

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 December 2007

Indian government workers defend medical scheme

On December 11, central government workers in Andrapradesh went on strike and held a sit-down protest at the Begumpet in Hyderabad. They were opposing the withdrawal of health facilities by private hospitals to Central Government Health Scheme (CGHS) beneficiaries.

The protesters, members of the Confederation of Central Government Workers, chanted slogans in support of their demands that included calling on the CGHS to set up its own hospitals with specialists and diagnostic facilities.

The CGHS was initiated in 1954 by the Indian Health Ministry. Under the scheme, government and semi-government employees and pensioners and their families are entitled to receive medical treatment at both government and private hospitals. Recently, however, private hospitals withdrew from the scheme.

Tamilnadu power loom workers demonstrate over electricity failures

Power loom workers in the Salem district of the Indian state of Tamilnadu demonstrated on December 11 over electricity shortages that threaten continued employment. They claim that hundreds of power loom factories across the state suffer frequent blackouts.

The workers demanded that the Tamilnadu state government take immediate steps to ensure the uninterrupted supply of power. They also called on the government to establish a separate welfare board and an insurance scheme for power loom workers, and to provide housing.

Kerala train drivers strike for pay increase

On December 8, train drivers from the Thiruvananthapuram railway division in the Indian state of Kerala went on strike for six hours over increased workloads and a two-hour increase in the work day.

The lightning strike brought most train services across the state to a standstill. The rail authorities have threatened to take tough action against the drivers for striking without prior notice.

Sri Lankan garment workers locked out

Around 500 workers at the Richard Robert garment factory in Kalagedihena near Colombo remain locked out. The workers were locked out on December 6 after campaigning for three weeks for a 2,500 rupee (around \$US23) pay increase.

They are also opposing the management's failure to pay contributions into the workers' provident funds. In total, the missed contribution amounts to 40 million rupees (\$US3.2 million). The management has refused to increase salaries.

Mass transport strike in the Philippines

Public transport in most cities and towns in the Philippines was brought to a standstill on December 13 when tricycle and jeepney drivers and operators joined in a national strike to protest rising fuel prices. Many large schools and universities suspended classes during the strike. Local authorities in many cities were forced to provide additional buses to various routes.

The strike was coordinated by the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) and included unionised workers of the Pagkakaisa ng mga Samahan ng Tsuper at Operator Nationwide (PISTON) who claimed success with up to 80 percent of drivers participating in some cities.

KMU, PISTON, and other groups are demanding that the Arroyo government impose a moratorium on oil price hikes, suspend the oil deregulation law and remove the 12 percent value-added tax on oil products.

NSW power workers stop work to protest privatisation

Workers employed by the state-owned power generating company Delta Electricity held stopwork meetings on December 11 and 12 at power stations in

the Hunter region (west of Newcastle) and Lake Macquarie (south of Newcastle). The workers are protesting the New South Wales (NSW) state Labor government's plan to sell-off its three power retail outlets plus lease out its three power generating companies.

Their action followed the distribution of a company letter to all staff offering bonus packages when the planned privatisation goes ahead. United Services Union (USU) state secretary Ben Kruse complained that the union had not been consulted about the proposed \$10 billion sell-off and incentive packages being offered to workers.

NSW Premier Morris Iemma claimed that no workers would lose jobs. The government is offering incentive bonuses of up to 30 weeks pay to the 1,700 power generating workers and 14,000 retail workers who transfer over to private operators within three years. Workers who wanted to remain state employees would be offered jobs in the state-owned power distribution companies, which would not be sold off.

Unions NSW, the state's peak trade union body, rejected the plan, saying it would lead to higher prices and job losses, and dismissed the "sweetener" payments as a bribe. The USU executive plans a petition to hold a special Labor Party conference to discuss the proposal.

Victorian healthcare union withdraws threat of industrial action

On December 13, the Health Services Union (HSU) withdrew a threat of taking industrial action until further notice after the Victorian state Labor government agreed to conciliation before the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC). The government also agreed to withdraw its application to the AIRC to have the pending industrial action by health workers declared illegal.

The healthcare professionals, including physiotherapists, social workers, radiographers and speech pathologists, are demanding a pay increase, extra staff and a better career structure.

On December 5, a meeting of over 500 union delegates voted for a campaign of industrial action in public hospitals, including the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre and the Sunshine, Williamstown, Footscray, Melbourne, Alfred, Dandenong and Monash Hospitals.

Perth hospital orderlies impose work bans

Hospital orderlies at the Sir Charles Gardiner Hospital, one of Perth's largest public hospitals, imposed work bans on December 10. They are protesting the demand by hospital management that they deal with disruptive and violent patients without proper training and legal clarification.

The orderlies, members of the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU), have banned attending Code Black emergencies which involve a hospital team dealing with violent incidents. A LHMU spokesperson told the media the orderlies would continue the ban indefinitely until the issues were resolved.

Qantas baggage handlers stop work over job security

About 100 baggage handlers employed by Qantas at Adelaide Airport in South Australia walked off the job on December 12 over job security issues and working conditions. Most flights were delayed across the country. Baggage handlers in Perth, Western Australia also held stop-work meetings on the same day.

During the one-day strike in Adelaide, Qantas used around 30 other staff to move baggage. A Transport Workers Union (TWU) spokesman claimed Qantas was considering outsourcing baggage handling. The TWU, however, agreed to a moratorium on industrial action until the end of next month to allow more negotiations.



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