above the legal minimum of \$20.

While most regional authorities agreed that the "living wage" criteria would be paid in May, an AWUNZ spokesman said ECan had "ignored this advice," adding that a "history of broken promises" had resulted in "serious frustration" among drivers.

New Zealand education psychologists to strike

More than 120 New Zealand Ministry of Education (MoE) psychologists will stop accepting new case referrals for a month starting on November 2. The APEX union has also issued a strike notice for the psychologists, who work in schools and early childcare centres (ECEs), after eight months of failed talks.

The union says members voted to hold the partial strike in order to draw attention to a recruitment and retention crisis. Last year nearly 3,000 children and young people were on waiting lists for learning support and there are over 50 psychologist vacancies across the country. Psychologists employed by the MoE are paid about \$10,000 less than their District Health Board counterparts.

The psychologists deal with young people who exhibit complex trauma. They support the "most at-risk" children, who are experiencing a raft of difficulties, including foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, neurodiversity conditions, such as ADHD and autism spectrum disorder, verbal and physical aggression, and attendance issues. Some are seen by a psychologist every day.

The action comes as the Labour government faces a teacher backlash over plans to reopen Auckland's classrooms after the school holidays and during an ongoing COVID outbreak. Teachers interviewed on Radio NZ said they were "astonished" that they could be back in school on 18 October while businesses such as restaurants and hairdressers remain shut.



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