

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

5 August 2022

The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

India: MRF tyre factory contract workers strike in Kerala

Contract workers from the MRF tyre manufacturing plant in Kottayam, Kerala, have been on strike since July 28 to demand a wage increase. The workers are currently paid 20,000-rupees (\$US252.5) as their monthly salary. They are demanding a salary increase of 2,000 rupees and medical insurance.

There are around 1,900 workers at the plant, including 400 contract workers and 200 casual workers. They produce around 2,600 tyres a day.

BSNL telecommunication workers protest privatisation of mobile towers

As part of a nationwide protest, workers from the state-owned telecommunications provider Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) demonstrated in Aurangabad, Maharashtra on July 27 opposing the Modi government's plan to sell some of BSNL's assets.

A union spokesman said workers were vehemently opposed to the sale of almost 15,000 mobile towers of BSNL to private firms under the national monetisation pipeline. The government estimates that it will garner 400,000 million rupees (\$US5.04 billion) through the sale of the towers and optic fibre network.

The AUAB, an umbrella association of BSNL unions in Aurangabad, did not call for industrial action and instead restricted the workers' protest to the wearing of black badges while remaining at working.

Medical science institute workers strike in Hyderabad

Around 350 workers from the Nizam's Institute of Medical and Science (NIMS) in Hyderabad walked out for one and a half hours on Monday over salary and entitlement issues. Striking workers included those at entry counters, paramedical and electrical and gas plant operators.

Workers demanded the immediate implementation of the agreement made in the first week of July with the state government. The agreement included implementation of a Variable Dearness Allowance (VDA), free medical treatment for the families of female employees, giving appropriate salaries to technical workers and granting casual leave.

Punjab: Contract workers in Tarn Taran demand permanency

Contract sanitation workers from the Tarn Taran municipal council in Punjab state began an indefinite strike on July 26 to demand the release of salaries and for permanent jobs. Workers held a dharna (sit-down protest) at the council complex with brooms in their hands.

Strikers said they are owed five months' salaries and that deductions for the Employee Provident Fund had not been deposited in their accounts. They demanded the immediate release of salaries, permanent jobs and abolition of the contract system.

On the same day, contract workers from the Punjab Roadways and PEPSU Road Transport Corporation (PRTC) held a gate rally in front of the roadways workshop in Tarn Taran. They demanded permanency of service with benefits.

Rural employment guarantee workers protest in New Delhi

Over 500 workers employed under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) travelled from 15 states to protest in New Delhi's Jantar Mantar on Wednesday against low pay, delayed wages and the lack of jobs. The workers are paid only 210 rupees (\$US2.65) a day. They want the number of working days increased.

Other demands were for universalisation of the Public Distribution System (PDS) and that the food welfare system Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana be continued until the COVID-19 pandemic is over. Workers also complained about no payments or compensation for workers injured or killed on the job and demanded the end of the app-based attendance monitor National Mobile Monitoring System.

Water utility daily wage workers in Jammu maintain strike

Daily wage workers from the Jammu division of the Jal Shakti Department (water conservation) have been on strike for over 43 days. They are demanding job permanency and unpaid wages. Water supplies have been disrupted in Jammu city, Kathua, Samba, Udhampur, Rajouri, Reasi, Doda and other major towns and rural areas.

Over 80 workers were arrested on Wednesday after police tried to break up their protest, which spilled onto the road outside the Public Health Engineering (PHE) office complex in Jammu.

The workers are organised by the PHE Employees United Front which said some daily-wage workers have served at the department for three decades but are only paid a meagre 255 rupees (\$US3.2) per day.

Australia

Svitzer tugboat workers strike at ten Australian ports

Tugboat workers from three different unions walked off the job on Friday morning at ten ports across Australia over their employer, Svitzer and Danish-owned parent company Maersk, which is attempting to terminate their enterprise agreement (EA). Workers at Cairns, Newcastle, Sydney, Port Kembla, Adelaide, Fremantle, Geraldton and Albany ports stopped work for four hours from 9 a.m., while their colleagues in Melbourne and Brisbane struck for 24 hours.

Svitzer and the three unions, the Maritime Union of Australia, Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers and the Australian Maritime Officers Union, have had 50 negotiation meetings for a new EA since the existing one expired in 2019. The unions said they had dropped all their demands in negotiations to “concentrate” on maintaining existing conditions, yet both sides remain at loggerheads. Svitzer claims the existing EA contains provisions that are “restrictive and inhibit productivity” and places it at a “competitive disadvantage.”

Svitzer’s wage increase “offer” is just 1.5 percent this year, far below the official Consumer Price Index (CPI) increase of 6.1 percent over the past 12 months. Moreover, workers’ wages have been frozen since 2019 when the old agreement expired.

