

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

18 February 2022

## Asia

### India: Maharashtra state transport workers continue four-month strike

Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) workers, including drivers, conductors, technicians, and workshop engineers, are maintaining their indefinite strike which began November 3 in defiance of mass suspensions and sackings. Over 1,000 workers and family members demonstrated outside the collector's office in Kolhapur on Monday.

Workers are opposing a rotten deal between the Shiv Sena-led state government and the Maharashtra State Transport Kamgar Sanghatana and other unions. They want to be made direct employees of the state government, a pay rise and an end to job outsourcing.

Around 20,000 out of 92,000 striking workers have been forced to report to work under threats of heavy fines. Protesters were demanding that the government cancel its suspension and termination orders issued.

### Visakhapatnam Steel Plant workers hold more protests against privatisation

Visakhapatnam Steel Plant (VSP) workers and family members held a sit-down protest in Visakhapatnam on February 12 to mark 12 months since their protests against the Modi government's planned privatisation of the steel plant began. Visakha Ukku Parirakshana Porata Committee members waved 365 flags as part of the protest.

The government has approved a 100 percent disinvestment of Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Limited (RINL), VSP's corporate entity, and private management of the steel plant. Widely supported demonstrations against privatisation have been ongoing since February 1 last year.

### Assam rural development contract workers demand permanent jobs

Contract workers from the Panchayat and Rural Development Department (P&RD) demonstrated in Assam state on February 11. Over 8,300 P&RD workers began protests on February 1.

They want job security, employee benefits and permanent posts. They are seeking an extension of their service period up to 60 years and the same benefits as state government employees. These include earned leave, casual leave, maternity leave and gratuity. Many workers said they had been working on contract for 12 to 14 years with no benefits.

### Haryana rural health workers' strike enters third month

Thousands of striking rural health (anganwadi) workers and helpers demonstrated outside the chief minister's residence at Karnal in Haryana on Monday over several long outstanding demands. These included a 1,500-rupee pay rise (\$US20) for workers and 750 rupees for helpers, a rise in their status to skilled workers category, payment of a dearness allowance and 300,000 rupees in retirement benefits.

Around 50,000 anganwadi workers and helpers have been campaigning across Haryana state since December. There are 26,000 anganwadi centres in 22 districts, and all have suspended activities. It has been three years since the Modi government gave any increase in entitlements to these low-paid workers.

Meanwhile, thousands of anganwadi workers in New Delhi have been on strike since January 31 for an increase in honorarium and recognition as government employees.

### Pondicherry government college teachers protest

Teaching staff from five government arts and science colleges in Pondicherry and Karaikkal region are wearing black armbands between February 16 and 25 to register their various demands. They want on-time payment of wages, immediate implementation of time bound promotions, immediate disbursement of allowances granted by the University Grants Commission (UGC) and enhancement of superannuation from 62 to 65 years.

The Pondicherry Society for Higher Education College Teachers' Association has threatened to call a hunger protest on February 25 if their demands were not met.

### Tamil Nadu power-loom workers end strike

Around 50,000 power-loom workers in Tamil Nadu's Coimbatore region walked out on strike on January 9 to demand higher wages. They returned to work on Thursday after their union accepted a pay increase offer from master weavers of between 15 and 19 percent.

Neither the power-loom owner-operators nor the hired hands who work alongside them have received a pay increase since 2014.

### Bangladesh industrial police attack garment workers in Gazipur

Industrial police in Gazipur attacked 500 protesting Gooryang Fashion factory workers with batons and sound grenades on Tuesday. The demonstration blocked the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway for several hours. At least 20 people were injured in the police attack.

The workers were protesting against the sacking of fellow employees and closure of the factory. Workers said that factory authorities issued show-cause notices to 28 workers and fired several others on Monday without any reason. Management responded to the protest by closing the factory indefinitely.

### **Bangladeshi polytechnic teachers demand permanent jobs**

Seventeen Bangladeshi polytechnic teachers have been on hunger strike since February 8 to demand they be included in the Monthly Pay Order system, which is a government pay scheme for private school teachers.

They claim 1,015 teachers were recruited and employed at 49 government polytechnic institutes in 2010 under a government project scheme titled Skills and Training Enhancement Project to improve the quality and skills of government polytechnic institute teachers. The project ended in June 2019. Striking teachers said they have not been paid since July 2020.

Over 770 teachers from polytechnic institutes and 32 professional bodies have indicated their support for the striking teachers.

### **Cambodian road construction workers demand overdue wages**

About 30 workers employed by a road construction contractor in Cambodia's Siem Reap province demonstrated at the provincial authority's headquarters on February 14 to demand unpaid wages. Protesters said that their work had been completed but the contractor refused to pay them, claiming he was still to be paid by the provincial council.

Workers alleged that the contractor never paid salaries. One worker said "Instead, he lent \$US100, \$150 or even \$250 to some workers." He added that most of the workers had not received any money for three months and some were owed five months of wages. Wages owed ranged from \$300 to \$500. The protest ended after the provincial authority agreed to pay the wages.

### **Australia and New Zealand**

#### **SunRice grain packaging workers to strike again**

The United Workers Union (UWU), representing 330 workers at the grain handling and packaging facilities of SunRice and its subsidiaries, CopRice and Australian Grain Storage, has called a 48-hour strike for February 21 in opposition to the company's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). The strike will impact on six facilities in New South Wales and Victoria. The action follows a 48-hour strike on February 1 over the issue.

SunRice and the UWU have been in negotiation over the proposed EA since July when the previous EA ended. That agreement was set to expire

in April 2020, but management and the union agreed to extend it until July 2021, locking in sub-inflationary 1.5 to 2 percent pay increase over 14 months.

