

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

29 December 2023

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

Philippines: Jeepney drivers hold two-week national strike against government's costly modernisation dictates

More than 200,000 jeepney (minibus) drivers covered by the PISTON and Manibela unions held a two-week strike across the Philippines. The walkout was due to end on December 29. Drivers and owners of traditional jeepneys and other small public utility vehicles (PUVs) are opposing the government's PUV modernisation program. The Marcos government claims the modernisation is needed to reduce the number of old polluting vehicles in high-density cities.

Drivers and operators are being forced to consolidate into corporations and cooperatives of no less than 15 vehicles by December 31. Drivers complained that they are being forced to borrow large amounts to pay for the modern vehicles that each cost at least 2 million pesos (\$US36,300). One driver told the media that on average he only brings home \$US3.60 per day after expenses, which is not nearly enough to save for a new minibus.

The National Union of Peoples Lawyers estimated that the implementation of the PUV Modernization Program (PUVMP) could lead to the revocation of franchises for nearly 64,000 jeepneys nationwide.

PISTON has demanded scrapping of the franchise consolidation requirement and to allow those who previously complied to withdraw their individual franchises; restoration of the five-year franchises for all PUVs and all modified PUV routes; immediate cash aid and reasonable financial support for all affected PUV drivers and small operators.

President Marcos has said that there will be extensions for the franchise consolidation, pompously adding that the government "cannot let the minority cause further delays."

Pakistan: National Foods workers in Karachi occupy factory

About 300 workers at the Karachi plant of National Foods began a sit-in protest on December 23 over numerous demands. Management have turned off electricity and water to force an end to the occupation and there is a media blackout of the strike. Workers want fair wages, safe working conditions and an end to job threats from management.

National Foods has a workforce of over 800 at several locations in Karachi. The giant multinational produces spices, jams, jellies, sauces, fruit drinks and other food items, exporting to the US, Canada, Middle East and Asia, Europe/United Kingdom and Africa. Its 2023 revenue was \$US100 million.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Lady Health Workers demand outstanding salaries

Lady Health Workers (LHWs) in Charsadda, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan, demonstrated outside the district health office on Tuesday to demand payment of six months' salaries. Workers said that over 300 LHWs in Charsadda, who are employed under the integrated health project, have been impacted by the late salary payments.

LHWs have threatened to boycott future vaccination drives and polio campaigns if their salaries were not paid immediately. They have also said they would extend their protest to other districts if the government failed to meet their demands.

Pakistan: Punjab government hospital doctors in Rawalpindi boycott outpatient department

Young Doctors Association (YDA) members at Benazir Bhutto Hospital in Rawalpindi boycotted the outpatient department (OPD) on December 23 to protest the termination of a graduate trainee doctor who allegedly spoke out about the shortage of oxygen at the hospital. The OPD was closed for four hours.

A YDA spokesperson said that young doctors were determined to save the career of the trainee doctor and planned to hold a "black ribbon" day of protest involving doctors across the province.

India: Shimla Municipal Corporation workers demand permanent jobs

Shimla Municipal Corporation workers in Himachal Pradesh demonstrated on December 21 outside the offices of the Municipality and Deputy Collector over 32 demands.

Shimla Environment, Heritage Conservation and Beautification (SEHB) society members demanded permanent jobs and on-time payment of a 26,000-rupee (\$US312) monthly wage in line with 7th Pay Commission recommendations. They also called for overtime payments and 39 days' vacation per year.

Workers said that the corporation failed to respond to their demands and that they are now preparing strike action. The latest protest was organised by the Centre for Indian Trade Unions.

Punjab school midday meal and cleaning workers in Sangrur demand pay rise

School midday meal and cleaning (Safai) workers in Sangrur, Punjab state, India, demonstrated near the chief minister's office on Tuesday demanding their monthly wages be increased from 3,000 rupees (\$US36) to 8,000 rupees. Workers declared during a meeting with the education minister that they would intensify their protest to include the entire staff if their demands are not met by January 11. The workers later "paused" their protest, however, after authorities agreed to hold a meeting on January 11.

Bangalore crematorium workers protest non-payment of wages

Crematorium workers from the Bangalore Municipal Corporation entered the corporation's headquarters on Tuesday to protest the non-payment of wages and other issues. They shouted slogans against the municipal commissioner and threatened to shut down the Bangalore crematorium and burial grounds if demands were not met.

The workers said there were 148 crematoriums in Bangalore where workers had not been paid. They are demanding permanent jobs and that their wages be paid on time.

State-wide strike by Andhra Pradesh childcare workers in third week

Anganwadi (childcare) workers across Andhra Pradesh have been on strike since December 11 to demand a pay rise. They are holding sit-down protests at Dharna Chowk in Vijayawada and other parts of Andhra Pradesh. On Thursday they surrounded a ruling party MLA house in Vijayawada demanding that the state government follow Supreme Court directives that all state governments pay gratuity and retirement benefits to anganwadi workers.

The Anganwadi Workers and Helpers Union want wages increased to 26,000 rupees (\$US312) a month, retirement age raised to 62 and one million rupees group insurance.

Sri Lankan sugar mill workers protest job cuts in Sevanagala

Hundreds of former full-time employees but now contract workers at the state-owned Sevanagala sugar factory in southern Sri Lanka demonstrated on Wednesday to protest being terminated. Workers allege that they are owed wages for the last month and a half and are demanding reinstatement.

In 2019, the government indicated that it planned to hand over several mills in the district to the private sector under its Revival of Underperforming Enterprises or Underutilized Assets Act. The mills would continue to operate under government supervision. The Sri Lankan media reported in November that the government is now debating full privatisation of the mill.

Royal Flying Doctor Service nurses reject latest pay offer

Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) nurses in Queensland are maintaining low-level industrial action after rejecting the employer's

latest pay offer on December 22. After eight months of failed negotiations for a new enterprise agreement, 70 nurses covered by the Queensland Nurses and Midwives' Union (QNMU) decided in November to take industrial action for higher pay. The campaign includes wearing reflective vests with the slogan "Fair Go for RFDS Nurses" and with bans on some paperwork.

The nurses have twice rejected substandard pay rises offers from RFDS management. The latest offer included a sub-inflation wage increase of 0.7 percent for 2024, 1 percent for 2025, and 1 percent for 2026.

Unlike the previous offer, the latest one does not include backpay or any increase for 2023. The union says that RFDS members' pay has been reduced in real terms by 13.1 percent over the life of their current agreement, with the consumer price index rising by 19.2 percent since July 2020 and nurses' pay only increasing by 6.1 percent.

Nurses want to be paid for all hours rostered, worked and spent on call, as well as better work/life balance. Vastly increased work demands on RFDS nurses in Queensland are causing staff fatigue and burnout. Management have agreed to reduce nurses' shifts by one per month if they accept a low pay increase.

RFDS primary health care nurses are flown into remote areas to staff Queensland Health clinics and provide health care for entire communities. Approximately 70 percent of RFDS retrievals are nurse-only flights. Nurses complained that they are paid less than their colleagues employed in Queensland Health.

Western Sydney garbage truck drivers strike for better pay

Garbage collection truck drivers employed by the Blacktown City Council, 30km west of Sydney, walked off the job for 48 hours on Monday in their fight for better pay and conditions. The strike was in defiance of a New South Wales Industrial Relation Commission directive that there not be any strike action. At least 300,000 residents in 24 suburbs were affected.

The Blacktown City Council and the union covering the workers have not made public the issues involved in the dispute.



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