

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

15 April 2022

Asia

Bangladesh Railway running staff strike over allowances

Bangladesh Railway running staff, which includes loco-masters, assistant loco-masters, guards and ticket-checkers, called a snap eight-hour strike on Wednesday over wages and a cut in benefits. All rail traffic came to a halt leaving passengers stranded at rail stations.

The workers have been campaigning for over five months to demand restoration of mileage and pension allowances management cancelled in November. The running staff were paid a mileage allowance, based on their basic salary, if they worked more than eight hours. They were also paid a 75 percent allowance on top of their basic pension.

The strike was sparked after the government refused a request from Bangladesh Rail to restore the allowances. The running staff returned to work after the government agreed to withdraw the cancellation order.

Bangladeshi garment workers demand wages and festival allowance

Garment workers from various factories in and around Dhaka rallied at the National Press Club in Dhaka on April 8 to demand wages and Eid festival allowances. Organised by the Garment Workers Trade Union Centre (GWTUC), the workers held a protest march along the Topkhana Road.

The garment workers, who are mainly from remote villages, find it difficult to travel back to their home villages for the religious holiday without these payments. Their minimum basic wage is a meagre 8,000 taka (\$US93) per month. Prior to the latest demonstration, the GWTUC has been holding gate meetings, rallies and processions at garment factory areas across the country.

India: Bus building workers in third week of strike in Karnataka

Wage protests by Tata Marcopolo bus building factory workers in Dharward, Karnataka state, entered their third week with various demands including wage revision. The 1,200 workers at the plant claim they have not had a pay increase for two years.

Many workers have been at the factory for over 14 years. Their average wages range between 18,000 rupees (\$US236.5) and 23,000 rupees per month. They said that their wages were not being revised even though the salaries of all white-collar employees were revised regularly.

They also demanded reinstatement of eight dismissed workers as per a court order, the pay of incentives, health insurance for parents of employees and an upgrade of the canteen.

Jammu and Kashmir Road Transport Corporation workers protest with multiple demands

Jammu and Kashmir Road Transport Corporation (JKRTC) workers staged a territory-wide protest on April 9 over long outstanding demands. These include release of four months outstanding wages, job permanency for employees who have completed eight years' service and the release of a pending 57 percent dearness allowance. They also want confirmation of Departmental Promotion Committee 2021 orders and formal fixation of HSD/Fuel scale for BS6 trucks as per a committee survey report.

The J&K Road Transport Corporation Workers Union members have said that they will intensify the protest across the territories of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh if the authorities continue ignoring their demands.

Sacked Haryana contract health workers demand reinstatement

Sacked contract health workers recruited by the Haryana state government during the COVID-19 pandemic held a march and demonstrated at the National Health Mission office in Panchkula on April 7 to demand reinstatement. The protest, which was joined by workers from across the state was called Sarv Karamchhari Sangh.

Protesters said that 2,212 contracted health workers hired during the pandemic emergency were terminated on March 31. The sacked staff are demonstrating in different districts and submitting their demand to various state politicians.

Tamil Nadu social health workers demand pay rise

Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) from across Tamil Nadu gathered in the state's capital Chennai on April 8 and held a demonstration with various demands. These were permanency of service and a monthly consolidated pay of 18,000-rupees (\$US236.5). They also demanded the payment of COVID-19 assistance of 15,000 rupees and a pending incentive.

The Tamil Nadu ASHA Workers Association, which covers nearly 2,700 ASHA workers, organised the protest.

Rajasthan municipal workers in Jaipur on strike

Clerical staff, sanitation workers and fire department staff from the Jaipur Municipal Corporation (JMC) Heritage, in Rajasthan state went on strike on April 7 over non-payment of salaries. Due to non-clearance of bills for the last six months, civic contractors of the corporation are already on an indefinite strike.

JMC management claimed it was not possible to pay any wages to the employees as they are short on finances and are waiting for assistance from the Rajasthan government.

National Child Labour Project teachers in Punjab demand unpaid salaries

Teachers employed in the National Child Labour Project (NCLP) rallied outside the deputy commissioner's office in Jalandhar on April 6 and staged a *dharna* (sit-down protest) on the road blocking traffic from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Teachers demanded pending salaries and accused the Punjab government of ignoring their grievances. Protesters said they had not been paid for the past 18 months.

The NCLP was established by the government to provide education to the children of labourers. It focuses on both education and rehabilitation of child workers or the adolescents engaged in meagre jobs. There are around 1,350 students in 27 evening schools, each with 50 students.

Construction materials manufacturing workers in Puducherry strike

Workers at the Larsen and Toubro (L&T) construction materials manufacturing plants in Puducherry have been on indefinite strike since March 15 and have occupied the company's four plants. The plants employ 150 permanent workers and over 1,000 non-permanent workers who have never been given a contract despite ongoing employment for between 5 and 25 years.