By December 2021 the lengthy negotiations had failed and UWU members voted with a 98 percent majority to undertake protected industrial action in pursuit of 4 percent annual pay increases. The company has offered only 2.5 percent annual increases, below the current consumer price index (CPI) of over 3.5 percent.

Workers are also opposed to the dangerous pandemic working conditions, gruelling overtime and short staffing they have had to endure while processing the company's bumper 2021 rice harvest. Up to 15 percent of the SunRice workforce has been off sick with COVID-19 over the last two years.

#### **Brisbane meat processing workers strike for pay rise**

Over 180 workers from the Cannon Hill meat processing plant of Australian Country Choice (ACC), in Brisbane walked off the job for 24 hours on February 11 and 14 to demand a pay increase. Australian Meat Industry Employee' Union (AMIEU) members have not had a pay increase for four years. They are also fighting to maintain hard won conditions in a new enterprise deal.

#### **New South Wales ambulance paramedics impose work bans**

Australian Paramedics Association (APA) members in New South Wales imposed state-wide work bans on February 17 (midnight to midnight) over safety issues caused by fatigue and staffing shortfalls. Action revolved around fatigue management. The union has directed members to ban staff movements unless specifically called to a job, a ban on splitting of dual crews to cover roster gaps or other staff shortfalls.

The APA has demanded New South Wales Ambulance (NSWA) hire 1,500 additional paramedics, grant a "real" pay increase that reflects their professionalism and skills, investment in specialist paramedic programs and establishment of better referral networks state-wide.

Union members are also directed to put chalk signage on their ambulances that says "Paramedics and nurses deserve better" and, "Lowest paid Paramedics in Australia" among others.

#### **I-MED Radiology workers in Victoria strike**

Over 160 members of the Victorian Allied Health Professionals Association (VAHPA) from I-MED Radiology facilities in Victoria walked out for several hours on Monday over the company's proposed enterprise agreement. The union has restricted workers to low-level industrial action, including various work bans and short stoppages for several weeks.

The radiology workers want a wage increase, better conditions and paid pandemic leave. A VAHPA spokesperson said negotiations stalled when I-MED union members rejected the company's last enterprise offer. If accepted, pay and conditions would have gone backwards in real terms, the spokesperson added.

VAHPA says that I-MED increased its profits during the COVID-19

pandemic while staff were overworked, facilities understaffed and, at times, workers were not provided appropriate PPE (personal protective equipment).

### **Victorian public school cleaners protest over safety**

Public school cleaners in Victoria are campaigning over the level of cleaning in schools across the state after the government-funded “enhanced cleaning” measures were removed. School cleaners were previously provided extra working hours to ensure schools were kept COVID-safe. This was not renewed for the new school term which began in February.

The United Workers Union (UWU) are campaigning at student drop-off areas to explain to teachers, parents and students that without the additional hours needed for enhanced cleaning measures they cannot maintain hygiene standards and fear children are not safe at school.

The UWU said some cleaners claimed they were working unpaid overtime to carry out additional cleaning as their contract employers are unwilling to pay for the extra hours. The action is part of the union’s “Clean Start, Better Start” campaign to divert cleaners away from concrete industrial action and into pathetic appeals to the Andrew’s state Labor government. The UWU, like the education unions, did not oppose the unsafe reopening of schools, which has seen thousands of teachers and students infected in the first weeks of term.

### **New Zealand medical physicists strike over pay**

New Zealand medical physicists, who provide radiation treatment for cancer patients, struck for two days from Wednesday. It is the most significant industrial action they have taken. The 75 workers have been refusing to work outside ordinary hours since December.

The Association of Professional and Executive Employees union (APEX) has been in negotiations over a new contract since last August. There is no change to the employers’ October offer, an additional \$1,200 per year for those earning under \$100,000, and a lump sum payment of \$1,000. Salaries for fully qualified medical physicists range from \$97,000 to \$155,000.

The physicists are responsible for radiation equipment in cancer treatments and have at least a master’s degree in physics and three to four years of on-the-job training. Their action comes at a time of increased pressure on radiation and oncology treatments, with waiting lists of up to 16 weeks. The employers, who are six of the country’s 20 area health boards, have asked the Employment Relations Authority to facilitate negotiations.

Contract negotiations have also broken down for 10,000 allied health workers represented by the Public Service Association. The public health, scientific and technical workers are voting this week on unspecified strike action.

### **New Zealand quarry workers strike**

Winstone Aggregates’ Flat Top quarry workers voted to strike last week for 48 hours. The nine employees at the highly profitable Kaukapakapa

site, north of Auckland, are members of First Union and have never been on strike before.

A union spokesman said each worker generates around \$321,000 a year for Winstones, which is owned by Fletcher Building, around five times more than the average quarry worker’s wage. They work 52 hours a week and are not paid overtime rates except for Saturday work.

The union’s pay demands are significantly lower than the current 5.9 percent CPI inflation. One proposal was for a two-year pay deal with a 2.5 percent increase in the first year, 3 percent in the second, and time-and-a-half after 45 hours a week. The company said it would only pay overtime after 48 hours. First Union has called on Winstone management for a resolution through mediation.

Workers at Allied Concrete’s Avondale and Penrose plants in Auckland have also voted to reject their employer’s 5 percent pay offer and instructed the union to increase their original pay demand.

### **New Zealand casino workers strike for fourth time**

Sky City Casino hospitality workers in Hamilton are striking again this weekend in an ongoing struggle over pay. The workers have already walked out three times in recent weeks, for around five hours each time, rallying in front of the casino premises. The first walkout was on New Years’ Eve. Unite Union organiser Joe Carolan said they want a lift in the starting wage to \$23, an increase of about 14 percent. This is still only marginally above the current legal minimum wage of \$20.



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