

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

26 November 2021

## Asia

### India: West Bengal hospital nurses protest for wage rise

About 2,500 nurses from various West Bengal government hospitals rallied outside the SSKM Hospital in south-central Kolkata on November 18 to demand pay parity with other state government workers. They protested over the same issue in August.

The nurses are holding a hunger protest at the School of Nursing at the SSKM Hospital until their demand is met and have denounced promises made by the minister of health during their August protest.

Protesters said although nurses with a diploma should be entitled to Level-12 pay they are only receiving Level-9 wages. They alleged that nurses across all categories, including diploma-holders and Bachelor of Science (BSc)-degree holders, are getting far less than what they should be getting.

### West Bengal tea garden workers demand minimum wage

Tea garden workers demonstrated in Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts of West Bengal on November 23 to demand the minimum wage. The Joint Forum of Trade Unions has called for payment of the minimum wage from January 2022.

The forum pointed out that tea workers in North Bengal now receive a minimum daily wage of 202 rupees (\$US2.7) after a 15 percent interim hike was granted in January. The workers had originally demanded that the minimum daily wage be fixed at 442 rupees.

### Punjab accredited health workers demand pay rise and better conditions

Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers marched from the railway station in Amritsar to the deputy chief minister's office on November 21 to demand an increase in honorarium and better working conditions. ASHA workers from various Punjab districts were involved in the protest.

ASHA workers said although they worked on essential national programs, such as female foeticide and COVID-19 vaccinations, they were only being paid meagre amounts and that their wages were often overdue. They want to be brought under the Minimum Wages Act and paid a monthly 18,000-rupee (\$US242) honorarium.

### Resident doctors strike at major Delhi hospital

Resident doctors from the Hindu Rao Hospital in Delhi began an indefinite strike on Monday over the non-payment of salaries and the dearness allowance (DA). Salaries at the hospital, which is run by the North Delhi Municipal Corporation, have been pending for the last two months and the DA for five months. Strikers said they will resume services only if their salaries and pending DAs are paid.

The doctors said they had been deferring their strike since November 8 because of the dengue pandemic. Last week, the Municipal Corporation Doctor's Association (MCDA) warned the corporation that if it did not give a favourable response within a week they will broaden the strike.

### Maharashtra university and college non-teaching staff strike

Non-teaching staff at the Mumbai University, Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey University and various degree colleges walked off the job on Monday in Mumbai. Their main demand was for implementation of the seventh pay commission.

Other non-teaching staff members of the Maharashtra State Colleges and Universities Employees Joint Action Committee have been holding strikes across the state since last month over the pay issue.

### Bangladeshi transport workers suspend strike

The Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation, which covers private sector workers on buses, minibuses, auto-rickshaws, trucks and covered vans in the Sylhet division, north-eastern Bangladesh, began an indefinite strike on Monday morning. The walkout was suspended on the same day after the divisional commissioner agreed to meet the federation's demands.

Workers' six demands included an end to police harassment and the withdrawal of victimisation cases against union leaders. The federation has threatened to resume the strike on January 5 if its demands are not met.

### Bangladeshi garment workers demand pay arrears and a wage increase

Garment workers held road blockades in parts of Dhaka on Wednesday to demand overdue wages and a pay increase to compensate for the skyrocketing food prices. The workers were from Centex Garments, BMA Garments, Vision Garments, Way Mart Apparels and several other plants in Dhaka.

A protesting Centex Garments worker told the media that the factory owner had mobilised goons against employees after they demanded their wages be paid on time. Provoked by this incident, garment factory workers in Mirpur 13 and Mirpur 14 in Dhaka spontaneously walked out in protest.

### **Cambodian workers blockade garment factory over victimisation**

Three hundred workers demonstrated outside the Xinhao Sun Garment Factory in Phnom Penh's Meanchey district on Wednesday afternoon. The protest erupted after dismissal and victimisation of one of the workers' representatives.

The protesters blocked the street outside the factory and restated existing demands for seniority and maternity pay, proper implementation of the labour laws and reinstatement of their representative. They told media that the demonstration would continue if their demands were not met.

### **Cambodian construction workers demonstrate over unpaid wages**

One hundred construction workers walked out on Wednesday to demand two months' unpaid wages. The building site is in the Svay Rieng special economic zone, 110 kilometres south-east of Phnom Penh and near the Vietnamese border.

Workers protested outside the site, which is a factory for a Chinese-owned tyre manufacturing company. They blocked all entrances and exits to prevent further work. The building workers were told by the building contractor that their unpaid wages would be distributed on November 10. The strike attracted media attention and saw the contractor agree to pay the money within 24 hours. The workers end the strike at 2 p.m. that day.

## **Australia and New Zealand**

### **New South Wales bus drivers take industrial action**

Bus drivers in Sydney's west and inner-west began industrial action on Monday to demand a pay rise from private bus operator Transit Systems. Members of the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and the Transport Workers Union (TWU) turned off the buses' fare collection readers for 24 hours in Parramatta, Liverpool, Fairfield and the entire inner-west.

Transit Systems NSW is contracted by the NSW state government to operate in two Sydney zones. It has 1,867 workers and 848 buses operating out of six depots. The bus drivers want pay parity with drivers in other Sydney regions and an end to the state government plans to privatise the service. The company responded to the industrial action by provocatively emailing drivers that their pay would be docked by 30 percent.

In August 2020, government bus drivers in Sydney's north-western

suburbs, eastern suburbs and northern beaches threatened a 48-hour strike if the Berejiklian Liberal-National government did not reverse its plan to contract the three regions to private operators. The RTBU claimed a victory when the government said it would "secure robust community consultations" before implementing its plans.

