

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Strikes widen over Indian pay commission report

Indefinite strike action by 300,000 members of the Bihar State Non-Gazetted Employees Federation (BSNGEF), demanding full implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission report, entered its sixth day on January 12. The walkout has caused major disruptions at all state government departments.

The Sixth Pay Commission has recommended the payment of three years' wage arrears, outstanding since January 1, 2006, the lifting of the retirement age from 58 to 60 years in 2010-11 and the provision of transport allowances to all employees.

BSNGEF and the Bihar Secretariat Services Association (BSSA) rejected a government offer to pay the arrears from April 1, 2007. The BSSA is refusing to enter negotiations with the government stating, "We will not accept anything less than the Commission's recommendations". Chief Minister Sushil Kumar Modi claimed that the Bihar state government had conceded more than it could afford in the latest offer.

Work at various state departments in Jharkhand came to a standstill on January 13, after 250,000 members of the Jharkhand State Non-Gazetted Employees Federation began indefinite strike action over implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. Departments responsible for drinking water and sanitation, forest, fisheries, land, health and village government departments were affected. The striking workers rallied outside the Ranchi district deputy commissioner's building and other collectorate offices in Kutchery, encouraging more state workers to join the walkout.

In the state of Manipur, 15,000 teachers at 2,200 elementary, secondary and higher secondary schools staged a sit-in over the Sixth Pay Commission. The All Manipur Elementary School Teachers Association demonstration came three days after higher secondary school lecturers staged a protest in Imphal city on January 9. It followed a one-month strike by Manipur government employees on November 27 over pay demands.

On January 7, Manipur government employees in Ukhrul district closed almost all state government offices, paralysing developmental and official works. Their union has called for employees in other districts to implement similar action.

The Chief Minister of Manipur told the media this week that the state would introduce the Sixth Pay Commission's recommendations when other Indian states implemented them.

Indian teachers jailed for demonstrating

Over 70 protesting elementary trainee teachers (ETT) in the Punjab were cane-charged and jailed on January 11 for disrupting a political rally for Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal. Angry over their companions' arrests, other teachers rallied outside the court the next day and marched through Maler Kotla markets, accusing the Punjab government of trying to oppress the teachers' protest.

ETT union district president Sukhbir Singh said the teachers were demonstrating because the government had not honoured a promise to absorb ETT teachers into the state education department.

Indian jute workers strike enters third week

An indefinite strike by 2,500 jute workers from the East India Commercial Company Limited (ECCIL) in Kothuru, Andhra Pradesh, entered its third week on January 13. The Indian Federation of Trade Unions and the Telugu Nadu Trade Union Council have presented a charter of demands, included wage increases in line with rising consumer prices, an attendance incentive and advance payment of the dearness allowance.

ECCIL management is refusing to talk to the unions, claiming the strike is illegal because the current agreement does not expire until 2010. The union leadership, ECCIL and Department of Labour officers were due to meet on January 16.

Jobless diamond workers protest in India

Vivekanand Diamond Association members protested at a government-sponsored financial investment summit in Ahmedabad city, Gujarat, on January 12, waving placards condemning the state government for "not doing anything concrete" for jobless diamond workers.

Association member Babu Patel said the state government was turning a blind eye to the fate of two million idled diamond workers. About 80 percent of diamond factories in Gujarat have shutdown as a result of the global financial crisis. The unemployed diamond workers are becoming increasingly desperate and several have committed suicide.

The jobless workers want a government monetary package that includes sufficient access to food grains, cheap loans for community members and education of their children.

Kerala telephone workers on hunger strike

Indian Telephone Industries (ITI) employees in the Kanjikode industrial area, Kerala began a protest hunger strike on January 13 over pay and job security. Workers at the state-owned company are demanding payment of two months' salaries and want ITI to be merged with the government-owned telecom giant Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd. (BSNL) or taken over by the Ministry of Defence.

The Indian government wants to fully privatise its telecommunications industry and claims that ITI is a sick industrial company or "SIC" and referred it to the Board of Industrial and Financial Reconstruction (BIFR). The Indian government established BIFR in 1987, following pressure from the World Bank and the IMF. Its function has been to justify privatising SIC government enterprises.

The Joint Action Committee at Kanjikode has rejected ITI being classified as SIC and claims that the company has made a profit for the past 12 years and paid taxes totalling 6,600 million rupees (\$US132 million).

