

Striking Chinese taxi drivers demand lower contract fees; 95,000 Maharashtra state transport workers continue strike; Around 50,000 paramedical professionals protest in Sri Lanka; New Zealand rail workers vote for national strike

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

19 November 2021

### Asia

#### Chinese taxi drivers strike and demand reduction of contracting fees

Thousands of taxi drivers in Chongqing, southwestern China, went on strike on November 12 to demand a reduction in their contract fees. They were still on strike the next day. A driver told the media that the operating conditions were so bad that not only did they fail to make money, but they were unable to pay the contracting fees. Drivers at the Guanyinqiao railway station struck for two days on November 11.

Drivers were demanding that the company that hires them, Chongqing Highway Transport (Group), lower contract fees to compensate for the downturn in demand due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Drivers reported that people are afraid to venture out and many entertainment venues, internet cafes and shops are closed.

A driver said his taxi cost between 100 and 200 yuan a day. The contract fee is 120 yuan, plus money and gasoline and then deductions for meals, leaving nothing to live on.

#### Hong Kong Airport construction workers demand overdue wages

Over 100 workers from the main contractor, Leighton Asia-Chun Wo, constructing the \$HK141.5 billion third runway at the Hong Kong Airport held a sit-in demonstration on Tuesday morning, claiming they were owed wages at the end of their work arrangements. The Hong Kong Airport Authority made a meaningless intervention calling for proper management of workers' wages and payment deadlines.

Construction of the runway was approved by the Hong Kong government in 2016 and originally slated to end in 2024. There are now growing concerns of the project going over time and budget. About 200 workers and 6 subcontractors are collectively owed \$100 million in unpaid wages and costs, according to a representative.

#### Foodpanda delivery workers in Hong Kong end strike

On Thursday, one of the leading food delivery platforms Foodpanda reached a deal on pay packages with its couriers, ending a labour dispute that erupted into a two-day strike last weekend. Eight representatives of the 10,000-strong workforce met with management to resolve issues such as lack of standard base pay per delivery.

The workers' main demand was for a minimum fee of \$HK50 (\$US6.40) for each order delivered by a rider and \$30 for those delivered on foot. Both rates had declined, from \$50 to \$40 in the past year for riders and \$28 to \$22 over the past six months for those on foot. Issues about the app's navigation system, restaurant delays and cancellation of orders were also raised.

#### India: Electrical manufacturing workers protest over unpaid allowances and bonuses

Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) workers in Trichi, Tamil Nadu stopped work and protested at the factory's main gate on November 16 demanding an unpaid bonus and other benefits from 2019. They held a hunger strike protest from 8 a.m. till 5 p.m.

BHEL, which was established in 1956, is an Indian government-owned engineering and manufacturing enterprise and the country's largest power generation equipment manufacturer.

Workers demanded the immediate convening of a Joint Committee to analyse and determine the development status of the company. Major unions, including INTUC, NDLF, LLF, supported the protest and denounced the Modi government's decision to privatise public sector companies.

#### Social health workers in Bangalore demand wage payments

Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers demonstrated at the

Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (municipal corporation headquarters) in Bangalore on November 15 over untimely payment of wages, and outstanding benefits payments and the allotment of undesignated tasks.

They also called for fixed monthly wages to be increased from 4,000 rupees (\$US54) to 9,000 rupees. The frontline workers are dealing with COVID-19 and have to conduct numerous surveys on a day-to-day basis, as well as look after antenatal and postnatal care. They are also involved in coronavirus vaccination drives.

### **Punjab municipal contract workers demand permanency**

Contract workers from the Ludhiana Municipal Corporation blocked the main entrance of the Zone A office in Ludhiana on November 16 to demand permanency. Workers organised by the members of the Municipal Karamchari Dal burnt an effigy of the corporation's minister.

The protest was one of many strikes and protests by Punjab state government and municipal contract workers demanding permanent jobs. Contract workers from the Punjab Public Service Commission struck for over two weeks in October demanding permanency. In September, contract workers from the Punjab Roadways Corporation struck for nine days over the same issue and again in October.

### **Maharashtra state transport workers remain on strike**

About 95,000 bus drivers from the Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) have been on strike since November 3. The strike was launched in opposition to the agreement that the Maharashtra State Transport Kamgar Sanghatana and other unions reached earlier with the Shiv Sena-led state government which betrayed their main demand.

They want to be made direct employees of the state government, thereby making it more difficult for their jobs to be cut, contracted out or privatised. Workers began a partial strike on October 27 with several other demands, including a house rent allowance and a dearness allowance.

