

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 February 2016

India: Strike by Delhi municipal workers in second week

Thousands of municipal corporation employees in Delhi have been on strike since January 27 demanding immediate payment of three months of outstanding wages. Other demands include salary increases, permanency for contract-based employees and unification of the three corporations in the city.

New Delhi, East Delhi and South Delhi municipal corporations have 150,000 employees including teachers, para-medical staff, administrative staff, engineers and sanitation workers. Sanitation workers walked out three times last year, including a 12-day strike in June, over the same issues. All municipal services, including medical facilities and schools, are affected.

A union official from the Nagar Nigam Shikshak Sangh threatened that the strike would intensify in the coming days if the government and municipal authorities fail to meet workers' demands.

Tamil Nadu government school teachers arrested during protests

On February 1, over 1,000 state government school teachers were arrested when they tried to demonstrate on roads in Thoothukudi, Kanyakumari and Tirunelveli with a 15-point charter of demands. The protest was coordinated by the Joint Action Council of Tamil Nadu Teachers Organisation.

Teachers' main demands are for equal salaries with teachers at central government institutions and the scrapping of the existing contributory pension scheme and reinstatement of the old pension scheme as promised by the State government in 2011.

Tamil Nadu power loom owners shut down production

Owners of over 5,000 power looms in the textile town of Komarapalayam in Namakkal district shut down their looms for an indefinite period on Monday to protest against the textile companies' decision to cut wages. The companies pay 45 rupees as wages to the power loom owners for manufacturing four towels. Without prior announcement, the textile companies reduced the payment to 35 rupees.

Over 35,000 workers are directly involved in the production activities and will be hit by the sudden wage cut. Loom owners demanded that the companies restore the wage to 45 rupees. "Our indefinite strike will continue until our demands are met," they said.

Tamil Nadu Revenue Department workers strike

More than 10,000 officers and staff in Revenue Department offices across Tamil Nadu walked out for two days on Tuesday with a charter of demands that included a wage increase, payment of allowances, the filling of 6,000 vacant positions and permanency for several hundred temporary workers in the election section.

The Tamil Nadu Revenue Officials Association said they want the chief minister to intervene and facilitate talks between the association representatives and the finance secretary.

Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa teachers threaten to close schools

Employees of 40 state-run Working Folks Grammar Schools (WFGS) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province have threatened to stop students from taking examinations and closing down the schools if they are not given two months' unpaid salaries. Around 40,000 children attend the schools.

As well as payment of salaries, teachers are demanding that adequate funds be released to ensure proper functioning of the schools. They complained that transporters are not being paid and had threatened to stop providing services to the schools. A representative from the Mehnat Kash Union said teachers would first hold meetings with government officials before taking action.

Pakistan power utility workers protest against privatisation

Workers at Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) and its power distribution companies walked out in a nationwide protest against the planned privatisation of state-owned power utilities. Demonstrations were held in 16 cities. Their action followed a nationwide stoppage on January 19 over the issue.

The government agreed to implement the demands of the International Monetary Fund and plans to privatise power distribution facilities along with other state enterprises, including aviation and airports, health and education. An anti-privatisation demonstration in Karachi by Pakistan International Airline workers on Tuesday was viciously attacked by police using firearms (see: "Two workers killed as government seeks to crush Pakistan airline strike").

Lahore teachers oppose privatisation and demand pay rise

Government school teachers in Punjab province districts demonstrated in Lahore on January 28 to oppose the placing of schools under non-governmental organisations. A representative from the Punjab Teachers Union accused the government of planning to hand over up to 6,000 government schools to private management. The teachers also demanded pay-scale upgrade.

Cambodian garment workers attacked by hired goons and security guards

Eight garment factory workers were seriously injured on Monday at a special economic zone (SEZ) in Kandal province, 20km south of Phnom Penh, after being attacked by ten SEZ security guards supported by 30 hired goons wielding steel pipes and meat cleavers. One worker was hospitalised with a knife wound to the neck.

The attack occurred as 600 employees of the Star Light Apparel Manufacturing factory inside the 7NG SEZ were attempting to board trucks to Phnom Penh for a protest against the firing of a union representative.

Workers have been in dispute with the factory since early January when management refused to renew the contract of their delegate from the Cambodian Labor Solidarity Union. Seven more workers were sacked after the factory accused them of inciting workers to strike in retaliation.

Cambodian tour bus drivers end protest

Some 45 sacked drivers of the Capitol Tours bus company ended their 30-day demonstration outside the company's office in Phnom Penh after city hall officials intervened demanding that the company begin talks with the workers.

The dispute was triggered when five drivers were fired in July after workers attempted to form a union. Drivers walked out on strike after the company ignored a court ruling ordering their reinstatement. In November, more drivers were sacked over continued attempts to establish a union.

City hall officials issued a non-binding request that protests be called off, that the company consider rehiring the drivers and that if the drivers were to be rehired, unions be able to fight for their working conditions. A company official said that management would not rehire the drivers.

Vietnamese garment workers strike for bonus

Close to 900 employees at a South Korean-owned garment factory in Quang Nam Province walked off the job on Monday after the company announced plans to withhold 70 percent of their Lunar New Year bonus until after the holiday. The bonus was equivalent to one-month's salary up to \$US121.

The company said it would only pay them 30 percent of the bonus before the holiday on February 8 and slowly distribute the rest between now and April. Workers complained that they needed the entire bonus to pay for their holiday travel. Many are from rural areas and they travel there to spend the holiday with their families.

