

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

25 February 2022

Asia

India: Chandigarh power distribution workers strike against privatisation

Electricity Department workers in Chandigarh struck for three days on February 22 in protest against the Modi government's privatisation plans. It follows an India-wide protest by thousands of power distribution workers early this month and numerous demonstrations by the Union Territory Powermen's Union over the past year.

The state government invoked the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA), which prohibits industrial action and with strikers facing heavy fines. Electricity services were disrupted and the army were called in as strike breakers.

Workers and engineers have demanded withdrawal of the Electricity (Amendment) Bill 2021 which would allow private companies to enter the sector and compete with state-owned power companies.

Workers fear for their jobs and that there will be a concentration of private, profit-focused utility players in the lucrative urban-industrial segments while poor and rural consumers would be supplied by the rundown public sector.

Tamil Nadu state transport workers protest intolerable working conditions

Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) workers demonstrated outside various depots in Madurai on February 21 over harsh working conditions. The protests were organised by the TNSTC Workers Union, which is affiliated with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

The workers, who face unhygienic and unsafe working conditions, demanded uniforms, canteens, toilets, rest houses and improved sanitation facilities. They also opposed long working hours and demanded the right to take leave.

Punjab fire brigade workers protest sackings

Fire Brigade Employees Union members have been protesting in the Mansar district, Punjab, since January 24 to demand reinstatement of eight laid-off colleagues. According to a Nagar council official, the workers cannot be reinstated because of a code imposed during the state assembly

elections. A union delegate threatened that the protests would be intensified if the workers were not soon reinstated.

Delhi childcare workers' strike in third week

Thousands of Anganwadi (childcare) workers and helpers have been on strike in Delhi since January 31 to demand higher wages. Several thousand workers have been holding daily protests outside the chief minister's office. There are about 10,700 anganwadi centres and 20,000 anganwadi workers and helpers in the city.

The present monthly honorarium received by anganwadi workers and helpers in Delhi is 9,678 rupees (\$US128.60) and 4,839 rupees respectively, on top of minor incentive payments for selected programmes. The strike and protests are being organised by the Delhi State Anganwadi Workers and Helpers Union.

Sri Lankan pre-school educators strike in Mullaitive district

About 100 Kariduraipatu pre-school teachers from Mullaitive district in northeast Sri Lanka struck on Monday to demand a pay rise and permanent appointments. Strikers held a sit-in protest at the district secretariat.

A former Northern Provincial Council spokesman said that pre-school teachers in the Mullaitive zone are only paid 6,000 rupees (\$US30) per month. There are 118 qualified pre-school teachers serving in the zone.

He alleged that pre-school teachers working with local councils were only paid 2,500 rupees compared to pre-school teachers working under the Board of Investment zone, who are paid 6,000 rupees, and pre-school teachers working the Department of Civil Defense, who are paid 38,000 rupees (\$US187).

Pakistan: Quetta municipal workers demand unpaid wages

Hundreds of workers from the Water and Sanitation Agency, Quetta Metropolitan Corporation, and other local government bodies in Quetta, Balochistan province have been protesting since February 16. Workers are demanding immediate payment of unpaid salaries and pensions.

Local governments in Pakistan are using the imposition of austerity measures by the federal government to justify delaying the payment of wages to workers, sometimes for many months. The Balochistan Labor

Federation was forced to expand the demonstrations to include workers across the province after negotiations with the provincial government failed.

Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences workers oppose job downgrade

Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) workers in Islamabad held a two-and-a-half-hour strike on Tuesday to oppose the downgrading of their work status to “deputationists.” The move comes after the government-run institute was placed under a board of governors in 2020 following enactment of the Medical Teaching Institution (MTI) Bill.

Workers had warned that the government was taking initial steps towards eliminating their job security as government employees and preparing the institution’s eventual privatisation. In defining workers with decades of service at the institute as “deputationists,” the administration is demoting them to temporary positions.

The Grand Health Alliance umbrella union has played a key role in dissipating and containing workers’ opposition to any privatisation measure and the MTI bill. This includes keeping the struggles isolated from their counterparts in other provinces, especially from Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where prolonged strikes against privatisation crippled the healthcare system.

The unions allowed the passage of the MTI Bill and similar acts in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Workers, however, have expressed their readiness to continue to fight against privatisation and warned of further strikes.

Cambodia: NagaWorld casino workers continue struggle

Hundreds of NagaWorld casino workers are maintaining daily protests outside the casino complex in defiance of ongoing attacks by police and Phnom Penh municipal authorities. They have been protesting at the site since mid-December to demand the reinstatement of 365 terminated union members and an end to alleged discrimination against the union.

In early January police arrested 12 union leaders on “incitement to commit a felony” and detained 17 others for questioning. This week, municipal authorities used COVID-19 pandemic restrictions to force 64 protesters from the demonstration and transported them to the Phnom Penh Quarantine Centre.

