

India: Thousands of Telangana transport workers strike; Darjeeling tea estate workers demand higher pay; New Zealand medical laboratory workers strike

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

12 October 2019

### India: Telangana State Road Transport Corporation workers strike indefinitely

About 49,000 Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC) workers are on indefinite strike after the state government sacked them for holding a two-day protest walkout last weekend for a range of demands. The strike is being organised by the Joint Action Committee (JAC) of TRTC employees and workers' unions.

Protesting union leaders were taken into custody by the police in Hyderabad on October 7. The arrests came a day after Telangana Chief Minister K. Chandrashekhara Rao refused to agree to the strikers' demands, which included the merger of the TSRTC with other state sector transport and for a pay rise.

A demonstration was held outside New Delhi's Telangana Bhavan building denouncing the Telangana chief minister's authoritarian methods and in solidarity with the striking workers. Protests were also held throughout the state and in other parts of India, including an October 9 demonstration by Andhra Pradesh Road Transport Corporation Staff and Workers Federation members.

### Darjeeling tea estate workers demand higher pay

Darjeeling tea estate workers and supporters are holding protests, pickets and go-slows to demand decent wages and a better bonus. A paidalyatra or protest walk was held on October 3 and involved students, youth and other Darjeeling residents. More than 60 people participated in the paidalyatra, walking 21 miles to Chowrasta singing songs, reciting poetry and chanting slogans.

The next day on October 4, up to 80,000 workers from the 87 tea estates held a 12-hour strike. The Darjeeling estate workers produce one of the finest teas in the world but are amongst the lowest paid workers.

### Childcare workers continue protest in Jharkhand

More than 70,000 anganwadi (child care centre) workers and helpers are continuing protests and demonstrations in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand to demand higher pay. The anganwadi workers are paid a little over 5,000 rupees (\$US70) per month while the helpers receive 3,000 rupees.

Jharkhand's chief minister has threatened to sack the workers if they continue their protests. The mainly female workers have been violently attacked by police during their protests.

### Uttar Pradesh railway workers protest against India's first private train

Railway employees demonstrated against India's first private train, the Tejas, on October 6 at Ghaziabad railway station and at various points along its route. Railway Protection Force officers attacked the protesters at Ghaziabad station.

The Indian government recently allowed the private companies to operate on the Indian Railways service. Railway workers have held numerous demonstrations since the government announcement. These have been organised by the Railway Mazdoor Union.

### India: Punjab Agricultural University workers protest

Punjab Agricultural University (PAU) workers rallied inside the university on October 7 over the non-payment of their September salaries. The demonstration was organised by the Punjab Agricultural University Employees Union and PAU Class-Four Workers Union. The workers have accused PAU management of negligence. Employees said the protest would be intensified if their salaries were not released soon and have threatened to lock down the university.

### Pakistan water and power workers oppose privatisation

Thousands of workers from the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) and its subsidiary power distribution companies protested nationally against the government's privatisation plans on October 3. Demonstrations were held in major cities. The All Pakistan WAPDA Hydro Electric Workers Union called the protests, which shut WAPDA offices.

Workers have also demanded authorities give contract and daily-wage workers permanent jobs and provide basic safety equipment. Workplace accidents, including electrocution, are frequent among WAPDA workers because of the run-down state of infrastructure and lack of safety equipment.

The International Monetary Fund, World Bank and Asian Development Bank have long demanded the Pakistani government privatise WAPDA.

### Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa health workers' strike continues

Over 45,000 doctors, nurses, paramedical staff and non-medical staff from the government health institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province remain on strike after walking out on September 27. They are demanding repeal of the regressive Regional and District Health Authorities Act 2019. Apart from emergency departments, the strike, which was organised by the Grand Health Alliance, forced the closure of about 1,500 health centres across the province.

The new legislation is a cost-cutting measure and will further privatise

the health sector and slash government spending. Strike action was called off in May when the province's chief minister formed committees with GHA participation to investigate the issues. The legislation was passed without reports from the committees being released.

The government responded to the September 27 strike by mobilising police who baton-charged workers and arrested about 16 doctors and paramedics. On Thursday eight doctors were charged for participating in the strike.

### **Sanofi Bangladesh workers demand compensation**

About 1,000 workers from Sanofi Bangladesh, a subsidiary of the French multinational pharmaceutical company, began a 96-hour work abstention protest on Monday morning to demand full compensation from the company, which is shutting down. They issued 18 demands late last month. These include 10 years' salaries, payment of insurance coverage and no termination of workers until completion of the company windup.

Workers demonstrated outside their 22 branch offices across the country. They fear that the company would not pay all outstanding wages and benefits. The company imports exclusive drugs, antibiotics, vaccines for deadly diseases like meningitis and yellow fever, chemotherapeutic products, medicines for kidney diseases, diabetes and vital products.

### **Thousands of Korean subway workers strike**

Unionised workers on the Seoul subway began a three-day strike on Monday, to demand an increase in the number of employees, shorter working hours, improved conditions and the introduction of a step-based salary system.

