

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 February 2017

Cambodian garment workers protest at closed factory

Some 300 workers from Shude Garments in Kampong Speu province demonstrated outside their shuttered factory on Monday after their employer vanished without paying January salaries. A union leader said that some of the 700 workers at the factory stayed inside to “protect the factory property.” Company property is often auctioned off to pay back wages.

Earlier this month, 1,000 workers from the Pattern International factory in Kampong Speu province demonstrated at the labour office after the factory owner disappeared without paying wages. Workers said they had not been paid since the company declared bankruptcy in December, even though they had remained working during December and January.

Taiwan rail workers protest

Around 100 Taiwan Railways Administration (TRA) workers demonstrated outside the Presidential Office in Taipei on February 9 to demand disciplinary action against them for participating in a strike during the Lunar New Year holiday be withdrawn. Some 200 strikers received letters from the TRA threatening them with dismissal.

Close to 500 members of the Taiwan Railway Union (TRU), including train conductors, station workers and other operational staff, refused to report for work during the holiday to protest staff shortages and pay cuts after new labour laws came into effect.

A union representative claimed that the TRA would need to hire 2,500 more employees to operate its current schedule without extending current work hours when new labour laws are implemented. TRU members want staffing levels increased or the number of passenger and cargo services reduced. Other demands include higher bonuses, subsidies for employees exposed to vocational hazards, and pensions and benefits on par with civil servants.

Nepalese local government workers strike

Thousands of local government workers on temporary or contract basis walked off the job on February 12 in a state-wide protest over job security. The strike affected work at the village development committees, district development offices, municipalities and ward offices.

The strike followed a week of protests in which workers demanded that the government’s plan to absorb them into the civil service should not leave them worse off. The strikers’ demands include career development and priority for permanent, temporary and contract basis.

Bangladesh light vessel workers strike

Bangladesh Lighterage Workers’ Union members walked off vessels on February 11 demanding implementation of a previously agreed wage increase. At least 60 fully loaded vessels were left idle.

The light vessels are used to transfer goods from mother ships anchored outside Chittagong port to the quays of Karnaphuli and other jetties across the country.

Strikers said that a minimum monthly wage of 9,650 taka (\$US121) was

agreed in November after a meeting between workers, vessel owners and government officials. Workers, who currently are paid 6,900 taka a month, want the increased wage paid by February 13. The union ended this week’s strike after a meeting with the Bangladesh Cargo Vessel Owners Association and extended the pay deadline to February 20.

Bangladesh farmers stop work, demanding power supply

Hundreds of farmers from three villages in Gouripur upazila (150 kilometres north from Dhaka) demonstrated on February 11 to demand restoration of power supply to a deep tube-well used for rice cultivation.

They formed a human chain around their dry fields and threatened to besiege the office of the pump operator Mauha-Boroikanda Krishak Samobay Samity and block the Mymensingh-Kishoreganj road if electricity supplies were not immediately restored.

The farmers have depended on the deep tube-well since 2006. The lack of power prevents them from transplanting their crops.

India: Kerala government farm workers protest

Workers at the state-run Aralam Farm Corporation (Kerala) Ltd. (AFCL) have been holding daily protests outside the farm’s main office since February 8 over non-payment of December and January wages. The protests are aimed at causing maximum disruption during the peak harvest time.

The farm workers threatened action in December over the non-payment of November wages. Aralam management at that time agreed to pay the outstanding salaries in two instalments in December and January. However, December and January wages have not been paid and some workers have not received their November salaries.

The protests were organised by a joint action committee involving the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, the Indian National Trade Union Congress and the All India Trade Union Congress.

Punjab school midday meal workers on hunger strike

Cooks and support workers of the Midday Meal Office Employees and Cook Workers Union began a hunger strike in Chandigarh on February 13 to protest false promises made by the government given in December to give temporary employees permanent jobs.

While the hunger strike was to commence on February 1, the union called it off when the government again claimed that it would honour its agreement. Workers said they will continue the protest till contract employment is abandoned.

Tamil Nadu power loom weavers’ strike in fourth week

Around 100 weavers who operate over 300 power looms in Tamil Nadu’s Namakkal district have been on strike since January 23 to protest a wage reduction. The workers are paid on a per metre piece-rate basis. Their wages have been reduced by 50 paise per metre, resulting in a wage cut of around 1,700 rupees (\$25.42) per month.

On Monday the weavers held a one-day hunger strike. They have

entered talks with the local authorities after mediation talks with labour officials failed.

Ola and Uber cab drivers in New Delhi on strike

Ola and Uber cab drivers in New Delhi have been on strike since February 10 over the fares charged by the app-based taxi services, which they claim were too low, and the gradual tightening of incentive payments by the companies.

To attract customers, Ola and Uber have kept fares low, even less than auto-rickshaws, but for drivers the incentives are based on the number of completed trips. Drivers complain that with competition increasing and more drivers becoming available to the companies, these incentives have become more difficult to achieve.

Lacking support from the formal unions, the drivers are relying on the informal and social media to spread their strike and publicise it in other cities.

Andhra Pradesh outsourced hospital workers protest

RIMS (Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Medical Science) Contract and Outsourcing Workers Union members demonstrated in the hospital premises on Monday. The workers allege that contractors appointed by the institution had failed to deposit full provident fund amounts into the workers' accounts despite deducting it from their pay.

