

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 February 2008

Indian power-loom workers continue strike

Power-loom workers in Anthiyur in the Thavuttupalayam region of Tamilnadu are continuing strike action they began on February 6 in support of a pay increase. There are around 3,000 weavers in Thavuttupalayam with some employed in allied activities such as warping and yarn winding.

The weavers have not received a pay increase for nearly 18 years. A spokesman for the workers said: "A casual labourer in construction industry in Anthiyur earns between 80 (\$US2.02) and 90 rupees a day, while we get only 70 rupees."

Indian doctors on strike

About 4,200 doctors in the state of Bihar went on strike for two days on February 7 over several demands, including pay and allowances on par with Central Government doctors. They also want a system of "Assured Career Progression" and the restoration of the powers of the health directorate.

The strike hit services in 25 district hospitals, 70 referral hospitals, 23 sub-divisional hospitals, 533 primary health centres and 1,259 additional primary health centres.

A spokesman for the Bihar State Health Services Association said despite past assurances by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar that the issue would be resolved, and a direction by Patna High Court, the government has failed to deal with the doctors' long-standing demands. He said that doctors would strike again on February 21 if the issues remain unresolved.

Indian railway workers demand pay arrears

Railway workers held a sit-down protest (dharna) outside the Divisional Railway Manager's office in Hubli, Karnataka, on February 7 to press for payment of arrears of PL (productivity-linked) bonus for 2006-2007 and other demands.

The agitation was a part of a week-long protest organised by South Western Railway Employees' Sangh.

Indian municipal and domestic workers protest

Contract municipal workers held a sit-down protest at the Kadapa Municipal Corporation office in Andhra Pradesh on February 11 demanding the full payment of wage arrears for the last three months. In a separate issue, women employed as domestics demonstrated on February 11 in Salem, Tamilnadu, demanding a fixed minimum wage. The protest was organised by the Working Women in Houses Union.

Nepal communication workers continue strike

Workers from the UTL Telco Company remain on strike after

walking out on February 11 demanding permanency. The company, an Indian-Nepal joint venture, contracts out most of its work and is opposed to changing the arrangement.

The main Indian companies involved in UTL are MSNL (Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Ltd), VSNL (Videsh Sanchar Nigam Ltd) and Telecommunications Consultants India Ltd. The local partner is Nepal Venture Pty Ltd. The strikers are members of the United Telecom Workers Union.

Autoworkers strike in Vietnam

More than 5,000 workers at Japanese car-parts manufacturer Yazaki Haiphong Vietnam Company in Hai Phong City (37 km south of Hanoi) walked off the job on February 13. They are opposing cuts to pensions and bonuses, inadequate maternity leave entitlements and poor food. Earlier this month, 2,000 workers on the same estate, Nomura Industrial Park, went on strike over similar complaints. While the workers had been given a wage rise, the employers cut pensions and allowances to offset the increase.

The state-run union did not call the industrial action but has intervened to impose a solution. According to the union, there were 541 strikes in Vietnam last year involving a total of 350,000 workers.

Japanese CEO threatens workers in the Philippines

On February 11, armed law enforcers rushed to the Chiyoda Philippines Integre Incorporated factory in the Laguna Industrial Park to block a march by 24 workers. The personnel came from the Philippine Export Zone Authority (PEZA) Police, the Light Industry and Science Park (LISP) and the Laguna Industrial Park Police Assistance Group.

The workers were also confronted by 23 security guards and the company's Japanese CEO Shinsuke Ozaki who threatened to shoot any one who ventured into the premises. The marchers were protesting over the company's abrogation of a memorandum of agreement (MOA) signed in August 2007, after workers went on strike over the dismissal of 52 of their colleagues.

While management agreed to reinstate all those dismissed, only eight workers have been put back on the payroll. Felimon Alfiler, president of independent union Tunay at Lumalaban paras a Ikatatag ng Manggagawa sa Chyoda, said that he was surprised at the CEO's response because the protest was within the bounds of the law.

