

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

11 February 2022

Asia

India: Emergency response workers in Himachal Pradesh hold second protest

Emergency workers from the 108 Emergency Response Service and 102 Ambulance Service demonstrated at the National Health Mission (NHM) office in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh on Monday demanding confirmation of their jobs. The state government recently outsourced the 108 and 102 services to a new contractor.

Nearly 300 workers who have been in the National Ambulance Service for between eight and ten years have not received a job offer from the new contractor.

The workers ended a day-long strike on January 17, after they were given a false assurance from the government that their demands would be addressed. Protesting workers refused to leave the NHM office until late in the evening, without resolution of their grievance.

The 108 Emergency Response Service provides integrated medical, police and fire emergency services and the 102 Free Ambulance Service is an emergency medical transport service.

Andhra Pradesh government sector workers hold state-wide strike and protest

Thousands of striking state government employees from across Andhra Pradesh assembled in the state's capital Vijayawada on Monday to protest over various demands. Protesters, including teachers and pensioners, defied police roadblocks to enter the city. Their main demand was for withdrawal of the recommendations of the 11th Pay Revision Commission (PRC) which workers say will cut pay.

They also called for enhancement of House Rent Allowances, reinstatement of the City Compensatory Allowance, and other demands.

The protest and indefinite strike, which began on February 6, was called by the PRC Sadhana Samiti, a joint action committee of government employees' associations.

Tamil Nadu government schoolteachers demand appointment of headmasters

Tamil Nadu Primary School Teachers Federation members demonstrated in Coimbatore on February 8 to demand the appointment of

headmasters in four primary schools in the district. Teachers claimed that two government primary schools in Karamadai and one each in Thondamuthur and Perur had been functioning without a headmaster for over four years.

Protesters alleged that teaching is affected in these schools and those carrying out headmasters' duties are overburdened. The demonstration ended after talks with the Coimbatore education authority.

Andhra Pradesh public transport workers protest

Public Transport Department (PTD) workers demonstrated at various bus depots in Andhra Pradesh on February 5. The Andhra Pradesh Public Transport Department Employees Associations Joint Action Committee demanded that the government withdraw the new recommendations of the Pay Revision Commission (PRC). Workers claimed they would suffer huge losses if the recommendations were implemented.

Protesters alleged that they are gradually losing benefits won in decades of struggle after the Road Transport Commission merged with the government to establish the Public Transport Department.

Tamil Nadu government trainee doctors demand overdue wages

Trainee doctors from the Government Mohan Kumaramangalam Medical College and Hospital demonstrated in Coimbatore on February 2 demanding payment of three months' stipends. There are 110 trainee doctors at the hospital who are only paid a 25,000-rupee (\$US334) monthly stipend.

Over 2,000 outpatients are treated at the hospital every day and over 1,000 treated as in-patients. Patients from Namakkal, Kallakurichi, Erode, Dharmapuri and Krishnagiri district arrive for treatment every day since the hospital is a super-speciality and referral hospital.

The doctors complained that despite providing service round-the-clock in face of COVID-19 threats their representation to management has been ignored.

Tamil Nadu railway workers protest in Madurai

Around 100 loco pilots protested at the Madurai railway station on Wednesday. The Southern Railway Mazdoor Union (SRMU) and Loco Running Staff (LRS) members demanded that loco pilots' working hours

be reduced to six hours per day for those doing high intensity shifts.

Pilots and other workers are opposing 100 fortnightly working hours with only two days off. Loco pilots said they have to drive at night and remember a 1,500-km route.

Chennai auto workers protest closure of Ford plant

Ford auto manufacturing workers stopped work for two days on Monday in opposition to Ford's decision to close its Chennai Maraimalaiagar plant. The Chennai Ford Employees Union called protests in September but proposed no other concrete action or for the mobilisation of other auto manufacturing workers. The union is confining workers to toothless appeals to the Tamil Nadu state government and Ford.

Maharashtra state transport workers maintain four-month strike

The strike by Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation, (MSRTC) workers, including drivers, conductors, technicians, and workshop engineers, entered its 100th day on Tuesday.

Workers are striking against a rotten deal between the Shiv Sena-led state government and the Maharashtra State Transport Kamgar Sanghatana and other unions. Workers are demanding to be made direct employees of the state government, a wage increase and an end to job outsourcing.

The strikers were threatened by the government following the failure of talks between the unions and Transit Minister Anil Parab. Around 20,000 out of 92,000 striking workers have been forced to report to work under threats of heavy fines.

Pakistani power utility workers oppose privatisation

As part of their long-standing struggle against privatisation, workers from the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA), the state-owned power generation and distribution utility, protested in Sindh province on February 2 against the federal government's privatisation program.