In April, the Hong Kong-owned NagaWorld casino 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

Lockout at West Australian Newspaper print facility enters fourth

week

Over 100 print workers employed by the West Australian Newspaper (WAN) print facility, owned by Seven West Media (SWM), in Perth remain locked out since February 7 in a dispute over the company’s proposed enterprise agreement. The indefinite lockout was the company’s response to a one-hour strike by the workers.

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

On February 14, workers again unanimously rejected the company’s proposed agreement, despite management intimidation and the use of scab labour. An AMWU spokesperson complained that when they went back into bargaining the company “put an even harsher offer than what’s currently on the table.”

Despite having wages frozen for over two years, the AMWU is only seeking 2 percent sub-inflation annual wage increases, an effective pay cut. The workers have not had a pay rise for two and a half years, following a deal done between the AMWU and SWM to extend the current expired agreement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Australian Defence Force nurses vote on industrial action

Nurses working for Serco Australia under their Australian Defence Force (ADF) Health Services contract have rejected the company’s proposed enterprise agreement and are voting on whether to take industrial action. The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) said Serco’s annual pay increase offer of 1.45 percent for three years with no back-pay in real terms is a pay cut.

The nurses’ current agreement expired on October 31 and they have not had a pay increase since November 2020. Nurses are demanding Serco “substantially” improve its pay offer. The current official consumer prices index (CPI) annual inflation rate is 3.5 percent.

Global Food Equipment maintenance workers on strike

Some 46 members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) from Global Food Equipment (GFE) in Queensland, New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory and Victoria began a two-week strike on February 16. The maintenance technicians, stores and manufacturing workers are in dispute with GFE over its proposed enterprise agreement. The AMWU claims that GFE is trying to strip back wages and conditions.

GFE sells and maintains industrial food storage and cooking equipment. It is part of the Dunbrae Group trading as Global Facilities Maintenance in Australia. It has over 100 technicians at 12 Australian locations.

Industrial dispute at Boral Cement in New South Wales in seventh month

About 200 workers from Boral Cement production plants at Marulan, Berrima, and Maldon in southern New South Wales are maintaining overtime bans and short ad hoc stoppages begun in August to win a better enterprise agreement. The workers are covered by various unions: the Australian Workers Union, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Electrical Trades Union and the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union.

According to the unions, the company wants to impose a four-year agreement that includes a total pay rise of only 3.5 percent plus major cuts to long-established conditions. Boral wants to abolish rostered days off, remove clauses restricting contract labour and job security, reduce annual leave loading and remove a Dispute Settlements Procedure clause.

The current agreement expired on June 13 last year with the last pay increase in June 2020. The Combined Unions want a three-year agreement with 4 percent annual pay increases and retention of conditions.

Boral is a major supplier of concrete and other materials in the construction and the road building industry. The Boral group made \$640 million net profit in the 2020–21 financial year. The dispute has dragged on while the unions ensure that any industrial action does not disrupt Boral's lucrative business operations.

Union calls off planned SunRice strike

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 off a 48-hour strike planned for February 21 following last-minute talks with SunRice over its proposed enterprise agreement. Workers held a 48-hour strike on February 1 after rejecting the company's proposed agreement.

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.

Workers want 4 percent annual pay increases. The company has offered only 2.5 percent, well below the current consumer price index rise 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.

Prior to the union calling off the strike, a SunRice spokesperson said the company was willing hold further discussions with the UWU and was willing to offer a "competitive" pay increase and more opportunities for skill development. The company is demanding major changes in working arrangements.

The UWU claimed that SunRice put forward a new offer and said it would continue talks, which was used by the union to call off the strike. The UWU has not given any details of the new offer.

New Zealand pallet workers continue strikes

Workers at CHEP, New Zealand's main supplier of pallets, continued strike action this week and picketed the company's service centre in Penrose, Auckland.

The company attempted to serve an unenforceable trespass order to prevent use of the footpath by the pickets, which had to be retracted by police. Delivery drivers who have arrived at the service centre have quickly turned away after learning of the picket.

The workers struck earlier this month after drawn-out negotiations between the company and First Union made no progress. A union spokesman said: "They maintain concerns about being pressured into working overtime and weekends, and the company is refusing to negotiate on wages, despite massive increases in the cost of living."

The union has sought a so-called "living wage," set at an inadequate \$NZ22.75 an hour, for all workers and increases beyond that for people who have spent many years working for the company.

First Union has been negotiating with CHEP since June 2021 and unsuccessfully sought mediation. CHEP is an Australian multinational pallet supplier with a major stake in New Zealand's supply chain. UK workers have been rallying at CHEP UK's Trafford Park site after a three-month dispute and ongoing strike action.



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