The strike was launched by the Seoul Metro Line 9 Corp., a union affiliated to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, after last-minute negotiations with management broke down. It involved over 100 workers who operated all of the morning peak hour trains and other services. Seoul Metro, which runs lines 1-8, will be hit with a separate strike on October 16-18.

Some 10,000 railway workers, who are members of the Korean Railway Workers Union, also began a 72-hour warning strike on Friday morning after its negotiations broke down with the Korea Railroad Corp.

### **Water utility workers in Sydney extend strike**

Thirty-six maintenance workers, employed by engineering company Ventia to maintain the supply network of Sydney Water, extended a strike this week that began on September 30. The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), have been in negotiations with the company over an enterprise agreement (EA) for 18 months.

Workers have been taking protected industrial action, including stoppages and bans, for several months. Ventia has refused to negotiate any further.

Sydney Water contracted out its maintenance work to Theiss in 2013 and Ventia bought the relevant division in 2015. Since then Ventia has rolled over the enterprise agreement, leaving conditions intact while paying modest wage increases.

According to the unions, the company wants to remove core conditions and force the former Sydney Water employees onto an inferior agreement shared with other Ventia workers. An ETU spokesman said workers would lose more than half their long service leave entitlements under the plan.

### **Industrial action at Victorian paper mill enters fourth month**

About 160 workers at the Australian Paper mill in Maryvale, southeast of Melbourne, are maintaining industrial action begun in late July in a dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement. As well as bans on overtime, call-outs and higher duties, workers took 48-hour strike

action on September 9.

The company wants a two-tier agreement with the wages of new recruits 15 percent less than current employees and a freeze on existing employees' wages until the pay of new starters catches up. Proposed changes could also lead to full-time staff being replaced by contractors, a reduction of sick and personal leave and alterations in the way overtime is calculated and rosters devised.

Workers unanimously rejected the proposed EA in July and voted for unlimited strike action. The unions covering the site, however, have delayed further stoppages until October 26, hoping to reach a deal behind closed doors in the Fair Work Commission before then.

### **Unions end strike at Brisbane glass factory**

The Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union ended a stoppage by 60 maintenance workers at the South Brisbane factory of multinational glass manufacturer OI Glass. The long-running strike was in opposition to a new enterprise agreement.

The unions say that their members have not had a real wage increase for seven years and are demanding 3 percent annual pay increases over three years of the proposed agreement. This, however, will not reverse the effects of years of wage restraint and the increasing cost of living.

OI Glass workers in Melbourne and Brisbane voted near-unanimously in protected action ballots in April and May for industrial action. Workers commenced strike action and work bans, and picketed both factories. The Brisbane and Melbourne factories are on separately negotiated EA agreements.

The union's return-to-work order at the Brisbane factory was first issued by the AMWU earlier this month after it accepted the company's annual pay increase offer of 3 percent, 2.5 percent and 2.5 percent. ETU members held out, demanding annual 3 percent increases, but succumbed to union pressure and returned to work this Friday. Both ETU and AMWU members were to vote on whether or not to accept the offer on Thursday. The result has not been announced.

OI Glass factory workers in Spotswood, Melbourne are maintaining strike action and a picket at the factory. The AMWU and ETU have isolated the dispute while management use hire-company workers to maintain production.

### **New Zealand medical laboratory workers strike**

Five hundred medical laboratory workers at nine District Health Boards (DHBs) and the New Zealand Blood Service struck for 24 hours on Friday. The DHBs involved are Northland, Auckland, Counties Manukau, Waitematā, Waikato, Taranaki, Hawke's Bay, Canterbury, and West Coast. The medical laboratory workers diagnose 90 percent of all patient disorders across the health system.

The lab workers are striking for "an equitable salary offer" after rejecting one made more than two months ago, the APEX union said. It has demanded a "slice" of the Labour government's recently announced \$7.5 billion fiscal surplus, not only for the lab workers, but also for radiographers and psychologists who are also taking strike action. Fearful that the strikes will escalate, APEX is separating and opposing any nationally coordinated action.

### **Godfrey Hirst workers in Auckland locked out**

About 50 workers from the carpet retailer Godfrey Hirst began an indefinite strike on October 4 and set up a picket outside the company's Wiri store in Auckland. A spokesman for the First Union called on the company to negotiate a "living wage" for new employees.

The company immediately locked the workers out of the plant. A Godfrey Hirst spokesman told the *New Zealand Herald* that last year the company had seen a series of rolling strikes at its Wiri plant. "This year the company took the view that rather than endure that disruption, it

would issue a lock-out notice instead,” he declared. The lockout has remained in place this week.

The bogus “living wage” campaign, endorsed by the trade unions, claims a minimum of \$21.15 an hour is necessary to “provide workers and their families with the basic necessities of life” and enable them “to live with dignity.” In fact, under deepening austerity measures imposed by the Labour-led government the figure, which is only marginally above the legal minimum of \$17.70, is totally inadequate.

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