The All-Pakistan Wapda Hydro Electric Workers Union called a separate protest of workers from the Islamabad Electric Supply Company on February 4 in an attempt to prevent a united struggle against privatisation.

Referring to double-digit inflation, protesters demanded universal pay increases for all Pakistani workers and permanent jobs for all contract workers. A longstanding complaint of WAPDA workers is staff shortages and the resultant increase in workplace accidents and fatalities.

Thai truck drivers protest over high fuel costs

Truck drivers parked a convoy of trucks outside the energy ministry in Bangkok on Wednesday to demand the government take action over diesel prices. The protest, which was organised by the Land Transport

Federation of Thailand (LTFT), is part of a "Truck Power" campaign seeking relief from fuel costs. It followed a similar protest in November.

Protesting drivers on Wednesday gave the government seven days to resolve the issue. They threatened to expand their action to include street protests by farmers and other people affected by high fuel costs. The LTFT has threatened to increase transport fees by 15 to 20 percent to reflect the rising cost of diesel.

The government previously capped the diesel price at 30 baht per litre from November to March, but truckers want diesel fuel to be lowered to 25 baht per litre. Taxi drivers and operators led a delegation to the energy ministry on Tuesday demanding that the cost of natural gas for vehicles be reduced from 15.59 baht per litre to 10 baht.

Cambodian police arrest more NagaWorld casino protesters

Hundreds of striking NagaWorld casino workers have been protesting outside the NagaWorld casino and hotel complex in Phnom Penh since mid-December. They want reinstatement of 365 terminated union members and an end to alleged discrimination against the union. Workers have been threatened with fines and imprisonment if they continue their action.

Police alleged that the strike and protest are illegal and in early January arrested 12 union leaders on "incitement to commit a felony" and detained 17 others for questioning. On February 4, the Phnom Penh Municipal Commission to Combat Covid-19 issued a directive telling the strikers to immediately end their protest. The next day four protesters were issued summons letters from the Phnom Penh Municipal Court to appear for questioning over their alleged "blocking of implementation of Covid-19 preventive measures."

In April, the Hong Kong-owned complex used the COVID-19 pandemic as the excuse to restructure its operations, sacking 1,329 of its 8,000-strong work force and targeting the union organisation. Only 85 workers accepted a severance payout which the union claimed was less than what is required by law. Workers said management had refused to negotiate with the union, instead insisting that they represent themselves in severance discussions.

As well as demanding reinstatement of the 365 union members, workers want a review of termination packages to bring them in line with Cambodia's Labor Law.

Australia and New Zealand

New South Wales Nurses vote for state-wide strike

In a near unanimous decision New South Wales public hospital nurses and midwives have approved strike action over chronic understaffing, low pay and unsustainable conditions and workloads. The New South Wales Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA), representing 48,000 public hospital nurses, said members will walk off the job for up to 24 hours in a state-wide strike on February 15.

While striking nurses will attend rallies in major regional cities others will protest at state parliament in Sydney. Skeleton staff, enough to care for the critically ill and preserve life, will remain at work.

Under-staffing, low pay and inadequate nurse to patient ratios in hospitals have been long standing complaints of nurses, but it is the

mounting anger and frustration among NSWNMA members over the catastrophic state of the health system amid the surging COVID-19 pandemic that has forced the union to eventually call the first state-wide strike since 2013.

Throughout the pandemic, NSWNMA has repeatedly shut down strikes over pay and staffing and limited industrial action to brief stoppages at individual facilities.

While the strike vote is a reflection of the growing anger among nurses, the union has excluded whole sections of the health sector workforce from the action. The NSWNMA's has no fundamental differences with the federal and state governments' profit-driven COVID-19 policies.

New South Wales rail union ends industrial action by train signallers

The Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has called off overtime bans by train signallers after reaching an agreement with Transport for NSW (TfNSW) on what the union says are key safety demands. The union claimed that the government has made a commitment in writing that the new enterprise agreement (EA) will not include driver-only trains and that the risk-assessment process for all new trains would be transparent.

RTBU members at the government owned-Sydney Trains and NSW Trains, had implemented industrial action from February 6 to February 21 as part of four months of limited industrial action for an improved EA offer. The action consisted of bans on working overtime, foreign depot work and working with contractors. Industrial action by workers other than train signallers will remain in place.

The union wants 3.5 percent annual pay increases, on par with the current official CPI of 3.5 percent, but far short of what is needed to keep up with the rapidly increasing cost of living. TfNSW is only offering a 2.5 percent annual pay rise that includes a 0.5 percent superannuation bump, meaning the actual wage increase would be just 2.04 percent—a pay cut.

