

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

12 November 2021

Asia

Korean government healthcare workers protest for improved conditions

Korean Healthcare Workers' Union (KHWU) members demonstrated outside Cheong Wa Dae (the official residence of Korea's head of state) in Seoul at midday on Thursday to protest excessive workloads and the government's failure to prepare for a COVID-19 surge as the country begins returning to normal ahead of winter.

Officials from the 7,600-strong union called off a planned national strike that day at public healthcare centres and hospitals after claiming 40 percent of members at several major hospitals would not participate.

The union said that although the government predicted that COVID-19 patients would rise to around 5,000 a day it did not have a plan to ease the heavier workload on health workers.

Thousands of Indonesian workers demonstrate for higher minimum wage

The Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions (KSPI), one of the country's peak union groups, held demonstrations in 24 provinces and over 100 regencies and cities on Wednesday to demand the government increase the regency and city minimum wage by 10 percent. Workers across the country are facing price rises of up to 10 percent on essential commodities and public transport due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The KSPI predicted up to 10,000 workers from 1,000 factories nationwide would attend protests outside the offices of governors, regents and mayors, including those of the governor of Jakarta. The KPSI has threatened national strike action if the government does not respond to the protests.

The union is also demanding the revocation of President Joko Widodo's anti-worker Omnibus Law on Job Creation. The government claims the new law will attract foreign investment by relaxing Indonesia's business, labour and environmental laws. The union has warned that the law will cut wages, remove sick leave provisions and other protections, and undermine job security.

Bangladeshi private sector transport workers strike

Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation members in the private sector have been on a nationwide strike since November 4 to demand a wage rise in response to increases in essentials, resulting from higher fuel prices. On average, a Bangladeshi transport worker earns just 500 taka (\$US5.8) a day.

One worker told media, "I cannot send any money to my family. All daily essential prices are rising and so our wages also need to rise." Private sector bus workers were not paid during coronavirus lockdowns. There are at least 5 million transport workers in Bangladesh, including 700,000 bus workers, according to the federation.

Three-wheeled taxi drivers in Bangalore protest

Three-wheel taxi drivers held a protest in Bangalore, Karnataka on Wednesday to demand that the fare per kilometre be increased from 15 to 16 rupees and that the minimum fare be raised from 25 to 30 rupees. The Auto Rickshaw drivers' union, which is affiliated with the Centre for Indian Trade Unions, also demanded the expansion of their area of operation in the outskirts of the city.

Australia

South Australian health and disability support workers impose bans

About 3,000 health and disability support workers from more than 45 hospitals, health and aged care facilities across South Australia stepped up industrial bans on Wednesday in their fight against privatisation and attacks on job security.

Hospital cleaners, patient service assistants, disability support workers, catering workers, sterilisation technicians, aged carers and community care workers have been taking low-level action, including work bans, since April in opposition to the state Liberal government's threats to outsource health jobs and privatise facilities.

The United Workers Union (UWU) told the media that issues in

dispute with the government include chronic understaffing, unpaid overtime and health and safety, such as access to PPE (personal protective equipment). A union spokesman said the government has refused to retract its earlier threats of job cuts and privatisation.

Queensland silica mine workers walk off

About 50 workers from the Cape Flattery Silica Mine in Far North Queensland walked off the job for 24 hours on November 4 in their fight for a new enterprise agreement. The workers, from three unions - the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Workers Union - are maintaining an indefinite overtime ban.

The AMWU claimed that workers have not had a pay increase since 2019 and the company is offering a below CPI (consumer price index) increase. The union has called for 3.85 percent wage rise per year, an increase in the production bonus and improvements to the classification structure so they can be properly remunerated for their skills.

The mine is owned by Mitsubishi and produces one of the highest grades of silica in the world, which is used to manufacture solar panels, smart phones and television screens. They have increased production consistently year on year.

Svitzer tugboat workers resume strikes at Australian ports

Some 240 members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), a division of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU), employed by tugboat operator Svitzer Australia have resumed strike action following a three-month pause.

Union members at ports around Australia stopped work for four hours on Tuesday, prior to a vote on Svitzer's latest enterprise agreement offer, which includes 1.5 percent annual pay increases, well below the current CPI of 3.8 percent. Workers held a series of 24-hour stoppages in January and again in July to demand an improved pay offer and maintenance of conditions.

Svitzer is part of the Maersk international shipping group, one of two main tugboat operators responsible for hauling ships into port. It has a fleet of more than 100 tugs and more than 1,000 seafarers.

The MUA has accused Svitzer of attempting to strip away workers' rights and conditions. It claimed that despite being close to finalising a new workplace agreement earlier last year, Svitzer management decided to use the COVID-19 crisis to introduce 30 new claims that would slash workers' rights, conditions and job security. It also wants to reduce fixed crew levels which it claims adds to substantial costs.

Emergency housing workers in Melbourne take industrial action

About 170 workers from the emergency accommodation provider Launch Housing are maintaining work bans implemented after striking for the day on October 25. Australian Services Union (ASU) members are in dispute with Launch over its proposed enterprise agreement.

The mostly female workforce wants an end to the different pay scales employed by Launch at its multiple sites and to win improved "on-all" and "sleepover" rates.

This week Launch threatened the workers with disciplinary action if they did not lift welfare-record reporting bans. The ASU says it is approved protected industrial action and that any disciplinary action by the employer would be illegal. Launch is challenging the industrial action in the Fair Work Commission.

Launch Housing is based in Melbourne and provides services and crisis housing for the nightly 25,000 homeless people in Melbourne. It employs around 400 people at 14 city locations providing different services including employment services.

Country Road warehouse workers in Melbourne strike

More than 50 predominantly female workers at the Country Road Group's Truganina warehouse in Melbourne walked out on Thursday to demand better pay and conditions. The indefinite strike follows ten months of fruitless negotiations by the United Workers Union (UWU) over the company's proposed enterprise agreement.

The strikers want pay parity with male-dominated warehouse workers in the same sector, with a \$1.00 per hour pay increase. The company is only offering \$0.50 per hour. Workers are currently paid only \$22.30 per hour, \$2 above the national minimum wage.

Country Road Group, a highly profitable transnational company, benefited from increased sales during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as receiving \$25 million in JobKeeper payments from the Australian government. Its parent company Woolworths Holdings South Africa reported a before tax profit of \$450 million, a 260 percent increase over the 2020 financial year.

The UWU said the strikers have faced abuse and the dumping of manure outside the company's gates ahead of a planned meeting and rally last week. The union, however, is isolating the strikers and opposes any joint industrial action by other UWU warehouse workers in the defence of the Country Road strikers.



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