

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Sri Lankan workers demand tsunami relief

Workers and professional staff in a number of places in Sri Lanka have protested over the past week about the lack of government assistance to areas affected by the tsunami.

Railway workers and their families in eastern port city of Trincomalee demonstrated on January 31, demanding government relief after receiving nothing for over a month. Most of the families lost their belongings when their homes were hit by five-foot high waves. The demonstrators sat on the railway tracks at the Trincomalee railway station, blocking the passenger train to Colombo. Police intervened but workers only dispersed when they received a pledge that their concerns would be looked into.

Doctors at the Karapitiya Teaching Hospital in the tsunami-ravaged southern city of Galle pulled a lightning strike on February 1. They demanded proper medical facilities at the Mahamodera hospital for expectant mothers. They are angry that, after the Mahamodera facility was damaged by the tsunami, the authorities transferred cases to the Karapitiya Teaching Hospital without providing the means to care for them. Waves and flooding destroyed three delivery units at Mahamodera hospital that could cater for up to 300 pregnant women but the authorities have not yet taken measures to reestablish the facilities.

Railway workers demand permanent jobs

Gate watchers employed by the Sri Lanka Railway Department in the eastern city of Batticaloa picketed the railway station on January 31, forcing the cancellation of the train to Colombo. They demanded permanent jobs for 173 gate watchers who have been working as casuals for more than 10 years.

The casuals are only paid 100 rupees (\$US1) a day. The rail authorities have refused to give them even temporary status. The workers also demanded a wage increase for permanent employees to 3,000 rupees (\$US30) and an allowance of 2,500 rupees (\$US25).

The demonstration ended when parliamentarians in the province promised they would take up the issues with the transport minister and seek a solution by the end of the month.

Pakistani government workers denied wages

A large number of workers from the Sindh provincial government's Food Department staged a demonstration outside the press club in Dadu on January 26, demanding 36 months of accumulated salaries.

About 490 workers in department had been sent to what is termed a "surplus pool" and denied any pay for three years, resulting in some families facing starvation. Fellow workers from Sehwan, Johi, Khairpur and Dadu joined the protest.

Indian workers strike for unpaid wages and shorter hours

Workers at Binny Engineering in Meenambakkam in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu protested on January 30. They demanded the immediate payment of wage arrears outstanding for nearly a year. About 450 workers have not received wages since last February and have been forced to withdraw money from their Provident Fund savings or take out loans to survive.

Annual bonuses have not been paid for the past three years and pay rates have not been revised since 1993. Appeals to the government have done nothing to alter the situation. The workers are members of the Binny Engineering Employees Union, Binny Beach Engineering Workers Union and Binny Beach Engineering Anna Thozhilalar Sangam.

In a separate dispute, workers employed by the Railway Department to load trains in Tirunaveli, Tamil Nadu, demonstrated outside the railway station on February 1. They called for the reestablishment of a former roster that required they work only from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) organised the protest.

Chinese workers hold protest in Hong Kong

Workers from mainland China protested in Hong Kong outside the head office of jewelry company Lucky International Holdings this week. They are demanding compensation for health problems caused by poor health and safety conditions in the company's plant in Shenzhen province. The company has been operating there since early 1990s.

Many workers have fallen ill with the respiratory disease silicosis. A former worker at the protest, 42-year-old Li Weizhong from the city of Chongqing, said that employees exposed to silica dust were not supplied with dust masks and there was no dust extraction equipment in the plant. Li and other workers met with the head of the company, Wang Shenghua, but could not get any agreement on compensation.

Sydney building workers demand proper facilities for women colleagues

About 100 construction workers at the Gazebo Hotel site in Kings Cross, Sydney, walked off the job on February 1. They were protesting management's refusal to provide a proper separate toilet and change room for female workers, including an apprentice electrician and a traffic controller.

A union spokesman said the company was obliged to provide sewerer toilets for the women. The hotel, which closed last year and sacked its staff, is being restructured as expensive apartments by Coordinated Construction.

