

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

31 January 2009

Mixed results in Indian pay commission struggle

A 14-day strike by 250,000 non-gazetted government employees in the state of Jharkhand was called off on January 27 following a pay rise deal with the government.

Essential services in the state were paralysed from January 13 after members of the Jharkhand State Non-Gazetted Employees Federation struck over the non-implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations that included pay rises backdated from January 1, 2006. Departments responsible for drinking water and sanitation, forest, fisheries, land, health and village government departments were affected.

Although the government has agreed to implement the recommendations, the accrued payments will be delayed. Employees will receive their pay increase backdated from September 1, 2008 but arrears from January 2006 to August 2008 will be paid in instalments from 2009 to 2012.

The government has also decided to establish joint consultative bodies at department levels and include non-gazetted employees' association representatives to "monitor" workers' demands.

Other commission recommendations, such as lifting the retirement age from 58 to 60 years and the provision of transport allowances to all employees, were not mentioned in the latest media report.

On January 28, work was paralysed in government offices across Jammu and Kashmir when 450,000 state employees struck for 24 hours to demand immediate implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations.

Jammu and Kashmir Employees Joint Action Committee (JKEJAC) members demonstrated in Srinagar city. One JKEJAC member told the protestors that the joint union body would announce future action early next month if the government failed to implement the pay report.

Karnataka farmers protest for wage increases and welfare

On January 28, agricultural workers organised by the Karnataka Pranta Krishi Coolikarara Sangha travelled in procession from Nehru Gunj to the deputy commissioner's office in Gulbarga where they began an indefinite protest.

The workers want a wage increase from 82 rupees to 150 rupees per day (\$US3), in line with the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, and that BPL (below the poverty line) welfare cards be distributed to families of all agricultural workers before January 30. BPL cardholders are supplied essential commodities, such as rice, wheat, edible oil, jowar, sugar and kerosene, at subsidised rates.

Their other demands include an increase in the minimum number of working days from 100 to at least 200 a year for a family and for the government to provide housing for homeless agricultural workers.

Punjab college teachers rally for pay rises

Around 200 members of the Punjab Federation of University and College Teachers Organisations, which represents 10,000 teachers and lecturers from universities and hundreds of government and non-government colleges in the state, walked off the job on January 28 and rallied in Chandigarh to demand implementation of the revised University Grants Commission pay scales.

According to teachers, the central government agreed to introduce the revised pay scales from last November. They want the pay rises before the Indian general elections in four weeks and have threatened to hold further protests if the Punjab government fails to meet their demands.

Tamil Nadu day-care workers strike

Over 250 workers at municipal day-care centres in Krishnagri, Tamil Nadu staged a sit-in strike on January 27 to demand the payment of salary increases approved by the central government in April last year.

The new salary scale grants a 500-rupee minimum monthly wage for day-care workers and 250 rupees for cooking assistants. Other demands

include no reduction in staff numbers, an end to direct deposits of wages into workers' bank accounts and the establishment of Sunday as a holiday.

The day-care employees have threatened further action if their claims are not met.

Cambodian garment workers end strike

Around 4,000 workers from the Yong Wa garment factory in Kandal province's Takhmao district, Cambodia returned to work on January 26 after the owners threatened to close the factory. Workers struck when management announced that this year's 13-month bonus would be cut from \$50 to \$20.

Several employees were injured when 100 local and district police tried to force them back to work. The garment factory owners have agreed to restore the full bonus but abolished overtime and deducted \$5 from each striking worker's salary.

Sacked Japanese hotel workers evicted

Tokyo District Court enforcement officers forcibly removed 130 sacked employees from the Keihin Hotel on January 25. The workers continued to operate the Tokyo hotel for three months after it was shut down by its owners, who claimed that high debt had forced the closure.

Scuffles broke out between the enforcement officers and other union members trying to prevent the eviction. The dispute will now move to the court where some of the former employees have filed a lawsuit seeking the nullification of the company's decision to fire them.

Philippines food-processing workers protest

Lami Foods Corporation employees in Cebu began daily protests at the factory's gates on January 23 after management announced it plans to cut the workweek from six days to four.

Workers Organisation of Lami Foods president Desiderio Lastimoso said: "The two-day reduction in the workweek means a 33-percent cut in workers' pay. It is a sacrifice that workers cannot afford given the hard times."

Lastimoso said the company's proposal was a violation of its collective bargaining agreement and has filed an unfair labour practice case at the National Conciliation and Mediation Board regional office.

NSW Catholic school teachers to stop work

Catholic school teachers in New South Wales voted this week to hold a two-hour stop work meeting on February 5 after they were unable to reach agreement in wage negotiations with employers. The teachers also called on the union to organise a one-day strike if the major issues remain unresolved.

Gloria Taylor from the Independent Education Union (IEU) said that employers had refused to negotiate on class sizes, relief time for lesson planning and other issues.

Traditionally, Catholic school administrators have granted wage increases and adjusted conditions in line with agreements between state school teachers and the government. The IEU has referred some of the major unresolved matters to the NSW Industrial Relations Commission in order to seek assistance with conciliation.

South Australian teachers take pay claim to court

The Australian Education Union (SA), which represents South Australian state school teachers, presented its latest wage claim to the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) this week.

The teachers' union called off a planned strike in November last year after the IRC ruled it illegal. The union then applied to the court for an interim 7 percent pay rise while continuing talks with the government and reducing its claim from 21 to 18 percent over three years.

The state government rejected this and has applied to the IRC to grant a 14 percent rise over three years for classroom teachers and 11 percent for other staff.

The IRC, which began hearing the union's interim pay rise application on January 28, will arbitrate on the full claim in May. South Australian state school teachers have not had a pay rise for 15 months.

New Zealand McDonald's workers ratify contract

After three months of industrial action that included strikes and street protests, Unite Union members from 28 McDonald's restaurants across New Zealand this week narrowly voted to accept a new collective agreement that will deliver some improved conditions, but keeps wages linked to the minimum wage.

Under the agreement, which will take effect in March, trained employees with 12 months' service will receive just 50 cents above the

minimum wage while crew trainers will get 75 cents above the minimum. The minimum wage is set by legislation at \$12 an hour (\$US6.80). **New entrants** and those subject to the minimum training wage will only receive \$9.60 an hour.

Team leaders and certified supervisors will get \$15 and \$16 per hour respectively, which will now be adjusted annually in line with the consumer price index. Most employees will also receive a one-off bonus payment between \$20 and \$100. A new clause also provides employees shift security so that when additional working hours are required in a store the existing crew will be given first consideration.

Unite says it will be "campaigning and lobbying" the National government to raise the minimum wage this year by \$1 an hour.

Lockout threat against NZ oil and gas workers withdrawn

A lockout notice issued against New Zealand oil and gas workers by Offshore Marine Services (OMS) has been withdrawn and a settlement reached following several days of mediation between the company and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU).

OMS provides labour for the oil industry, in this case to Tanker Pacific, which operates the Raroa, a floating production, storage and offloading vessel. OMS served the lockout notice after refusing to meet union claims when bargaining began in September. The lockout was to take effect from January 23.

Night-shift work will now be recognised and pay increases between 14 and 20 percent were granted, backdated to May, along with a 5 percent ratification payment.



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