Currently, MSRTC's entire fleet of around 18,500 buses is grounded and its 250 depots shut down. Management has sacked over 2,000 of the most militant workers. The government has given permission to price-gouging private bus companies to ply MSRTC's routes during the strike. The unions have done nothing to stop the scab companies from derailing the industrial action.

### **Steel workers protest in New Delhi against privatisation**

About 200 workers from the National Mineral Development Corporation (NMDC) Steel Union protested in the Jantar Mantar park in New Delhi on Wednesday. The workers were opposing the planned privatisation of NMDC which has steel plants in Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Workers threatened there will be more protests.

The Modi government announced in July that it intended to sell off 7.49 percent of its shares in NMDC. The government claimed that the sale would reap around \$US488.8 million dollars needed due to the impact of COVID-19 on the economy.

The government's chief economic adviser at the time revealed that the government is pursuing a \$US2.363 billion target from divestments and strategic sales this fiscal year with the major amount coming from the state-owned Life Insurance Company and privatisation of Bharat Petroleum Corporation. LIC is the tenth most-valuable insurance brand globally worth around \$US8.65 billion.

### **Chhattisgarh cooperative society administrative workers protest**

Chhattisgarh Cooperative Societies office workers held a sit-down protest in Raipur on November 14 to demand their pay scale and entitlements be in line with other Chhattisgarh state government employees and their service rules for 2018 be amended.

### **Sri Lankan oil refinery workers protest against privatisation**

Thousands of oil refinery workers of the Petroleum General Employees Union protested outside the Sapugaskanda Refinery in Colombo on Wednesday against its closure. Workers fear that the closure of the refinery for maintenance is a pretext for privatisation of the energy sector including the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC).

A union spokesman said that CPC crude oil supplies in all tanks at the refinery will be depleted by November 15, 2021. He accused the government of turning the CPC into a loss-making concern paving the way to privatisation.

The Ceylon Petroleum Corporation generates an annual revenue of nearly \$US3 billion. Its main refinery is the Sapugaskanda Refinery. CPC's main partner is the Ceylon Electricity Board which has a debt of 500 billion rupees (\$2.55 billion) due to be paid.

### **Sri Lankan health professionals protest over wage anomalies**

Around 50,000 paramedical professionals protested outside the ministry of health on Wednesday to demand the government fix long-outstanding pay anomalies.

The Federation of Health Professionals alleged that the government budget will not eliminate the salary anomalies of paramedical and paramedical graduates or provide a salary system for nursing and allied medical graduates. They also want an immediate increase of the Disturbance, Availability and Transport (DAT) allowance to 10,000 rupees. The federation has threatened to call a strike on November 24 if its demands were not met.

### **Bangladeshi jute mill workers demand reopening of mills**

Hundreds of Bangladeshi jute mill workers demonstrated at the zone office of the Bangladesh Jute Mill Corporation (BJMC) in Khalishpur, Khulna city, on Monday with several demands. They demanded distribution of unpaid wages at five closed mills in Khalishpur and Daulatpur, the reopening of all closed mills and implementation of the

government pay scale.

The BJMC in June last year closed all 25 state-owned jute mills, making about 50,000 permanent, temporary and substitute workers jobless. Temporary workers from two closed mills in Khulna held a demonstration in Khulna on August 10 with the same demands.

### **Bangladeshi garment workers protest over delayed wages**

More than 500 apparel workers from the ZA Apparels factory protested in the Dewan Market area in Ashulia, Savar on Monday demanding regularisation of payment of salaries and overtime pay. Officers from the Dhaka Industrial Police-1 were deployed to the demonstration.

Factory management had failed to pay the wages of about 700 employees which are due on the 10th of each month. Workers also demanded maternity leave, attendance bonuses, and general leave, which had been denied. The protest ended after industrial police and factory management convinced workers that they would resolve the issues.

### **Australia and New Zealand**

#### **FedEx drivers across Australia resume rolling stoppages**

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

The previous FedEx enterprise agreement 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 will only get a 3 percent increase from July 2021 and 2.5 percent from 2022, well below the current inflation rate.

The TWU is desperate to reach agreement before Christmas and has proposed several counteroffers to FedEx. The union suspended further industrial action last week after the company agreed to union meetings during paid time across the country. At the meetings members overwhelmingly endorsed taking further action.

#### **Country Road warehouse workers in Melbourne on strike**

More than 50 predominantly female workers at the Country Road Group's (CRG) Truganina warehouse in Melbourne began indefinite strike action on Monday to demand better pay and conditions. Dozens of striking workers chained themselves together and held a rally outside Country Road's flagship store in South Yarra, Melbourne on Monday.

Workers have twice voted down proposed enterprise agreements brokered by the UWU and management. The strikers want pay equity with workers employed at the nearby Hanes Bonds Warehouse who, according

to the UWU, are paid up to \$10 more per hour.