The RTBU said it is opposed to management's demand that some conditions be put into policy rather than be included in the EA. This union's concern is that this would allow management to change work conditions without seeking support from the union.

Sydney parcel delivery workers strike over low pay

About 100 franchisees of Aramex couriers, representing the majority of the company's greater Sydney delivery drivers, stopped work for 24 hours on February 4 over low pay rates. A Transport Workers Union (TWU) spokesperson told the media that the couriers are fed up with "outrageously unfair" pay rates that earn them an average of \$2.10 per parcel.

Workers said Aramex's franchise model, which requires couriers to use their own vehicles and pay the associated expenses, is "modern slavery on wheels." The TWU claimed that some couriers were working more than 50 hours a week but only taking home "a few hundred dollars after costs."

Couriers are also protesting over what they say are exorbitant deductions for parcels that are not delivered. One courier who had COVID-19 was unable to deliver parcels and was penalised more than three times what he would have been paid if able to deliver the parcels.

Aramex, formerly known as Fastway Couriers, services several retail clients, including Amazon, Harvey Norman, Pet Circle, eBay, Cotton On, Athletes Foot and Naked Wines.

Western Australian newspaper print workers locked out again

About 120 print workers employed by Western Australian Newspapers (WAN) in Perth were locked out on Monday for the second time in three months over a new enterprise agreement.

Negotiations between the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and WAN management for a new EA began in 2019. While two years of talks produced no deal, the company put its proposed EA to workers in December. The proposed deal stripped away workers' current redundancy entitlements and attacked wages and conditions and was rejected by union members.

Management refused to resume negotiations forcing workers to strike on December 10. Management immediately initiated a lockout. Four hours into their first strike in 17 years the union told workers the company had agreed to recommence negotiations and called off the strike.

The new round of negotiations again failed, with the company beginning a lockout last Tuesday after workers resumed industrial action.

INPEX LNG processing workers in the Northern Territory to strike

Unions representing nearly 200 workers at INPEX offshore and onshore liquid natural gas processing facilities at Darwin, capital of the Northern Territory, have notified INPEX that industrial action will commence on February 16. Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and the Australian Workers Union (AWU) members rejected the company's non-union negotiated EA in February last year.

Proposed protected industrial action could include indefinite stoppages, ranging from 30 minutes to 24 hours, and an unlimited number of work bans.

The Offshore Alliance (OA), which is made up of the ETU and the AWU, has been negotiating with INPEX since June last year. OA claims that INPEX is arguing for a "meaningless" baseline agreement. Workers want secure jobs, fixed rosters, an agreed classification matrix, minimum manning levels of direct hire employees, and other conditions, locked into the EA.

INPEX Corporation is a Japanese company established as the North Sumatra Offshore Petroleum Exploration. It is the largest oil and gas exploration and production company in Japan, with global exploration, development and production projects in 20 countries.

New Zealand casino workers walk out over low pay

About 20 hospitality workers walked off the gaming floor at the SkyCity Casino in Hamilton, New Zealand, on February 6, and picketed the premises. It was the second strike by the workers, who walked out at midnight on New Year's Eve in what the Unite Union trumpeted as "the world's first strike for 2022." The workers have voted to escalate strike action into next week.

Unite organiser Joe Carolan said the workers are striking for "fair pay in a sector plagued by severe understaffing and low wages." The industry is facing severe understaffing as people leave to find better paying jobs elsewhere.

Unite, representing the mainly young workers, is only calling for a "pathway to a living wage," and for pay rates to be raised to the same level as SkyCity Auckland. The official Living Wage campaign is a fraud.

It contends that \$22.75 per hour, marginally above the legal minimum of \$20 an hour, is enough to live on. With the average house price skyrocketing to \$NZ1 million nationwide, and inflation hitting 5.9 percent, it is manifestly inadequate.

Carolán further declared the workers are “risking their health and safety in the middle of a pandemic and they are saying no more.” However, neither Unite nor any other unions have mobilised any campaign to oppose the Ardern government’s push to reopen dangerous workplaces and schools as Omicron spreads.

Auckland pallet suppliers strike over wages

Workers at CHEP, New Zealand’s main supplier of pallets, took strike action and picketed the company’s service centre in Penrose, Auckland for an hour on Tuesday morning. First Union spokesman, Mark Muller, said while CHEP is the country’s largest suppliers of pallets for commercial use, “their workers have never been fairly paid for the gruelling jobs that they do.”

Without giving any details of the union’s claim, Muller said that it involved the company “meeting significant rises in the cost of living.” After initiating bargaining in June 2021, little to no progress had been made with the owners on negotiating “fair wage rises.” Meanwhile, workers have been pressured into overtime and working weekends, trying to live when rents and prices are rising much faster than their rates of pay.



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