

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

3 December 2021

Asia

India: Maharashtra state transport workers' strike enters fifth week

About 95,000 Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) bus drivers remain on strike in the face of mass suspensions and sackings. They walked out on November 3 in protest against a rotten deal between the Shiv Sena-led state government and Maharashtra State Transport Kamgar Sanghatana and other unions.

Workers 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. They began a partial strike on October 27 over this and other demands, including a house rent allowance and a dearness allowance.

MSRTC's entire fleet of around 18,500 buses is grounded and its 250 depots shut down. 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.

In an attempt to intimidate strikers, 3,010 workers have been suspended and 270 daily-wage workers terminated.

Government hospital doctors in Karnataka strike

About 5,000 junior resident doctors and interns at Karnataka state government hospitals walked out on November 29 to demand a COVID-19 risk allowance and timely payment of salaries. The strike was organised by the Karnataka Association of Resident Doctors (KARD) and affected all medical colleges affiliated with KARD. Doctors boycotted outpatient departments and elective surgery.

KARD is an association of house surgeons, postgraduates, and super speciality residents of government medical and dental colleges in Karnataka. Striking doctors alleged that the government has failed to honour its promise to pay the COVID-19 allowance of 10,000-rupees (\$US134) per month, which it announced in April.

Gujarat government hospital doctors and medical college teachers protest

Resident doctors from Gujarat state government hospitals held a day-long strike on November 29 to protest against postponement of the entrance test for medical students, which doctors claimed caused an acute

shortage of doctors that increased the workload of junior doctors.

The National Eligibility Entrance Test (Postgraduate) is a qualifying and ranking examination in India for students wanting to do Doctor of Medicine postgraduate courses and Master of Surgery diploma courses in government or private medical colleges.

On the same day, hundreds of professors and lecturers from Gujarat Medical Education and Research Society-run medical colleges protested across the state over their long-pending demands, including payment of arrears as per the 7th Pay Commission recommendations.

Hospital and medical research institution workers in Bengaluru protest

Victoria Hospital workers in Bengaluru demonstrated on November 29 demanding immediate release of their October salaries and for a pay rise in line with the 7th Pay Commission.

Bangalore Medical College and Research Institute housekeeping staff, ward attendees, lift operators, data entry operators and security personnel demonstrated on the same day to demand timely payment of wages.

Manipur college teachers continue two-year struggle for pay rise

State government college teachers in Manipur are continuing their two-year struggle for a wage increase in line with Seventh Pay Commission recommendations. Federation of Government College Teachers Associations members are currently wearing black badges until December 4 in protest against the government's failure to grant the teachers' demands by November 27.

College teachers have been fighting and taking action to demand a pay revision since 2019. Teachers said it was the seventh time they have taken action over the issue and each time the government signed a memo promising to resolve the issue. The association has threatened to hold sit-in protests on college campuses from December 6 to 9 and take mass casual leave for two days from December 10.

Tamil Nadu sanitary workers demand permanency

Sanitary workers protested in Chennai, the Tamil Nadu capital, on November 28 to demand a pay rise and permanency. Over 3,100 sanitary workers have been working at government primary health centres (PHC)

on a contract basis since 2005. While they work a 12-hour day, their monthly wages have been frozen at 1,500 rupees (\$US20).

According to the Tamil Nadu PHC Reproductive and Child Health Sanitary Workers Welfare Association, the workers do not have a day off in the week or any other benefits. The workers want equal pay with permanent sanitary employees, medical benefits, a day off each week, medical and maternity leave, uniforms and an eight-hour work day.

Sri Lankan government electricity board engineers oppose privatisation

Ceylon Electricity Board Engineers' Association (CEBEA) members have begun a work-to-rule, which includes overtime bans, against government plans to sell 40 percent of shares in the Kerawalapitiya Power Plant to a US-based company, along with an amendment to the electricity act from November 25. The sale is expected to fetch \$US350 million in revenue for the Rajapakse government.

The CEBEA has accused the government of trying to break up and sell shares in the Ceylon Electricity Board like they did with the Yugadanavi Power Plant. Engineers fear the next share sell-offs will be in the Laxapana Power Plant.

Workers at Cambodia's largest casino threaten to strike

Laid off workers at the NagaWorld casino complex in Phnom Penh voted on November 24 to prepare strikes and protests near the complex unless management reinstates all employees.

The dispute goes back to April when the Hong Kong-owned complex used the COVID-19 pandemic as the excuse to restructure its operations and target the union organisation. It laid-off 1,329 of its 8,000 workforce.

Protesters want reinstatement of all workers, including union members, and review of termination packages to bring them in line with Cambodia's Labor Law.

Australia and New Zealand

New South Wales power distribution workers strike again

About 1,700 members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) at the state-owned power distribution utility Essential Energy stopped work across the state for 24 hours on November 28 in the most significant industrial action at the company in 18 years.