Alcoa workers condemn sacking

Nearly 400 maintenance workers at Alcoa plants in Western Australia have been on strike since February 2, demanding the reinstatement of a fitter dismissed over a petty matter. The worker was sacked after he gave a female colleague a present of lingerie and what the company deemed to be a “sex toy”.

The company dismissed the employee at Pinjarra aluminium refinery on the grounds of “gross misconduct” even though the woman in question, a trade assistant, said she was not offended. While the company claimed that the gift breached its harassment policy, workers viewed the punishment as being far too harsh for a minor offence.

The strike has affected maintenance work at the company’s Pinjarra, Wagerup and Kwinana refineries and at its two bauxite mines at Huntley and Willowdale in the Darling Range. Construction work on Alcoa’s new \$400 million plant at Pinjarra also stopped as contract workers supported the strike.

Esso withdraws roster change

A settlement was reached this week in the 19-month dispute involving 100 contract rig workers employed on Esso’s offshore oil and gas platform in the Bass Strait. During that time, the workers had been involved in a number of stoppages and protest actions.

The company agreed to withdraw its demand for a 14-day-on, 14-day-off roster that would have lengthened the time workers were offshore and away from home by two days. The settlement also includes a 15 percent pay increase, but this is spread over three years.

New Zealand legal aid staff vote to strike

National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) members employed in legal aid offices have voted for industrial action, including strikes and work bans, if there is no movement in pay talks next week.

A NUPE spokesman said the workers had been in negotiations with the Legal Services Agency (LSA) for six months but had not yet received a pay offer. Bans will be placed on processing or approving invoices for legal aid, meaning lawyers will not be paid.

A NUPE spokesman said the union was only seeking a pay offer “that reflects the current rate of inflation and other pressures on members’ finances”. He emphasised that the union was keen to meet with the LSA and “avert a strike if at all possible”. NUPE represents 25 percent of the LSA staff, including nearly all Wellington and Christchurch staff, and all staff who process legal aid applications for the Waitangi Tribunal.

Meat company gets lenient treatment over workers’ injuries

Canterbury Meat Packers was fined nearly \$NZ20,000 this week and ordered to pay compensation totalling \$NZ5,500 to two workers injured at its Mid-Canterbury plant. Donna Meager suffered injuries to her arm when it became trapped in a rotating offal auger that she was cleaning. Eruera Edwards hurt his hand in a conveyer belt on another machine that had no guard.

The company—which employs 800 workers at its Seafield site in

Ashburton—admitted to two charges under Health and Safety in Employment legislation of failing to take all practicable steps to ensure the two workers were not exposed to hazards. The meat company claimed, however, that it was not responsible for the conduct of the cleaning company that employed Meager and its failure to adequately instruct her in procedures, or for the worker placing her hand into the auger to clear a blockage.

Treating the company sympathetically, the Ashburton District Court judge said that deciding compensation and fines in such matters was “an inexact science”. Despite it having two previous similar convictions, he claimed that the company had a “good safety record” and declared there are “many danger points” in an operation the size and scale of a meat works.

Pacific island garment workers protest over no pay

On January 28, sixty garment workers employed by La Mode in Saipan—capital of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI)—protested at the Department of Labor, demanding assistance to recover at least one month’s back pay owed to 100 employees. They are also asking for “job transfer relief” as most workers are immigrants and cannot seek other employment under their existing contracts.

Acting Labor Secretary Dean O. Tenorio told a press meeting that La Mode management “admitted” they are unable to meet their payroll obligations and that the “company is about to close”. He said the government was looking at whether it would give the workers temporary work authorisations.

The future for these and other garment workers looks bleak. The CNMI garment industry is expected to lose up to 50 percent of its orders after the January 1 implementation of the World Trade Organisation’s quota reductions on textiles. Most of the country’s garment exports go to the US and have been protected by tariffs but will now be competing directly with China, where wages are lower. Some garment manufacturers have already relocated to China.



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