

# Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

26 January 2024

## India: NLC contract workers in Tamil Nadu demand permanent jobs and higher pay

Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) workers held a black-flag protest at the company's head office yesterday. The company employs over 10,000 contract and casual workers in the Cuddalore district.

The workers have been protesting for job permanency, as ordered by the supreme courts, for over two decades. Under current law all employees who have completed 480 days of service in two years should be given permanent jobs.

While the Madras High Court recently ordered the company to grant workers' demands within eight weeks, this has not occurred. No action has been taken against the company for ignoring this directive.

The contract workers have decided to boycott the upcoming parliamentary elections and a petition will be submitted to the Indian president, prime minister, chief election commissioner and the chief justice.

## Anganwadi workers in Andhra Pradesh call off six-week strike

Over 100,000 anganwadi (childcare) workers ended a 42-day strike on January 22 without winning any of their demands. The low paid workers, who defied police attacks and the Andhra Pradesh state government's draconian Essential Services Maintenance Act, are members of the Anganwadi Workers and Helpers Association, which is affiliated to Centre for Indian Trade Unions

The strike was ended by the union after scores of workers were detained by the Vijayawada police when they called for a march to Vijayawada to present their demands to Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy. The strike had shut down over 55,600 anganwadi centres across the state.

The union responded to the government's refusal to grant any pay increases by ending the strike and declaring that workers would boycott forthcoming election polls.

## Maharashtra anganwadi workers and helpers remain on strike

Anganwadi workers and helpers in Maharashtra remain on strike and are continuing an ongoing protest over several demands in a Mumbai park that they began on December 4.

They are demanding permanent jobs, higher wages, timely payments and new mobile phones with the Poshan (Nutrition) Tracker app which they need for their work. The workers provide nourishment assistance to 6.5 million under-privileged children across the state.

## Accredited Social Health Activists workers fight for higher wages

ASHA workers involved in statewide protests and industrial action for increased pay held a sit-down protest at the Nagpur district Collector Office premises this week. Workers walked out on January 12 under the leadership of International Trade Union Confederation.

Trade union leader Shyam Khale said the workers were a vital interface between the community and public health system across the country as a part of the National Rural Health Mission.

## Outsourced workers sacked at All India Institute of Medical Science in Chhattisgarh

Protests erupted on January 23 after the sacking of 500 outsourced workers from All India Institute of Medical Science in Chhattisgarh. The workers had been employed for decades at the facility by an outsourcing agency. The workers said they had been removed from their jobs without notice by management and blocked by police from re-entering the premises.

## National Health Mission workers stage three-day protest in Kerala

NHM workers held a three-day sit down protest outside the Governor's Office in Kerala from January 22 to 24. The workers demanded the immediate payment of outstanding wages, the extension of state health insurance and retirement benefits, equal pay for equal work and other issues. The protest was directed against Prime Minister Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party-led government.

## Uttarakhand sanitation workers call for improved pay and benefits

Thousands of sanitation workers across Uttarakhand have been protesting for over a month to demand improved wages and benefits. Demonstrations were held on January 21 outside Haridwar, Dehradun, Roorkee and other cities, where workers submitted a memorandum to the relevant authorities.

Workers said that they would continue their action for another week and have threatened a statewide road blocking protest if the government does not address their demands within a week. The sanitation workers said that the Bharatiya Janata Party-led state government had failed to provide job permanency and other promises made in the party's manifesto.

## **Bangladeshi food workers strike for higher pay**

Cocola Food employees stopped work on Monday to demand a salary hike and held a street protest in Gazipur's Mouchak. The demonstration caused a two-hour, kilometre-long traffic blockage before the police broke up the protest by firing tear gas shells and sound grenades, injuring about 25 workers.

While the company increased Cocola Food workers' monthly pay last week from 6,700 taka (\$US61) to 8,000 taka, the raise, which is well below the poverty line, provoked last weeks' angry protest. Protesters are demanding that their monthly salary be increased to 12,500 taka, as decreed in November's minimum wage agreement between the government and garment factory owners.