### **Healthscope private hospital nurses in Tasmania walk out over unsafe staffing**

Healthscope private hospital nurses in Hobart walked off the job for the third time in six months and protested outside the hospital to demand safe staffing levels. Nurses have been campaigning since February against excessive workloads and for safe nurse-to-patient ratios to be written into their EA. They complained of having to care for 10 patients per nurse on night shifts, excessive overtime and being pressured to work double shifts.

Protesters held placards saying, "Fix staffing levels" and "Fix workloads and patient safety." Overworked nurses held a two-hour walkout in May and a 30-minute walkout in August.

Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) members rejected Healthscope's proposed enterprise agreement (EA) in July saying management had failed to address any of their concerns.

### **Graphic Packaging International workers walk out in Melbourne**

Over 100 workers from the packaging manufacturing plant of Graphic Packaging International (GPI) in Braeside, Melbourne walked off the job on Wednesday to demand a better enterprise agreement. Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members want improved conditions and substantial increase in the meagre \$22.46 an hour they currently receive.

### **Melbourne aerospace engineering workers strike for better pay**

AMWU members at the RAUG aerospace engineering company walked out at the company's two Melbourne sites on Monday. Management has refused to directly negotiate with the union for a new enterprise agreement but hired a Sydney law firm to conduct talks.

RAUG Australia provides engineering design and support for the aviation defence industry with workers stationed near airports around Australia. The company is part of RAUG MRO International.

### **Ramset Reid workers in Melbourne locked out**

Building-tools manufacturer Ramset Reid has locked out 21 AMWU members in Melbourne following a 24-hour enterprise agreement stoppage on Monday. Management informed the workers they would be locked out for five days. The union has accused Ramset of attempting to cut wages and conditions.

## **Queensland silica mine workers hold third strike**

About 50 workers from the Cape Flattery Silica Mine in Far North Queensland held a third 24-hour strike on November 19 and protested outside the company's offices.

Members of the AMWU, Electrical Trades Union and the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union are in dispute with the company over its proposed enterprise agreement. The workers have imposed an indefinite overtime ban because management has refused to negotiate.

According to the unions, the mine workers have not had a pay increase since 2019 but the company is offering a below CPI (consumer price index) increase. The unions want 3.85 percent annual wage rise, an increase in the production bonus and improvements to the classification structure so they can be properly remunerated for their skills.

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

## **New South Wales bookshop workers take industrial action**

Retail and Fast Food Workers Union (RAFFWU) members at the Better Read Than Dead bookshop in Newtown, a Sydney inner-west suburb, are taking industrial action to force the owners to resume negotiations on their first enterprise agreement. Workers have banned overtime, web orders, cash handling, picking returns and window displays.

Better Read Than Dead employs around a dozen people, most of them in their late teens and early 20s. The bookshop workers began their campaign for a formal contract with a workplace and sexual harassment policy and a living wage.

An in-principle agreement was reached in July but after months of delays the owner backed down on several key points, including parental leave, Sunday penalties and junior rates. A local community protest march was held on November 19.

## **Queensland bus drivers strike**

About 150 drivers at Sunbus Sunshine Coast in south-east Queensland and 80 drivers from Marlin Coast Sunbus in Cairns, in the far north of the state, stopped work for 24 hours on Wednesday to demand higher pay and better conditions in a new enterprise agreement. While Sunbus said it has already reached agreement on 30 claims put from the Transport Workers Union, the union said the wage offer was unacceptable.

## **Strike notices lodged for New Zealand rail stoppages**

Strike action by New Zealand rail workers is set to paralyse KiwiRail operations nationwide next month, affecting both rail and ferry transport. The Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) has served KiwiRail two separate strike notices.

A one-day strike will be held by South Island workers on December 16 with North Island workers walking out December 17. Train control

functions are located in the North Island which means that operations in both islands will be stopped on December 17. The strike will impact on all rail operations, including rail ferries and the Auckland and Wellington Metro systems.

The RMTU wants an 8 percent general wage rise, following a zero pay increase in 2020, to cover increased living costs in the last two years.

The results of the nationwide postal ballot were 1,420 votes in favour of striking and just 81 against. The union is still in talks with management and could call off the industrial action. If it does go ahead, it would be the first national rail strike since 1994.

## **New Zealand port workers vote to strike**

Port of Timaru workers on New Zealand's South Island have voted to strike for an 8 percent general wage increase. A Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) organiser said 94 percent of workers voted in support of industrial action. The vote provides a mandate for strike action at any time from 7–24 December.

The RMTU has been in negotiations for a Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA) with Prime Port Timaru and Quality Marshalling since May. Employers have said they will not sign a MECA and have only offered below-inflation adjustments to pay.

The RMTU has said that it is using the strike vote solely as a bargaining chip. It declared that it wants to “send a signal” to employers which it claims will “act as a catalyst for meaningful negotiation.” The union has told the employers it is available for talks “anytime” next week.

## **Auckland supermarket distribution centre workers strike over pay**

About 700 workers at two Countdown supermarket distribution centres in Auckland walked off the job for three days on Wednesday. A First Union spokesman said the workers face spiralling rent and housing costs and need a “fair” pay rise. While Countdown's income and profits have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, the company has dragged out pay negotiations for months.

The union wants a 4.9 percent increase, in line with the latest annual Consumer Price Index (CPI) but inflation will rise above 5 percent in coming months. The union told the company that strike action is a “last resort.”



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