The strike came ahead of Monday’s Fair Work Commission hearing of Svitzer’s case for terminating the existing EA, which would see 540 workers forced onto the industry minimum award-level pay rates and result in salary cuts of up to 50 per cent with the loss of current hard-fought-for conditions.

Nurses at a major Sydney hospital protest understaffing and workload

Intensive care unit (ICU) nurses from the Hornsby Ku-ring-gai Hospital in Sydney’s Upper North Shore demonstrated outside the hospital following their night shifts on Monday morning. Nurses were protesting unsafe staffing levels and unbearable workload. They held placards saying “Ratios = Patient Safety” and “Nurses are Exhausted.”

The walkout was sparked by an announcement from the state Liberal government that it was considering a plan to substitute staff trained in critical care with less experienced assistant nurses in the hospital’s ICU. Nurses claimed the plan will put patients and staff at risk.

A spokesperson from the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) said nurses were under incredible pressure, mentally and emotionally, because of the workload. She said that assistants in nursing were not adequately trained to care for seriously unwell and ventilated patients in Hornsby’s intensive care.

The protest at Hornsby comes after nurses from Westmead and Blacktown Hospitals held demonstrations at the end of their shifts in the morning on July 18, protesting chronic understaffing and overcrowding amid a growing surge of COVID-19 infections. Nurses were calling for mandatory nurse-to-patient ratios of 1:3 in emergency departments and 1:4 on general wards, as well as an overall increase in staff numbers.

Garbage workers in Melbourne strike over low wages

About 100 workers employed by waste management contractor Citywide to pick up garbage in the City of Melbourne implemented work bans on July 28 in opposition to the company’s proposed enterprise agreement. Under the bans by members of the Municipal and Utilities Workers Union (MUWU) rubbish bins will go uncollected, curb collections will be halted, and asphalt pick-ups paused in four key streets in Melbourne’s central business district.

Workers said they plan to continue the action indefinitely if Citywide sticks with its current offer.

A union spokesperson said the action is in response to Citywide’s refusal to negotiate a new agreement, opting instead to rollover the existing agreement until June 30, 2023 with a below inflation pay rise of only 3 percent. Citywide has offered a one-off payment of \$350. The union is demanding a weekly pay increase of \$50 plus another \$20 safeguard payment against any further pandemic-linked disruptions.

Citywide is a private company providing waste management services to the city of Melbourne and other Victorian local government authorities.

The MUWU is one of two competing union bureaucracies representing different factions in the Victorian Labour government fighting for dominance in the Victorian union movement including over control of Melbourne’s municipal waste management workers. The other is the Australian Services Union (ASU) which is also a party in the negotiations with Citywide. In contrast, the ASU is supporting Citywide’s proposal.

Coal miners in New South Wales locked out for six weeks

A group of about ten workers from the Peabody coal handling preparation plant at the Metropolitan Colliery in Helensburgh, south of Sydney, have been locked out for six weeks in a dispute for a new enterprise agreement. The lockout was the company’s response to a 90-minute strike by Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) members.

The workers want job security clauses in a new agreement along with a pay increase. Peabody has refused to continue negotiations.

Tasmanian hospital nurses hold another walkout

More than 150 nurses, midwives and assistants in nursing held a 15-minute walkout at the Launceston General Hospital in northern Tasmania on Wednesday. They gathered in front of the hospital holding placards saying “Retain, Recruit, Recognise” and “Excessive Overtime and Double Shifts Need to Stop”.

The action was part of an ongoing campaign by members of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation-Tasmania (ANMF) protesting unsafe staffing levels, low pay and unsustainable workloads.

Last week, ANMF members at the Royal Hobart Hospital and the Hobart Repatriation Hospital walked out for 15 minutes and were joined by supporters in front of the hospitals protesting the critical staffing issue.

The union is limiting industrial action to 15 minute stoppages and has convinced nurses that by making individual appeals in letters to the Liberal state government explaining their dire situation that they can bring about change. The government said it will meet with the nurses but only if they call off industrial action.

Victorian library workers impose work bans

Eighty workers at Eastern Regional Libraries Corporation (ERL), which provides library services to the cities of Knox, Maroondah and the Shire of Yarra Ranges in Victoria, began industrial action on Thursday in their dispute for a new enterprise agreement. Workers, near unanimously, voted on June 25 to take industrial action after rejecting ERL's proposed pay offer.

Although workers approved work stoppages up to 24 hours, the Australian Services Union is restricting action to ineffective work bans that centre on making appeals to the public to support their campaign for better wages and conditions. Workers are pinning union notices on library notice boards and wearing union badges among other activities.

The ASU has already partially stitched up a sell-out deal with ERL. While demanding a sub inflationary 2 percent wage rise, it has already agreed to accept ERL's 30 percent reduction in minimum staffing levels to open library facilities and job reclassifications that could put some workers on a lower pay rate.



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