Workers had rejected the company's proposed enterprise agreement of annual pay increases of only 2.5 percent. A union spokesperson said any pay offer below the current 3 percent inflation rate was 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 95 percent of New South Wales and employs over 3,000 people.

Sydney bus drivers hold three days of strike action

Bus drivers in Sydney's west and inner west stopped work for two hours on Thursday and Friday and will walk out for 24 hours on Monday to demand a pay rise from private bus operator Transit Systems. About 170,000 passengers are affected.

Transport Workers Union (TWU) and the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) members began industrial action on November 22, turning off their buses' fare collection readers for 24 hours, and again for three days on Monday. Drivers want pay parity with drivers in other Sydney regions and an end to the state government plans to privatise the service.

Transit Systems NSW is contracted by the NSW state government to operate in two of Sydney's 14 contract regions. It has 1,867 workers and 848 buses operating out of six depots.

The TWU is responsible for the current condition facing its members, having made separate deals with each individual contractor and sanctioning unequal pay and conditions between regions.

Western Australian alumina refinery workers strike

Ten contract maintenance workers at Alcoa's alumina refinery at Kwinana, 20 kilometres south of Western Australia's capital Perth, walked off the job on November 29 in an enterprise agreement dispute. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and maintenance contractor ALTRAD are in negotiations for a new work agreement. Workers want equal pay and conditions with workers from other contract companies doing the same job.

Aged care workers in Queensland call for a strike ballot

Some 40 delegates, representing over 7,000 employees from major aged care facilities in Queensland, have called on the United Workers Union (UWU) to apply for a ballot for industrial action for a new enterprise agreement that increases pay and resolves inadequate staffing levels

Delegates from Blue Cross, Southern Cross Care, Churches of Christ and others are calling for reform in the aged care sector in line with recommendations made 12 months ago in an aged care royal commission.

After years of neglect by successive governments and the UWU, workers said they are fighting a system that allows minimum wages and excessive workloads, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, making it impossible to provide safe care for the elderly.

A union spokesperson cynically claimed that "Aged care workers across the country are joining together to fight for better jobs, decent pay and a quality aged care system." As history has demonstrated, the UWU is hostile to any united action by its members for a proper living wage and working conditions that covers all aged care workers.

South Australian hospital health workers walk out again over safety

More than 100 essential health workers from major hospitals in South Australia's capital, Adelaide walked off the job on Thursday amid concerns about serious understaffing and against privatisation.

About 3,000 members of the United Workers Union (UWU) are maintaining work bans at 46 hospitals and aged care facilities where they have been refusing to cut corners on cleaning and perform other unsafe work. Workers implemented the bans in April in opposition to the state Liberal government's threats to outsource health jobs and privatise facilities.

Cleaners, catering staff, sterilisation technicians and patient services assistants say their jobs are under threat and that they have been exploited during the COVID-19 pandemic due to chronic underfunding and lack of preparation of the public health system to deal with the coronavirus.

Workers complained that hospital management are unwilling to fill staffing shortfalls. They reported that at Adelaide's Flinders medical centre at least 600 shifts had been short staffed, averaging 20 patient services assistants every day. Hospital management has demanded workers curtail their usual working conditions on patient transfers and cleaning.

the year to October, and median rents increased by 8 percent.



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New Zealand port workers vote to strike

Workers at the Port of Timaru in New Zealand's South Island will strike this month over stalled pay negotiations. According to the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU), 94 percent of members voted to strike for an 8 percent general wage rise.

The RMTU has been in negotiations since the middle of the year for a Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA) with Prime Port Timaru (jointly owned by Timaru District Holdings and the Port of Tauranga) and Quality Marshalling (owned by the Port of Tauranga).

The union is clearly angling to avert the strike. RMTU Organiser John Kerr said, "We're going for the 16th [of December] but we may issue for the 17th and subsequent days, or we could withdraw notices." Kerr said the strike notice was "to provide a focus to negotiations," then added: "We've still got plenty of time to sit down and nut out a deal."

In the rail sector, the RMTU has served the state-owned KiwiRail strike notices for this month, also over an 8 percent pay claim. A one-day strike will be held in the South Island on December 16 and another nationwide on December 17. The RMTU entered mediation this week in a bid to avert what would be the first national rail strike since 1994. The union's secretary Wayne Butson declared he is "optimistic" of a settlement before the strikes.

Union imposes law pay deal on supermarket distribution centre workers in Auckland

The First Union announced this week it has settled a pay rise for Countdown supermarket's Auckland distribution centre workers who walked out for three days last week.

About 700 workers took strike action after the supermarket chain declined to offer pay increases in line with the consumer price index in a new collective agreement. The strike quickly resulted in stock shortages at Countdown stores around the country.

A First Union spokesman said workers from the company's two distribution sites in Auckland had signed a new agreement that would include a 5 percent wage rise for the next year and a 3.9 percent increase for a nine-month term in the following year.

The Reserve Bank has, however, forecast that inflation will run above 5 percent for the next three quarters. House prices were up by 30 percent in