

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 December 2015

South Korean workers strike over industrial reforms

Some 74,000 workers from 26 unions stopped work for two to four hours on Wednesday to protest against the Park government's push for labour market reform. Around 17,000 strikers rallied in 12 cities. The strike was called by the Korea Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the country's second-largest umbrella labour union.

Wednesday's strike follows walkouts by 260,000 union members in April and 45,000 in July over the government's labour market reform. The KCTU is facing rising discontent among its members over plans to slash workers' wages and benefits, as well as labour market restructuring that would make it easier to fire full-time workers.

A bill to "reform" civil servants' pensions would push back the age at which workers can access their pensions from 60 to 65, while increasing the amount paid from 7 to 10 percent of one's salary. The proposed "peak wage" system would slash the wages of older public sector workers, supposedly in the name of "job-sharing." The government claims that the money saved would allow younger workers to be hired.

The union federation has a long history of staging one-day token strikes to allow workers to let off steam, while channelling their anger back into the parliamentary establishment. An anti-government rally has been planned for this weekend.

Burmese garment workers on strike

More than 200 Hteik Tan Myanmar Garment Factory workers in Burma's commercial capital Yangon have been on strike since December 7 to demand their full salaries for November. The company docked workers' pay for failing to meet production targets. More than two-thirds of the workers have been protesting outside the plant in the Hlaingthayar Industrial Park after receiving only 15 days' pay last month.

Since the strike began, workers have been barred from using the factory's ferry services and the dormitory where they usually reside. A workers' representative said a mediation group had scheduled a Monday meeting but Hteik Tan's owner never showed up.

Pakistan International Airline workers maintain rolling stoppages

Pakistan International Airline (PIA) workers, including reservation booth staff and some pilots, walked off the job for over two hours at airports across the nation on Tuesday in protest against the PIA Corporation Conversion Ordinance which allows partial privatisation of the airline. Their action followed a two-hour strike last week called by the joint action committee of the PIA Employees Air League over the issue.

In September 2013, the International Monetary Fund bailed out Pakistan from a possible default, lending the government \$US6.7

billion over three years. In return, the Nawaz Sharif government accepted IMF demands that it increase taxes, cut electricity subsidies and privatise state enterprises.

The government has restricted funding to PIA, forcing the airline to seek finance from the private sector. Under the IMF loan deal, Pakistan has agreed to privatise 26 percent of PIA. Media advertising will start before the end of the year and the sale completed by June 2016. The privatisation will affect 18,000 employees.

Although the privatisation program will hit hundreds of thousands of workers in state-run enterprises, the unions have blocked any coordinated fight to defend jobs and other rights. The PIA unions have limited action to two-hour stoppages and excluded pilots and flight attendants from participating while fostering illusions that the government can be pressured into reversing its privatisation policies.

Pakistani rural health workers boycott anti-polio drive

For the second time in two months Lady Health Workers (LHWs) in Lahore, Punjab province took strike action on Monday over their service structure. Hundreds of LHWs, paramedics and other health workers of the Allied Health Staff, the Punjab Paramedics Alliance, the Lady Health Workers Association and the Dengue Control Programme boycotted the first day of the anti-polio vaccination program and demonstrated outside the Directorate General of Health Services building.

In October LHWs from several Punjab districts travelled to Lahore and demonstrated on The Mall, a major city road, over the issue. Although the government made permanent the services of Punjab's 48,000 temporary LHWs in March 2014, they still have no service structure, affecting promotions and their salaries.

Unpaid teachers in Karachi protest

On Tuesday evening hundreds of teachers employed by the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) demonstrated at the Civic Centre to demand their salaries for the past five months. A large portion of University Road was blocked to traffic. Teachers said it was a "do-or-die" situation because they were unable to provide for their families.

Teachers ended two previous protests over the issue when the KMC falsely promised that the payments would be released within the month. There are around 1,200 employees in the KMC's education department and 65 percent are teachers.

Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa health workers protest

Hundreds of doctors and paramedics from government-run hospitals in Swat district in Pakistan's northern Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province protested in Mingora on December 11 to demand six months'

overdue wages. The demonstrators were joined by Class IV government workers assigned to hospitals and health centres. The medical staff threatened to boycott the anti-polio vaccination campaign if they were not paid.

India: Retrenched contract teachers in Odisha protest

Odisha Contract Teachers' Association (OCTA) members demonstrated on Tuesday in Bhubaneswar over the state government's failure to reappoint 3,760 contractual teachers by the middle of this month.

The government had cancelled services of nearly 3,760 contractual teachers appointed after June 11 in response to an Odisha High Court order over alleged anomalies with the appointments. The order is being disputed by the minister for school and mass education who previously told the teachers that their appointments would be confirmed by the second week in December.

Bangladeshi tea plantation workers on strike

At least 15,000 workers from the British-owned Chandpore Tea Estate in Habiganj district of north-eastern Sylhet division have been on strike since Monday to protest against a government plan to acquire hundreds of hectares of land. Workers are demanding the government scrap plans for a special 207-hectare economic zone on spare agricultural land owned by the estate that tea workers' families cultivate for their own survival.

The Chandpore estate has 1,655 registered tea workers and a total population of more than 6,000 people. Workers and family members from three neighbouring estates owned by the same British company have also joined the strike. The government has decided to develop five special economic zones, including one in Habiganj, to attract foreign and domestic investors.

South Australian water utility workers hold second strike

For the second time in three weeks about 200 Allwater workers walked off the job for 24 hours last Tuesday to protest proposed changes to work conditions. It follows six months of failed enterprise agreement negotiations. Allwater is an alliance of Transfield and SUEZ Environment and contracted to manage the state-owned SA Water's water supply, sewerage and waste disposal.

Members of United Voice, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, the Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union and the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union have rejected proposed changes to their enterprise agreement.

These include the removal of more than 150 clauses from the current enterprise agreement that will give management unrestricted flexibility on rosters, reduce job security by making it easier to make a worker redundant and bring in part-time work. Protesters said they could be forced to 16-hour days with only two days' break in 19 and cuts in rostered days off. At least 1,500 workers are covered by the agreement.

More Australian government employees reject pay offer

Public servants from the employment and agricultural departments have voted down enterprise agreement offers from Australia's federal government. The 1,400 employment workers and 4,400 in agriculture were offered annual 2 percent pay increases over three years but with cuts in conditions and entitlements.

IP (intellectual property) Australia employees rejected a new management offer whilst a ballot of Australian Tax Office workers,

which closed on Wednesday, is also expected to vote down new enterprise deals. They join workers in 118 federal departments who have thrown out government enterprise agreement offers. In fact, only 4 percent of 160,000 federal public sector employees have accepted new agreements.

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and other unions have reduced their original pay demand from 4 percent annual pay increases for three years to between 2.5 and 3 percent with no loss of conditions.

New Zealand: Bunnings workers continue industrial action

Over 800 union members at 21 stores owned by the Bunnings hardware retail chain walked off the job on Wednesday in a long-running work agreement dispute. Workers at seven other Bunnings stores in New Zealand planned to meet on Friday to vote on strike action.

The FIRST Union claims that under the current collective agreement Bunnings can only alter start and finish times under mutual agreement with workers. The firm wants to insert a clause that will allow individual store management to modify workers' start and finish times at will.

An overwhelming majority of the Bunnings workforce has voted down the proposed collective agreement, which includes a 4 percent pay rise this year with a further two percent next year. Bunnings employs 3,000 people in New Zealand. FIRST Union has kept industrial action regionalised and limited to ineffective two-hour walkouts and roadside demonstrations.

Auckland bus drivers vote on strike action

Around 1,000 bus drivers in New Zealand's largest city Auckland are participating in a ballot to decide whether they will strike for two hours on December 22 in a dispute for a pay rise. Negotiations between the Auckland Tramway Union and First Union and NZ Bus began in April. The unions are demanding a 2.95 percent pay rise but NZ Bus has offered just 0.75 per cent.

The unions are already signalling they plan to shut down any strike irrespective of the ballot result, with one representative stating he is hopeful a strike could be avoided altogether.

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