The contractors reportedly collected 1,000 rupees from each worker but deposited only 600 rupees into the Provident Fund account and also failed to deposit 138 rupees into the ESI (Employees State Insurance) facility.

Sri Lanka Telecom contract workers' strike approaches two months

Some 2,100 employees of outsourcing company Human Capital Solutions at Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) are maintaining their strike begun on December 26 to demand permanent jobs. The strikers are paid much less than permanent employees and not provided with adequate facilities or safety equipment.

The workers rejected an offer from SLT to recruit 200 of them as new employees each year. This means it would take over 10 years to recruit all the 2,100 manpower workers and their basic monthly salary would be reduced to 17,500 rupees, down from 30,000 rupees.

Pakistan: Balochistan nurses end strike

Nurses from government hospitals in Quetta, Balochistan province ended a four-day strike on Wednesday after the government gave an assurance that all their demands would be met "without delay" and promised to establish a government committee to "find a solution."

The nurses walked out on February 11 to demand the health professional allowance and improvement in their service structure. A Nurses Action Committee spokesperson said that nurses had been demanding the health professional allowance since 2011. She said despite acceptance of the demand the government had so far not issued an official order in this regard. Nurses want the service structure and professional allowance on par with neighbouring provinces.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa municipal workers on strike

On February 9, municipal administration workers in the city of Karak in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa shut down services and locked offices to protest the delay in salary payments. Workers said they were not paid for January and that wages for the current month were also not guaranteed given the financial situation of the municipality. The workers' union warned of further protests if wages were not paid immediately.

The federal government's public expenditure cuts have curtailed payments to provincial governments and city administrations and led to severe financial problems, including non-payment of wages by local authorities.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa young doctors strike

Young doctors from the Bisham tehsil headquarters hospital in Shangla district boycotted the out-patients department on February 10 to demand immediate payment of withheld salaries. The Young Doctors Association (YDA) said that over 100 young doctors at various hospitals in the district had not been paid for six months.

A YDA spokesman alleged that the district finance department demanded 60,000 rupees as commission to release the doctors' salaries. Besides calling for an end to the "commission mafia" in the local finance department, doctors want a "proper" service structure and improved hospital security.

Lahore utility workers oppose outsourcing of jobs

Hundreds of workers from the Lahore Electricity Supply Company (LESCO) demonstrated outside the company headquarters on February 10 over the outsourcing of meter reading jobs.

Organised by the All Pakistan Wapda Hydroelectric Workers Union, demonstrators also called for an end to the Pakistani government's restructuring and privatisation of the power industry. Workers are also demanding a pay increase for meter reading staff and the merger of the 5,000-rupee Mobile Meter Reading Allowance into monthly salaries.

Power utility workers have been engaged in a long struggle against the privatisation of the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) and its distributing subsidiaries. The Pakistan government is implementing International Monetary Fund demands for privatisation of power distribution facilities and other state enterprises, including aviation and airports, health and education.

Far north Queensland bus drivers strike

Drivers from commuter service provider Sunbus Cairns, in far north Queensland, walked off the job for 24 hours on Tuesday in a dispute over a proposed enterprise agreement. Striking drivers demonstrated outside the Translink office in Cairns demanding that the Queensland state government provide more funding to Sunbus. Transport Workers Union (TWU) members want a pay increase and conditions on par with other regional drivers. The Sunbus drivers stopped work for 24 hours in October over the issue.

The TWU called for a 6.25 percent pay increase but Sunbus offered just 3.4 percent, in return for productivity increases. A union spokesman said a 3.4 percent increase would mean Cairns Sunbus workers would still be paid well below their colleagues in Townsville and on the Sunshine Coast. Sunbus claimed that the state government authority Translink does not provide enough funding to meet the drivers' pay demand.

New Zealand: Retail car parts workers walk out again

For the third time in three months 20 employees of car parts supplier Brake and Transmission (BNT) walked off the job in Auckland on February 10 after the company refused to offer any pay increase in a new work agreement. A FIRST union organiser said the workers initiated bargaining in August and while the company has met with the union it has made no pay offer. BNT workers struck in December and January over the issue.

The parts workers, who are only paid the minimum wage, want a pay rise that reflects New Zealand's rapidly rising housing and accommodation costs. A union spokesman claimed it had been years since workers have had a wage rise.

New Zealand ambulance workers maintain industrial action

Over 800 members of the Ambulance Professionals First union at the government-subsidised ambulance service St John New Zealand are maintaining low-level industrial action begun in November for a new

collective agreement. This week the union announced that it had reached a deal with St John that may see an end to industrial action, including a ban on covering at public entertainment events, by March 1.

The union has provided no detail on the deal except to tell members it includes increases in pay and improved leave provisions. St John said it would establish a Joint Consultative Forum with representation from all unions to discuss the issues.

Paramedics previously rejected a pay rise offer of 1.25 percent in return for the elimination of time-and-a-half for extra work, which is used to cover understaffing. The union has called for 2 percent pay rise and also want issues resolved on single-crewing, prolonged work periods without tea breaks and shortages of skilled paramedics.

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