

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 February 2013

Indonesian workers protest low pay

Tens of thousands of workers organised by the Indonesian Metal Workers Federation (FSPMI) protested in major industrial centres on February 6 to oppose low wages and demand social security. Workers rallied in Greater Jakarta, Bandung (West Java), Surabaya (East Java), Batam (Riau Islands), Medan (North Sumatra), and Aceh. At least 35,000 rallied in Jakarta.

The FSPMI called on the government to set the minimum wage in accordance with true basic living costs, which includes 84 items, and reverse its decision to exempt employers “experiencing hardship” from paying the minimum wage. The union also called for a national health insurance scheme to begin in January next year, instead of in 2019 and a retirement pension implemented on July 1, 2015.

Indonesia has one of the fastest growing economies internationally but poverty is growing exponentially. Almost 40 percent of the 35 million people employed in the formal sector are underpaid and have no health insurance. Even after the introduction of the minimum wage in January this year, which increased minimum wages by an average of 40 percent, most unskilled and semi-skilled workers are only paid \$US220 a month.

Pakistan: Striking Lahore government doctors on hunger strike

Over 100 members of the Young Doctors Association (YDA)-Punjab chapter, began a hunger strike outside the Services Hospital in Lahore on February 4 over the failure of the government to implement doctors’ demands for a new service structure and increased wages and benefits. A YDA spokesman said over 100 doctors had vowed to observe the hunger strike until death if their demands are not met.

Hundreds of YDA doctors protested in early January against the termination of six doctors, the suspension and withholding of salaries of another 12, and the transfer without valid reason of over 60 doctors.

The doctors have been on strike since January 16 following the arrest of several colleagues when they entered a medical superintendent’s office in Gujranwala to renew their contracts. YDA members are currently refusing to attend outpatient departments in Punjab hospitals.

Balochistan teachers on strike

About 5,000 contract teachers at government schools in Pakistan’s south-west province of Balochistan walked out on February 4 to demand service regularisation and unpaid wages.

Teachers rallied in the province’s capital Quetta and about 200 began a hunger strike in front of the Quetta Press Club. Teachers complained that despite more than five years’ service, their jobs have not been regularised leaving them on low pay scales and depriving them of government service related allowances.

India: Karnataka contract sanitary workers on strike

Hubli-Dharwad Municipal Corporation (HDMC) contract sanitary workers and family members began an indefinite protest on the streets of Dharwad on February 3 to oppose privatisation of sanitation services.

HDMC has outsourced their jobs to private firm Bharat Vikas Group, which has announced that over 760 of the existing 1,800 workers will lose their jobs. Many workers with more than 15 years’ experience will be affected. The protesting workers are demanding to be made regular HDMC employees and receive equal pay for equal work.

Maharashtra luxury hotel workers impose bans

Over 500 Leela Hotel employees in Mumbai have banned overtime since January 25 in a dispute over permanency and back-breaking work schedules. Workers demanded permanent employment for 70 casual workers who had worked more than ten years. The casual employees are denied basic rights and discriminated against. The Hotel Employees Federation of India organised the industrial action.

Sri Lanka: Colombo municipal workers protest

Colombo Municipal Council white-collar workers demonstrated outside the council building on February 5 over the Salaries and Cadre Commission’s regular five-year report, which called for job cuts and a reduction in employees’ salaries. Protesting workers, who have rejected the recommendations, shouted slogans and burned a copy of the report. The new measures were to begin on January 1 but have been delayed due to opposition.

Cambodian garment workers picket closed factory

Over 200 Kingsland Garments employees have been holding a 24-hour picket outside its closed factory since January 18. Workers fear that the Hong Kong owners will attempt to remove equipment and other assets without paying former employees outstanding back pay and termination entitlements. According to workers, they are owed \$US200,000.

The factory, which closed in mid-December, made garments for Walmart and H&M. Although the sudden closure was illegal under Cambodian law, government authorities have ignored the former employees’ demand for their case to be sent to the Arbitration Council.

New South Wales coal carrier workers on strike

Over 800 members of the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) at Pacific National (PN) Coal in New South Wales walked off the job for 48 hours from noon on February 8 in a dispute for a new enterprise agreement. The strike stopped the daily delivery of thousands of tonnes of domestic and export coal. Pacific National, which carries two-thirds of NSW’s coal, is owned by the Asciano ports and rail group.

PN Coal walked away from 14 months of negotiations in early January after 85 percent of workers, including train drivers and ancillary workers, rejected a proposed non-union offer of 4 percent annual pay increases over three years with roster changes. The union had demanded a 7 percent pay rise in the first year of the new agreement followed by two successive increases of 5 percent in the next two years, plus an annual 2 percent fuel-efficiency bonus to be carried over from the previous enterprise agreement.

