

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

25 March 2022

Asia

India: Assam petrochemical production workers strike

About 2,300 contract workers from the state-owned Brahmaputra Crackers and Polymers Limited (BCPL) petrochemical plant stopped work on Wednesday to demand a pay rise. The strike began after two union delegates were barred from entering the plant in Dirbugarh.

The workers have been demanding a pay increase over several months, citing the rising cost of living and growing inflation. According to the union, there has not been a pay increase at the plant for ten years.

India: Chhattisgarh rural health coordinators walk out state-wide

Over 15,000 Rural Health Coordinators went on strike across Chhattisgarh state on Wednesday to demand a pay increase. Health Coordinator Employees Union members want their pay increased from 2,200 rupees (\$US28.82) to 2,800 rupees a month, a COVID-19 allowance for workers in infectious wards, a 5,000-rupees monthly incentive payment, and their job classification to be changed to rural health assistant officer.

Hailed as “COVID warriors” by the government when the coronavirus swept through the state, the workers are paid extremely low wages. The workers said they will remain on strike until their demands are met.

Delhi University teachers demand permanent appointments

Delhi University Teachers’ Association (DUTA) members demonstrated in New Delhi on Tuesday to demand all ad hoc and temporary teachers be made permanent. Nearly 4,500 ad hoc and temporary assistant professors are waiting for appointments into posts of professors across colleges and departments. Protesting teachers said they were deprived of all rightful benefits such as annual increments, promotion, medical benefits and leave.

Teachers at ad hoc schools in Meghalaya state fight for salary rise

Federation of All Schools Teachers of Meghalaya (FASTOM) members marched from Raj Bhawan to Malki in Shillong on Tuesday to protest the state government’s long delays in upgrading all ad hoc schools to deficit-grant.

The current monthly salary of a lower primary school teacher is only 12,000 rupees (\$US157) and 16,000 rupees, 20,000 rupees and 24,000 rupees respectively for upper primary, secondary and higher secondary school teachers. There is no additional allowance for teachers in each of these categories.

A FASTOM spokesperson said teachers decided to hold four-hour daily protests outside the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBoSE). The teachers have threatened a statewide protest in April if their demands are not granted.

Arunachal Pradesh Road construction workers strike over outstanding wages

Tamchi Kusuk Enterprise (TKE) road construction workers demonstrated in Demwe and began a hunger protest at the TKE highway camp on March 19 to demand overdue wages. The All Arunachal Pradesh Workers Union members allege that TKE and its sub-contractor, Ankur Enterprise (AE), have not paid wages for the last nine months even though the company was paid by the National Highways and Infrastructure Development agency.

Workers have accused TKE and AE of stalling by playing blame-games with each other for the outstanding wages. They also complained that AE supervisors had assaulted workers when they asked about the pending payments. The union called off the strike in the evening after receiving assurances from TKE and AE that overdue wages would be paid.

Karnataka pre-university guest lecturers protest against sackings

Over 2,000 pre-university guest lecturers whose jobs were axed have been protesting at Freedom Park in Bengaluru since February 14 to demand reinstatement. They began a relay hunger protest on March 18.

Prior to their dismissal, there were 12,900 low paid guest lecturers across the state with an eight-hour workload. The government agreed to increase their pay, but also increased their workloads and terminated 2,264 lecturers.

Sacked Tamil Nadu doctors hold online protest to demand reinstatement

Doctors from mini clinics across Tamil Nadu whose service will end on March 31 initiated an online protest on March 18 demanding job security and permanency. They have not been paid for the past three months.

The doctors used social media platforms to promote their protest,

sharing videos and others posts of their work during the COVID crisis. One online post said, “We were on duty throughout the Covid waves, donning various roles in Covid ICUs, Covid care centres, fever wards, fever camps, swab collection camps, Covid vaccination, and Makkalai Thedi Maruthuvam.”

A mini-clinic doctor told the media that of the 1,800 doctors recruited to the clinics, 150 cleared the Medical Recruitment Board (MRB) exam in 2018 and were waiting for counselling. The government justified the sackings by claiming that there were “almost” no COVID-19 cases in many hospitals and the demand for staff had reduced.

Mysuru Music University workers in Karnataka maintain strike

Mysuru Music University workers have been on strike since February 21 over the retrenchment of 21 non-teaching staff. The sacked workers had been protesting to demand the government pay one year’s outstanding wages and improve working conditions.

Zomato food delivery workers in Chennai protest exploitation

Zomato food delivery workers in Chennai, Tamil Nadu stopped work and held a protest on March 20 over long and increasing working hours, low wages and other forms of exploitation. The workers defied a police order banning the protest. Strikers said Zoom denied them the right to retirement benefits, a provident fund and Employment State Insurance by calling them delivery partners.

Bangladeshi bidi workers demonstrate in Kushtia

About 1,000 bidi (hand-rolled cigarette) workers protested at the Kushtia Public Library in south-western Bangladesh on Sunday over several demands. These included protecting the bidi industry from foreign multinational tobacco companies, tariff cuts on bidis in the next 2022-23 budget, elimination of the 10 percent income tax on bidi and enactment of a bidi worker protection law.

The bidi industry is an ancient labour-intensive industry that employs millions of extremely poor workers.

The Kushtia Bidi Sramik Sangram Parishad, which organises the bidi workers, handed a memorandum of demands to the chairman of the National Board of Revenue through the Kushtia Chamber of Commerce.

Bidi workers protested over these issues in January 2021 and September, August and June in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the workers.