Chinese hospital nurses strike over low pay

Nurses in at least eight hospitals across China have gone on strike in the last six months over low pay and benefits, and demands for equal pay for equal work. On January 19 several dozen nurses in Chongping, Hubei province in central China walked off the job demanding pay increases. Their action followed a strike of more than 100 nurses in Huaibei, Anhui province on January 8, demanding a pay increase and equal employment status.

A key issue for nurses in nearly all of China's public hospitals is the very wide gap in pay and conditions between formal staff and contract workers. Health care workers claim that hospital managers resort to "no end of dirty tricks" to prevent nurses and other healthcare workers from gaining formal employment status, something which should entitle them to the same benefits as civil servants.

According to *CN Healthcare.com*, low pay and unfair work practices mean that administrators can often rely on nursing staff quitting before they can obtain formal employment status, and then replacing them with young, inexperienced staff on short-term contracts.

Aluminium seafarers in New South Wales occupy ship

Sixteen crew members on board the bulk carrier ship CSL Melbourne moored in Newcastle port are on strike and refusing to disembark after being ordered to sail the ship to Singapore where it will be replaced by a foreign-flagged vessel with an alternative crew. The entire crew will be sacked. The Fair Work Commission on Wednesday ruled the industrial action illegal and ordered the crew members to leave the ship. The case will go to the Federal Court if they do not comply.

CSL Melbourne was engaged to carry alumina from Gladstone in Queensland to the Tomago Smelter in Newcastle, which is operated by Pacific Aluminium, a wholly owned subsidiary of global multi-billion dollar miner, Rio Tinto. It is the sixth Australian-crewed ship to be decommissioned with the axing of over 100 jobs in the past 20 months.

Australia's domestic merchant fleet – numbering more than 130 ships a few decades ago – has been reduced to only 13 vessels.

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) has opposed unified national industrial action to defend these jobs. Although workers have taken "illegal" industrial action by occupying the ships and refusing to sail, the MUA has consistently isolated the protesting workers and deflected seafarers' concerns into nationalist appeals to the government and encouraged animosity against foreigner seafarers.

In a recent stand-off at Portland in Victoria's south-west, the sacked crew on Alcoa's aluminium cargo ship MV Portland occupied the vessel for two months and refused to sail it to Singapore to be replaced. The company hired 30 security officers to forcibly remove them in a midnight raid last month. The MUA divert members' anger into a harmless rally outside the office of the minister for employment and minister for women.

In November 2014, 36 crew members of a Teekay-owned petrol tanker Tandara Spirit struck for 20 days and occupied the ship in Melbourne in a failed attempt to save their jobs. The Tandara Spirit crew ended their action after they were threatened with individual legal action. The union told the media at the time that it had no intention of organising any broader industrial action over the dispute.

Australian regional airline pilots end strike

Close to 200 unionised pilots, one third of Australia's domestic airline workforce of Regional Express Airlines (REX) ended a 24-hour strike on Tuesday after walking out to protest over staff shortages that were forcing them into interstate trips of up to five nights. They feared their work-home balance would only be further disrupted when REX expanded and opened its new base in Perth.

The Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP) ended the strike after REX agreed to enter negotiations.

The AFAP, which referred their dispute to the Fair Work Commission, has been in negotiations with REX for a new enterprise bargaining agreement for more than two years. The pilots are demanding a guaranteed maximum number of overnight trips they can be asked to perform under a new agreement.

New Zealand: Auckland bus drivers strike

Auckland bus drivers stopped work on Thursday in a long-running dispute with NZ Bus over pay and conditions. The stoppage was called over the drivers' claim that NZ Bus has been increasing working hours without providing toilet breaks. More than 100 drivers have signed a petition calling for better working conditions.

The strike caused disruptions to Metrolink, North Star, Go West, Waka Pacific, City Link and Outer Link bus services in Auckland between 9 a.m. and 2.30 p.m.

NZ Bus is currently in wage negotiations with Tramways and First Union but no agreement has been reached. The company offered drivers a 1.7 percent wage increase. At least 240 jobs are at risk after the company lost its contract to operate in south Auckland.

Papua New Guinea school teachers strike

Hundreds of government schools teachers in Papua New Guinea's Western Highlands province of Jiwaka have refused to take up this year's postings until they are paid their 2015 leave fare entitlements. The entitlement is paid to teachers in regional schools across the nation to allow them to travel home at the end of the school year to spend time with their family. Most travel from the remote areas is by aeroplane or boat and is expensive.

According to the PNG Teachers Association (PNGTA), 72 teachers from Jiwaka were not paid their leave fare entitlements in 2014 and in 2015 most teachers received just 70 percent of their leave entitlement.

While there has been an ongoing annual dispute over this issue for more than a decade, the PNGTA has refused to mobilise teachers in national industrial action. All previous strikes have been organised by the teachers' themselves on a regional or school basis and then shut down by the PNGTA falsely promising that it will take up teachers' demands.

PNG nickel mine workers end strike

Workers at Ramu Nickel's Kurumbukari Mine in Madang province ended their six-day strike and mine occupation on January 28 following a commitment from the Department of Industrial Relations, and the mine's management, that an 11-point petition presented by the workers will be

“considered.”

Mining and smelter workers represented by the Ramu Nickel Workers' Union presented the company with their grievances three weeks ago and demanded it adhere to Australian and New Zealand safety standards. The petition set out the workers' concerns about safety requirements and security measures. It follows the death of a night-shift worker at the mine site in December.

A meeting scheduled for January 27 was postponed to February 1. After closing down the strike on a vague promise, the union president threatened that workers would stop work again if their petition is “not addressed” by the next set date.



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