When PN Pacific responded to planned 24-hour strike action by reducing its original 3 percent annual pay increases the RTBU extended the industrial action by another 24 hours. The company followed this decision by declaring that it would cut the pay offer to 2.5 percent if a resolution was not found by the end of this month. Other issues in the dispute include roster changes and the method used to test for drugs.

Mining giants Xstrata Coal and Whitehaven Coal have threatened legal action against the union if coal supplies to the ports are disrupted. The federal Labor government's workplace relations minister Bill Shorten has intervened in the dispute demanding that PN Coal and the RTBU accept a Fair Work Australia Commission to oversee a resolution of the dispute.

Western Australian nurses vote for industrial action

Nurses in Perth, the Western Australian capital, held stop-work meetings at the Royal Perth, Fremantle, Sir Charles Gardiner and other major public hospitals on February 4 to endorse limited work bans as part of their push for a 15 percent pay rise over three years.

While Royal Perth Hospital nurses voted to stop performing "non-nursing" duties, such as re-stocking, cleaning and moving patients, this will have minimal impact because most of these duties are performed by ancillary workers. The Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) has already reduced the nurses' original demand for a 20 percent pay increase over three years which would have restored pay parity with state public school teachers.

Other union demands include a \$1,000 annual retention bonus, 20 percent afternoon shift loading, Friday afternoon penalty rates increased to 25 percent, and the right to convert unused sick leave into annual leave, potentially giving nurses an extra two weeks' holiday each year.

The Barnett Liberal government previously said it would begin negotiations in January but now says it will not sign any agreement until after the state elections on March 9. The ANF has threatened to begin closing beds if the government does not negotiate a pay rise.

New Zealand: Christchurch public school teachers to strike

Primary school teachers in the earthquake-affected city of Christchurch on the South Island's east coast will strike on February 19 over the Key government's plan to close or merge numerous schools in the city. The New Zealand Education Institute, which has not categorically opposed the government plan, characterises the strike as an attempt to force the government to "allow more consultation."

Auckland magazine distribution workers on strike

Some 23 workers at book and magazine distributor Gordon & Gotch in Auckland walked off the job indefinitely on January 31 over a new enterprise agreement. According to the FIRST Union, which covers 27,000 workers in the finance, textile, wood, retail, stores and transport industries, says the company wants to cut back workers' entitlement to redundancy compensation. The union has not called on its other members to take industrial action to back the striking Gordon & Gotch workers.

Boat crew walk off Korean fishing vessel in New Zealand

New Zealand officials have seized Sur Este 707, a Korean charter fishing boat, over allegations that the Indonesian crew has been forced to work long hours, for less than New Zealand's \$13.50 per hour minimum wage. Over 20 crew members walked off the vessel after it was seized at Timaru on South Island's east coast, with only six opting to stay.

Slavery-like conditions, including physical abuse, lack of nutrition, and non-payment of wages, is common on chartered fishing vessels operating from New Zealand. In October, 12 Indonesian fishermen from another Korean vessel, the Melilla 201, demonstrated outside United Fisheries processing plant in Christchurch to demand \$850,000 in unpaid wages.

Fijian bus drivers face deportation

Twenty-five Fijian drivers employed by commuter bus company Go Wellington are facing deportation after Immigration New Zealand recently removed bus driving from its "skills shortage" list. Bus drivers had previously been in short supply and were first included in the government's skills shortage listing in 2006.

Immigration New Zealand has insisted the men have "no path to residency", despite many of them having young families raised in New Zealand. The Tramways Union said several of those affected intend to appeal the decision.

Solomon Islands teachers end strike

Close to 9,000 Solomon Islands public school teachers returned to classes on February 4, ending more than a week of industrial action and a lockout. The return to work recommendation by the Solomon Islands Teachers' Association (SINTA) followed a meeting with education officials and the Trades Disputes Panel in which the government agreed to the teachers' demand for a wage increase. The government said that the payments would be spread over three pay periods.

Teachers began industrial action on January 28, when the school year was due to commence, complaining that in February 2012 the government, after three years of negotiations, agreed to increase teachers' salaries and allowances. The union put off strike action last year, after the government again promised that the payments would be made by December.

One striking teacher told media that the Solomon Islands education pay system was drastically in need of review. He pointed out that while some teachers only receive \$200 (\$US27) a week, other less experienced teachers get just \$200 a month.

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