Laboratory staff in New Delhi strike

Laboratory staff at various New Delhi government hospitals boycotted work for two hours on January 12 over a number of outstanding claims. Their demands include better pay scales, promotional opportunities and doubling of the patient care allowance.

The Joint Forum of Medical Lab Technical Staff, which has accused the Sixth Central Pay Commission of neglecting laboratory staff, also wants passage of the Para-medical and Physiotherapy Central Councils Bill 2007. The bill allows for the establishment of a separate central council for scientific and clinical laboratories and uniform standards for education and diagnostic techniques.

Nepal hotel workers strike for minimum wage

Around 400 hotels and restaurants in Pokhara remained empty on January 9 as indefinite strike action by hotel and restaurant workers entered its third day. Hundreds of tourists deserted the city when they could not get food or accommodation.

The All Nepal Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union wants a government-fixed minimum monthly salary of 4,600 rupees (\$US58). Union chairman Rajendra Timilsina said a memorandum had been presented to the District Administration Office and if the union did not receive a reply in the next few days it would organise protests.

Bangladesh garment workers demonstrate over beatings

Around 700 employees from the Pallmall Style garment factory in Uttara, Dhaka chased a manager from the factory on January 11 and followed him to the local police station where they held a protest, accusing him of beating workers. The workers barricaded the Dhaka-Mymensingh Highway, stopping traffic for more than an hour, and demanded that the manager be charged for assaulting one of their female

colleagues that morning and for past beatings he had inflicted on them.

Employees returned to the factory after senior police and company representatives said they would call a meeting to resolve the matter. Workers were assured that the manager would not be allowed back into the factory.

Bangladesh nurses rally for jobs

Some 200 unemployed nurses rallied in central Shaheed Minar, Dhaka on January 12 to demand jobs. Bekar Diploma Nurses Association secretary Iqbal Hosain Sabuj said there were more than 9,000 nurses unemployed but vacant positions remained unfilled in government hospitals and health complexes.

The nurses attempted to march to the Bangladesh prime minister's office to put their case but were blocked by police.

Korean auto workers vote for strike

Workers at Ssangyong Motor Company, South Korea's No.5 automaker, voted for strike action on January 12 to demand that the major shareholder, the SAIC Motor Corp., save the company from bankruptcy.

The unionised workers, who produce Rexton sport utilities, have accused SAIC of not providing enough financial backing for Ssangyong, which is suffering from plunging car sales and liquidity problems. SAIC, China's largest automaker, has a 51 percent stake in Ssangyong.

A union spokesman also urged the South Korean government to inject money into Ssangyong, to "not only to save the company but also to prevent potential bankruptcies of suppliers". Ssangyong has about 7,100 employees and 250 vendors.

Last week the Seoul Central District Court froze all Ssangyong's debts, obligations and assets and will decide in a month whether the company can file for bankruptcy protection.

Telstra workers resume industrial action

The battle to secure union-negotiated employment agreements for Telstra employees resumed last weekend as union members went on strike for the second time in a month. Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) members refused to work overtime or be available for recalls and call backs for 48 hours from January 10. CEPU and Community and Public Sector Union members first instigated rolling stoppages and placed bans on overtime and call backs in early December.

Telstra is adamant that it will not negotiate a new collective agreement with the unions, claiming only 15 percent of Telstra employees are union members. Telstra spokesman Martin Barr said last weekend's industrial action had no impact on customers as less than 20 employees across Australia declined to do overtime or recalls in the 48 hours.

CEPU national secretary Ed Husic said the union would look to more strikes in the future. "We will be significantly ramping up the level of industrial action in February with the prospect of longer disputes and we may take union members out for indefinite periods," he said.

About 13,000 Telstra employees are covered by an enterprise agreement that expired in September. The unions estimate that the rest of the 32,000

workers are on Australian Workplace Agreements (individual contracts).

Queensland firefighters reach agreement in pay dispute

An 18-month pay dispute between state firefighters and the Queensland government ended on January 13 when the United Firefighters Union (UFU) accepted an average pay rise of 5 percent and new job classifications. The state government said firefighters and station officers would be entitled to some back pay, but it is not yet clear when the new rate will apply.

The dispute came to a head in February 2008 after a breakdown in negotiations between the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service management and the UFU over a job evaluation report in 2006. The government had agreed to adjust the firefighters' classification structure but refused to offer a pay increase, triggering a series of street protests and work bans.

The agreed 5 percent rise is much less than the union's original demand for a 9 percent increase.



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