Sri Lankan government health workers continue protests

Government health professional workers demonstrated at their respective hospitals in the Southern Province on Tuesday and Wednesday over the government’s refusal to resolve their long pending demands. Protesters alleged that the government has not kept an agreement to

establish a committee to resolve salary anomalies, failed to issue the 5 to 7 promotion system circular which was promised by the cabinet, and failed to consider their grievances.

The protests followed several nationwide strikes by around 60,000 health professionals held in February and March. The executive council of the Health Professional Federation, which consists of 18 health unions, has threatened to strike again if the government continued to ignore their demands.

Sri Lankan state management services workers protest

State management services workers held a protest march in Kurunegala on Wednesday over salary anomalies and other demands. The state management services officer’s joint trade union alliance called the protest, which included workers from Kurunegala and Puttalam districts. As well as demanding resolution of salary anomalies, the alliance called for promotional examinations.

Sri Lankan plantation workers and peasants protest

Hundreds of plantation workers, farmers and peasants from Nuwaraeliya, 172 km from Colombo, protested against the escalating cost of living and the scarcity of essential items on Wednesday. They gathered at Ragala Mahakudgala and marched to Brookside junction chanting slogans against the Rajapakse government and demanding reductions in the price of rice, fertilizer and bread.

Taiwan railway workers oppose corporatisation

More than 1,000 Taiwan Railways Administration (TRA) workers marched from Taipei Railway Station to the Legislative Yuan on Wednesday to oppose Ministry of Transportation and Communications’ plan to corporatise the agency. The Taiwan Railway Labor Union (TRLU) accused the government of drafting a statute establishing the Taiwan Railway Corporation (TRC) before coming to an agreement with the unions.

TRLU claimed the draft statute is flawed and fails to address safety issues and does not guarantee that the civil servants salary adjustment procedures would remain after the formation of the corporation. Workers also fear that they will be forced to vacate TRA dormitories when the corporation is established and not receive any improvement in salary or benefits.

A TRLU spokesman said the unions disagree on 12 articles in the statute and that workers do not believe the ministry’s promises of better salaries and benefits. Once the TRC is established, each employee would have five years to consider whether to continue being a civil servant or become a company employee.

Myanmar fast food delivery riders strike

Delivery riders from Food Panda stopped work in some cities in Myanmar on March 16 after delivery fees were cut by more than a half. Riders complained that fees were cut from between 600 and 700 kyats (\$US0.39) to just 200 and 300 kyats.

They said repeated requests for Food Panda to explain the cuts were ignored. However, as strike action spread Food Panda responded claiming that the fee cuts “Were caused by a computer software problem”.

Young workers desperate to get a job in the impoverished country have to pay 25,000 kyats to Food Panda to be recruited, then 10,000 kyats are extracted from their pay each week until a total of 85,000 kyats (\$US47.77) is reached. Riders complained that at times they do not earn enough to cover the 10,000-kyat deduction.

Australia

Northern Territory public sector workers impose bans

Over 400 members of the United Workers Union (UWU) from three public sector employers in the Northern Territory (NT) began protected industrial action last week as part of their fight for better pay and conditions.

About 200 workers from the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service, Danila Dilba in Darwin, have not had pay rise in three years. They implemented low-level work bans on March 17, which included not wearing their uniforms, placing union material in the workplace, stopping work to talk to the media, and other actions.

Over 150 paramedics, patient transport officers and communications officers from St John Ambulance are refusing to work outside of their regular shifts and bans on some paperwork. Paramedics are demanding an end to pay freezes and want back-pay from 2019 in a new enterprise agreement. Negotiations are currently at a stalemate with the government contractor. The NT Labor government has refused to intervene.

Some 55 UWU members from the NT Fire and Rescue Service have imposed similar work bans in opposition to the territory government’s demand for a four-year wage freeze on public sector workers. Australia’s consumer prices index (CPI) increase for 2021 was 3.5 percent. It is expected to rise above 4 percent in 2022.

Lockout at West Australian Newspaper enters seventh week

Over 100 print workers employed by the West Australian Newspaper print facility, owned by Seven West Media (SWM), in Perth have been 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.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members are fighting to protect working conditions and for a pay increase. SWM’s proposed deal, which workers have rejected three times, would strip away current redundancy entitlements and attack wages and conditions.

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 increase 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.

Management is attempting to maintain production using scab labour. On

March 17, the union organised a protest outside state parliament in Perth, appealing to state politicians to intervene in the dispute.

South Australian nurses to vote on industrial action

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation members in South Australia are to vote on what sort of industrial action they will take in their enterprise dispute with the Adelaide Community Healthcare Alliance (ACHA). The agreement covers workers at the Ashford Hospital, Flinders Private Hospital and the Memorial Hospital.

The current EA expired in July 2021 and negotiations began in May that year. After seven rounds of talks the ACHA is refusing all ANMF staffing/workload claims.

The ANMF has offered considerable concessions to the ACHA in an attempt to avoid any industrial action. It claimed this allowed the federation to focus on priority claims, including a safe-staffing clause, workload management clause, increased annual leave for nurses rostered on call, increased handover time, a lead apron allowance, increased personal and parental leave and a “decent” wage increase.

After the ANMF applied to the Fair Work Commission for permission to hold a protected action ballot the ACHA increased its pay offer. The improved offer, which was not accepted, gave 1.75 percent pay increases for two years (up from 1.5 percent) and 2.25 percent for the following year (up from 2 percent). Still well below current cost of living increases.



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