The workers' long outstanding demands include equal pay for equal work, double pay for overtime, proper deduction of Employee State Insurance and Provident Fund contributions, job permanency for those who have completed more than two years of service and an end to 12-hour shifts.

The company has appealed to the High Court to order the eviction of the striking workers from inside the plants.

Australia

Queensland: PN Coal threatens to lockout train drivers

Coal rail transport company Pacific National Coal (PN Coal) in Queensland has threatened to lockout over 180 members of the Rail Tram

and Bus Union (RTBU) on April 19 in response to a planned one-hour stoppage on that date. Some 97 percent of members voted to impose work bans on March 4 after rejecting the company's proposed enterprise agreement.

Negotiations for a new agreement have been ongoing for over seven months. The RTBU want PN Coal to lift wages and conditions, bring its workers into line with other rail freight operators. As well as a pay increase, workers are also calling for family friendly rosters and other demands.

Victoria: Brimbank City Council workers walk out

Australian Services Union (ASU) members at Brimbank City Council, in metropolitan Melbourne, walked off the job for two hours on Wednesday morning in opposition to the council's low pay increase enterprise agreement. The council has offered annual increases in the three-year agreement of just 1.75, 1.5 and 1.5 percent.

This is a pay cut when compared to the official consumer prices inflation rate of 3.5 percent for 2021, which is forecast to rise over 4 percent in 2022. Council management has refused to improve its offer and closed off negotiation until the end of the month.

New South Wales ambulance paramedics take industrial action

Ambulance Division of the Health Services Union (ADHSU) members are maintaining state-wide work bans imposed on April 7 in their campaign for a 5.5 percent pay increase this year.

The limited work bans are aimed at causing administrative inconvenience to New South Wales Ambulance with minimum effect for the public. Some of the bans not completing certain paperwork, restricting staff movements to fill vacant shifts and no patient transfers between hospitals.

The Liberal state government, through the Industrial Relations Commission, imposed a wage freeze on state public sector employees in October 2020, claiming it was necessary due to COVID-19 "disruption" to the economy. Pay increases due in 2020–21 were limited to 0.3 percent. The ADHSU claims that a 5.5 percent wage increase, or higher, is needed to make up for the pay cut and to bring New South Wales paramedics' pay in line with colleagues in other states.

Unions covering PHI helicopter engineers call off planned strike in Western Australia

Two weeks of industrial action planned for April 15 by engineers from Petroleum Helicopters International (PHI) in Western Australia was called off at the last minute by the Offshore Alliance after the company agreed to resume negotiations.

The Offshore Alliance (OA), the enterprise bargaining unit that represents 15 members of the Australia Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA) claimed that PHI indicated it was willing to revise its proposed enterprise agreement.

PHI transfers workers between offshore LNG platforms and onshore facilities at Broome in northern Western Australia. The engineers want

protection of jobs against outsourcing to low-wage labour hire contractors, an end to fixed-term employment contracts and for all engineers to be employed on a permanent basis paid annual leave and the locking in of even-time rosters.

The OA is made up of the Australian Workers Union and the Maritime Union of Australia. It claimed that PHI wanted an agreement that would give the company the right to sack highly skilled helicopter engineers at the end of their fixed term contracts and replace them with low wage labour hire contractors.

Waste disposal workers in Victoria strike

About 20 Transport Workers Union (TWU) members at the Tullamarine depot of the Victorian waste disposal company Cleanaway Operations have begun strike action over the company's proposed enterprise agreement.

Cleanaway wants to end the probationary period limit for new workers and make it indefinite and to not pay wages during training. The TWU has sought to minimise the effect of industrial action by limiting it to a two-hour stoppage on Thursday and a two-hour stoppage on Tuesday next week. Overtime bans have been imposed.

New Zealand health workers vote on strike action

About 10,000 New Zealand allied health workers have begun voting for a proposed strike on May 16, following lengthy pay negotiations. The strike would be accompanied by two weeks of work-to-rule, from May 9, which includes working only contracted hours and taking all entitled breaks.

The Public Service Association (PSA) announced the action at an on-line meeting this week involving more than 3,000 union members from allied healthcare, public health, scientific and technical district health board.

Many workers are paid minimum wages and work second jobs. They are forced to do a lot of overtime and evenings, on which the District Health Boards (DHBs) rely. Many workers have complained about the coffee vouchers and snacks DHBs gave them as a "thank you" for their hard work during Omicron.

The DHBs invited the union to return to pay talks this week but a PSA spokesperson said there was little hope this would move things forward after 18 months of failed negotiations.

The PSA has been petitioning for Health Minister Andrew Little to provide DHB negotiators with a "wide enough mandate" to make an offer that "ensures fair pay, addresses low wages and guarantees safe staffing." The petition is nearing 17,000 signatures.

A previous strike in March was called off after DHBs took the union to the Employment Court and the strike was ruled illegal, purportedly because it related to a separate pay equity claim. The PSA has removed any reference to pay equity from its current claim in an effort to avoid a second injunction.



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