Country Road workers receive between \$22.52 and \$24.34 an hour, slightly above the national poverty wage of \$20.33 an hour. CRG has offered a 2.7 percent annual pay increase over three years—inflation is currently 3 percent—and this does not bring them on par with other warehouse workers.

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.

#### **Victorian library workers strike again for better pay and safety**

About 90 members of the Australian Services Union (ASU) from the Geelong Regional Library Corporation (GRLC) walked off the job for 24 hours on Thursday and protested outside the Geelong Library, the Heritage Centre and Belmont Library to demand higher wages and improved safety in a new enterprise agreement. GRLC oversees seventeen libraries and two mobile libraries in the Geelong area.

A majority of workers voted for industrial action in May and walked out for 24 hours on July 2. The workers are reportedly the lowest paid librarians in Victoria. When the current enterprise agreement expired in June last year, management offered a four-year agreement with annual pay increases of 0 percent, 0 percent, 1 percent and 1 percent.

The corporation's latest offer, which has been rejected by workers, was for pay increases of 1 percent, 1.4 percent, 1.6 percent and 1.8 percent, reduced evening penalty rates and management's right to force library staff to work more nights and weekends. With inflation at 3 percent, the offer is a pay cut.

The Australian Services Union wants equal pay with other libraries in Victoria, improved safety with a minimum of two staff on duty and security at all times.

#### **New South Wales power workers strike for pay increase**

About 1,700 members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) at the state-owned power distribution utility Essential Energy stopped work for an hour on Wednesday to discuss further industrial action in response to the company's pay offer. Workers rejected the company's proposed enterprise agreement (EA) offering annual pay increases of 2.5 percent.

A union spokesperson declared that any pay offer below the current 3 percent inflation rate is a pay cut and would not be accepted. The union also wants the company to pay the national legislated superannuation contribution increases starting at 0.5 percent this year.

Essential Energy is a state-owned electricity infrastructure company which owns, maintains and operates the electrical distribution networks for much of New South Wales, covering 95 percent of the state's geography. It employs over 3,000 people.

#### **South Australian hospital health workers continue industrial action**

At part of ongoing industrial action in a campaign for job security, adequate staffing levels and against privatisation, health workers at the Lyell McEwin Hospital in Adelaide walked off the job on Thursday and held a protest in front of the hospital.

Some 3,000 health and disability support workers from more than 45 hospitals, health and aged care facilities across South Australia stepped up industrial bans last week as part of the campaign.

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 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). The union claimed that during negotiations the government had refused to retract its earlier threats of job cuts and privatisation.

### **New Zealand rail workers vote for national strike**

Workers at the New Zealand state-owned KiwiRail have voted overwhelmingly for a nationwide strike over failed pay talks. According to the Rail and Maritime Union (RMTU), of 1,504 returned ballots, almost 95 percent approved the strike. The action will involve about 2,500 workers and affect all rail operations, including inter-island ferries, as well as Auckland and Wellington Metro systems.

The RMTU's claim is for an 8 percent pay increase to all wages and allowances, with a 12-month term. The company has offered a 2-year term with a 2 percent rise to wages and allowances in each year. A lump sum of \$750 would be paid to RMTU members covered by the agreement. The company is also proposing attacks on current Lieu Day entitlements and Medical Retirement changes.

The strike would be the first full national stoppage of the rail system since 1994. The action proposed is for one-day strikes on any dates between November 30 and December 24. The range of dates gives the union flexibility to return to the bargaining table with time to reach a deal and call off any action.

### **Auckland retail distribution centre workers strike**

More than 280 workers at The Warehouse Group's Auckland distribution centre walked out on strike for 24 hours last Monday.

The strike comes after six months of negotiations in which workers said precarious work, short-term contracts and fair and transparent wage rises had not been addressed. The last collective agreement, which covered about 300 people at the distribution centre, expired in June.

A First Union organiser said there were concerns about health and safety, including implementation of the company's proposed vaccination mandate and its recent decision to require immunocompromised people to return to work.

There have been four confirmed COVID-19 cases at the centre. The union had heard of "onerous antigen testing requirements" that could result in workers losing pay and hours while testing. Workers also raised concerns that the facility does not appear to be regularly deep cleaned.

The centre remained open during COVID lockdowns. The union said the workers were deemed essential and the company demanded "more

from them than ever" during the lockdowns. However, management would not offer a pay rise that covers the rising cost of living in Auckland.

The Warehouse Group, one of New Zealand's largest retail operations, posted sales of \$3.4 billion in the financial year ended August 2021, contributing to a record profit of \$NZ117.7 million—up from \$44.5m the year earlier.



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