

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

5 November 2021

Asia

Contract doctors in Malaysia threaten second strike

Contract doctors in Malaysia's public hospitals have threatened to walk out in December if the government continues to ignore their demand for permanent positions. There are currently 23,000 frontline contract doctors employed under a temporary system established by the government in 2016. The walkout will be the second over the issue.

Around 7,000 of these doctors walked off the job nationally on July 26 in defiance of threats from authorities and police. Currently in a career limbo, short-term contract doctors are blocked from professional advancement. Their pay is at least 30 percent lower than permanent public health doctors.

After the July strike, a special task force was set up involving the Malaysian Medical Association and the Health Ministry. While the government said an amendment to the Pension Act would allow permanent employment, the state Budget22 only allowed for the extension of contracts of 10,000 doctors for two years.

The doctors are bearing the full brunt of Malaysia's worsening COVID-19 crisis which has pushed the public health system to the brink of collapse. On Wednesday, two days after the doctors announced their intention to hold a second strike, there were 5,284 new COVID cases and 46 deaths bringing the accumulated totals to 2,281,267 and 29,091 respectively.

Dairy processing workers in Indonesia protest mass sackings

Hundreds of workers from the PT Indolakto dairy processing factory in Pasar Rebo district, Jakarta, demonstrated on Wednesday afternoon against mass sackings. Police set up barricades to contain the protesters but traffic was blocked along the main arterial road Jalan Raya PKP near the factory.

PT Indolakto is a subsidiary of Indofood. Indomilk is the biggest brand in Indonesia. The factory employs over 1,000 people. The media did not report what triggered the sackings.

India: Spicejet workers walk off over unpaid wages and entitlements

Engineering workers from the low-cost domestic airline SpiceJet walked off the job in various parts of the country on Monday over unpaid salaries and entitlements. It followed a walkout in September over the same issues.

Strikers said some employees have not been paid full wages and leave for 12 months. They also alleged that provident fund deductions from salaries were not being deposited into their Employees' Provident Fund Organisation accounts.

Strikers returned to work after meeting with management but warned that they would call a nationwide walkout if their grievances were not addressed.

Kerala government doctors continue protests against pay freeze

Doctors from the Kerala Government Medical Officers Association demonstrated outside the Secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram on November 1 to protest against a pay freeze and the withdrawal of some allowances.

The demonstration was a continuation of industrial action begun on October 4 in which the doctors 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 alleged that despite working relentlessly through the COVID-19 pandemic, doctors and health workers were not provided any risk allowance. Instead, in the last pay revision salaries were not increased and several allowances were withdrawn. Doctors have threatened to take mass casual leave on November 16 if the authorities continue to ignore their grievances.

Punjab government clerical officers on indefinite strike

Punjab State Ministerial Services Union members are on indefinite strike for salaries and benefits to be increased in line with the Sixth Pay Commission report, and for the raises to include workers recruited after January 2016. They are also demanding that all employees recruited after 2004 be transferred onto the superior old pension scheme.

The workers, who have been on strike since October 6, protested in front of the treasury office in the district administrative complex in Ferozepur on October 28.

Last month, the workers voted unanimously to take protected industrial action that could include bans on administrative duties and overtime, followed by work stoppages of 1, 4 and 8 hours.

Sri Lankan educators and parents continue protests

Thousands of public school educators, parents and students held demonstrations in Sri Lanka's main cities on Wednesday as part of a long-running campaign to lift the wages of teachers and principals and for the resolution of other issues pending for 24 years. Protesters demanded that at least 6 percent of the nation's GDP be allocated to education and that parents not be charged for school maintenance expenses.

The protests were organised by the unions following their betrayal last month of the 100-day national online teaching strike of about 250,000 teachers and principals. While educators have rejected the Rajapakse government's offer of a small salary increase—one fifth of teachers' original demand, which would be paid in four instalments—the unions have accepted the paltry rise but appealed to the government to make one payment.

Australia and New Zealand

FedEx drivers across Australia to hold rolling strikes

The Transport Workers Union (TWU), representing 3,000 Australian FedEx truck drivers, has announced that its members will be holding national four-hour rolling stoppages commencing Monday over ongoing negotiations for a new enterprise agreement. It is the third round of strikes at the global logistics company in a bargaining process that has been underway since April.

The previous enterprise agreement covering FedEx workers expired at the end of June 2020, but the TWU agreed to defer negotiations under the pretext of the COVID-19 pandemic, effectively implementing a wage freeze.

FedEx has refused to increase its pay offer in more than six months of bargaining despite workers rejecting it numerous times. Under the proposed agreement, workers will not receive a back-dated wage rise for 2020 and only get a 3 percent increase from July 2021 and 2.5 percent from 2022, well below the current inflation rate of 3.8 percent.

There have been no talks between the company and the union since October 21.

Queensland sugar mill workers strike against pay freeze

Rocky Point Sugar Mill workers in south-east Queensland walked off the job and picketed the factory on October 29 to demand higher pay in the company's proposed enterprise agreement. Members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Workers Union said they have not had a pay increase since 2016 and want a pay offer that compensates for the five-year wage freeze.

Union betrays locked out workers at Konecranes in Tasmania

Locked out gantry technicians from the transnational company Konecranes Damage returned to work this week after their union sold out the workers and accepted the company's \$1 an hour pay rise offer. Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) members had been locked out since August 5 after taking industrial action to demand a pay increase in the next enterprise agreement.

The six workers decided to take industrial action after 12 months of failed negotiations for their wages to be lifted to be on par with other workers in Tasmania doing the same job. They claimed their pay was not much higher than a fourth-year apprentice.

The union isolated the workers during the 11-week lockout opposing any joint industrial action of Tasmanian members to defeat the company attack. This allowed Konecranes to rely on its multi-billion-dollar multinational parent and its monopoly position to maintain the lockout.

New Zealand rest home workers strike

Rest home workers in the northern New Zealand regional town of Kaitia struck for two hours on Saturday October 30 in an ongoing series of stoppages.

The Claud Switzer Memorial Trust, which runs the town's only residential care home, has proposed scrapping special pay allowances for health care assistants and domestic staff working weekend shifts, along with other benefits, as part of a new collective agreement.

Workers are currently paid an additional \$5 per hour to work on a weekend, and the employer wants to reduce this to just \$12 extra in total for any weekend shift. Other changes include reducing penalty rates for overtime work, qualification allowances, and attacking job security. One clause would potentially give the employer the right to terminate workers on medical grounds.

The E t? union has been bargaining since May and in mediation since August over the collective agreement. A union spokesperson said that without the weekend allowances, workers doing weekends as part of their 40 hour-week would not receive up to \$3,000 extra per year.

The trust is threatening that the future for the home is "grim" if workers do not accept the new agreement—with around 20 residents needing to be moved and a 20 percent cut in staff due to lack of funds for a new building and upgrades.



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