## **Bangladeshi garment workers demand outstanding pay**

Bangladeshi garment workers from Sakoatex Limited, a sweater manufacturing exporter in Rajshahi, walked out on January 17 and 18 and demonstrated inside the factory for full payment of outstanding salary arrears.

The company pays workers according to their work output. They should receive 17,000 taka per month (\$US155) on average but about 200 workers have not been paid anything for up to three to eight months.

As one worker told the media, "I cannot pay house-rent and I owe a lot of money to shopkeepers for buying daily necessities. I don't even have the money to buy new school dresses for my kids in the new year because I don't receive a regular salary."

Another worker said that factory authorities have blocked employees from entering the plant when they asked for their outstanding pay. Management recently sacked up to 20 workers for demanding their unpaid wages.

## **V/Line rail workers strike in Victoria**

More than 1,260 Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) members stopped work for four hours on Thursday, shutting down V/Line's regional rail operations and passenger services. The strike brought the state's entire regional network to a stop. The walkout involved conductors, train controllers, station and customer service staff, and authorised officers. It was their second strike in the past month and a half.

The RTBU has been negotiating with V/Line over wages and conditions for a new enterprise agreement since June. Union members overwhelmingly voted in November, six months after the agreement expired, for future industrial action. The RTBU says workers want increased staffing levels to meet staff shortfalls and higher consumer demands, improved job security as new technologies are introduced and higher wages to meet cost of living pressures.

The RTBU's wage rise demand is 17 percent, spread over four years, or 4.25 percent per annum. The Australian Bureau of Statistics September 2023 report says the official annual cost of living increase is 9 percent, which means the union's wage claim is a pay cut.

## **Queensland construction workers strike over lost penalties and unsafe working conditions**

Last Thursday 250 construction workers stopped work at Queensland's Cross River Rail (CRR) project. The Construction Forestry Mining and Maritime Employees Union Queensland members accused CPB, the project's main contractor, of violating heat and humidity safety procedures. It followed strike action the previous Tuesday at two other CCR projects, where the union accused Rocktown, a major sub-contractor at those sites, of withholding industry-standard payment and allowances.

Brisbane temperatures were above 30 degrees celsius last week, soaring to 33.6 degrees on Friday. CFMMEU Queensland officials told the media that the heat and humidity at CCR's workplaces were a serious safety hazard. He referred to last month's death of a young worker at CCR's Salisbury site, allegedly from heat stress, and the hospitalisation of two other workers for heat-related injuries. In July, a 54-year old worker died after falling through scaffolding.

Safety on the CRR project has been the subject of over 300 safety enforcement notices. Queensland's Transport Minister Mark Bailey, however, claims that CCR's record is better than the industry standard.

## **BAE Systems workers strike in Western Australia**

Over 160 workers at BAE Systems shipbuilding facilities at Henderson in Western Australia struck on Wednesday for higher wages in a new enterprise agreement.

The ship workers and electricians, who are members of the Australian Shipbuilding Federation of Unions (ASFU), overwhelmingly rejected a sub-inflation 10 percent wage rise offer over three years from BAE Systems management in December. The ASFU says its members want a fair deal after years of lost wages relative to ongoing Consumer Price Index increases.

## **Sydney's wire-drawn ferry workers escalate industrial action**

Wire-drawn ferries crews in Sydney stepped up their industrial action on Thursday with three-hour strikes during peak operating times. The CFMMEU are in dispute with ferry contractor Birdon and the New South Wales government over wages and conditions.

CFMMEU officials say the current wages of their members do not cover rises in the cost of living. Current hourly rates, in accordance with the NSW Ports, Harbours and Enclosed Water Vessels Award, are just \$29. Workers' last rise—of just 5.7 percent—was in July 2023. The union is demanding \$46.00 per hour to bring ferry crews into line with NSW traffic controllers.



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