Malaysian bus drivers end strike

Around 70 bus drivers at government-owned bus company RapidPenang in Georgetown, Malaysia ended a 24-hour strike on February 5 but buses at six depots on the island of Penang remain idle.

The drivers are campaigning for 15 demands, including a pay rise, management contributions to the Employees Contribution Fund and confirmation of their posts. The Georgetown drivers returned to work after management offered a 20 percent increase in their daily incentive allowance. The deal was made after the drivers signed an agreement preventing them from taking similar action in the future.

On the same day, 100 RapidKL drivers in Kuala Lumpur struck for four hours over several issues, including a pay rise. They returned to work after the company agreed to “investigate” their claims.

Firemen threaten to strike over pay

New South Wales firemen are threatening strike action over stalled pay negotiations. The state Labor government of Premier Morris Iemma has placed a 2.5 percent cap on increases for state public servants, including the state’s 3,500 full-time fire-fighters, even though the annual inflation rate is now running at 3.5 percent.

The union is demanding the government negotiate from a base-line of 4 percent, indicating that it will accept a lower amount in line with union-negotiated agreements in other industries this year.

The fire-fighters are already refusing to cover shifts left vacant by absentee colleagues. A spokesman for the Fire Brigades Employees Union (FBEU) said, “We might be escalating and who knows where it might go.” The government is also demanding various tradeoffs including the loss of one week annual leave. To date, the trade-offs have been rejected by the union.

Hospital scientists to walk out in Victoria

Over 1,000 hospital scientists, psychologists and pharmacists will strike for 24 hours across of Victoria on February 15. The strike affects public hospitals in metropolitan Melbourne and regional hospitals at Bendigo, Shepparton, Echuca and Cobram.

The stoppage is part of a six-month dispute with the state Labor government over a new pay deal. The scientists plan to picket the Alfred Hospital in Prahran.

Medical Scientists Association secretary Dr. Rosemary Kelly said scientists were angry over the government’s refusal to negotiate. “We have had private conferences in the Commission but so far we have not received any realistic offers,” she said. The government is offering a 3.25 percent pay increase per annum, less than the increase given to doctors, nurses and police in recent pay agreements.

New Zealand early childhood teachers vote to strike

More than 50 early childhood teachers in Dunedin voted to strike for 24 hours on February 12 in a dispute over a collective work contract. The teachers, members of the NZ Educational

Institute, are employed by the Dunedin Community Childcare Association which runs five early childhood centres as well as a home-based early childhood service, making it one of the city’s largest early childhood providers.

The Association, however, is refusing to remain a party to the Early Childhood Education Collective Agreement which is supposed to provide national consistency across the early childhood sector. The workers have resolved to take further industrial action.

New Caledonia union leader barricades himself in headquarters

Police in New Caledonia last week surrounded the headquarters of the Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE) after leading union official Gerard Jodar refused to present himself for questioning over last month’s clashes between bus drivers and police. All vehicles entering and leaving the union site were checked. Workers and supporters responded by setting up barricades outside the building which houses the USTKE offices.

Jodar is alleged to have been involved in an incident on January 17 when 400 strikers fought with police who tried to prevent them occupying the headquarters of Carsud, the bus company that provides services in the capital Nouméa and surrounding areas. The workers had struck over the dismissal of a colleague for alleged misconduct.

Over 200 police were sent to disperse the occupation and attacked workers with tear gas grenades, rubber bullets and batons. Some workers were grabbed and claim to have been beaten in the back of police vans. Up to 63 arrests were made with at least 12 strikers held on remand. Most were charged with armed assault on police officers and criminal damage.

Ten of the detainees remain in prison awaiting trial. Two summonses were sent to Jodar but he denies having received them. He has declared that he has no intention of being questioned, claiming police are harassing him not because of alleged violence but because he is the president of the union.



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