Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Indian high court orders Bihar public servants back to work

A 34-day strike by 300,000 non-gazetted employees (NGEs) of the Bihar state government ended on February 9 after the Patna High Court ordered them back to work. The directive was made in the court packed with striking employees who have now returned to work with their demands unresolved.

The NGEs walked off the job on January 7 to demand full implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission (SPC), which recommended the payment of three years' wage arrears outstanding since January 1, 2006, transport allowances for all employees and the retirement age lifted from 58 to 60 years in 2010-11.

Acting Chief Justice Chandramauli Kumar Prasad made a non-binding request to the Bihar government not to sack any striking employees and to resolve the deadlock by March 31. A government representative told the court that there would be no disciplinary action against workers if they ended the strike action.

More public servants strike for Pay Commission increases

Thousands of state public sector workers in Jammu and Kashmir walked off the job on February 10 over the non-implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. Thousands of workers attended protest rallies outside district headquarters, paralysing government departments and public sector outlets in both states.

Along with full implementation of SPC recommendations, Jammu and Kashmir workers want regularisation of temporary workers, formation of a transparent transfer policy and revival of the medical claim insurance policy. The strike was called by the All J&K Employees Joint Action Committee.

Police intervene in Tamil Nadu building workers protest

Around 2,000 construction workers, including women, were arrested or detained by the police on February 10 when thousands affiliated to All India Trade Union Congress demonstrated at 13 locations in Tamil Nadu.

The building workers want changes to Government Order MS122, which they claim is anti-worker because it modifies the enrolment of construction workers in the welfare board, the renewal of membership and provision of welfare assistance.

Further demands include, provision of medical facilities, pension benefits, employees' gratuity and provident fund, compensatory allowances of 500,000 rupees ($US10,416) for accidental death and 200,000 rupees for natural death.

Nandankanan zoo workers strike

Over 130 casual workers from Nandankanan Biological Park in Orissa, India began an indefinite strike on February 8 to demand job regularisation. Strike leaders said their 2,100-rupee ($US43) monthly wage was grossly inadequate and that they should have permanent jobs.

Employees said their work involved risks but they did not receive any health or social security benefits. "We do not have any kind of healthcare facilities at all. In case of any mishap, there is no such relief," said Bhaskar Samal, a contractual employee.

The Nandankanan Zoo, which is spread over 1,940 square kilometres, has an international reputation for breeding white tigers, black panthers and crocodiles in captivity. It is home to over 67 species of mammals, 18 varieties of reptiles and 81 species of birds.

Andhra Pradesh child-care workers call off agitation

The Andhra Pradesh Anganwadi Workers and Helpers' Union on February 9 called off a 45-day protest after Chief Minister Y. S.

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Rajasekhara Reddy issued orders to delay Government Orders to place the workers under the control of village councils and non-government organisations and make it easier to dismiss them.

Reddy postponed the orders, "pending detailed examination of the petition submitted by the union". The minister's announcement was made while care workers were holding protests rallies in Kakinda and Rajahmundry.

Municipal workers demonstrate in Andhra Pradesh

Contract and regular employees of the four municipalities in the Vizianagaram district, Andhra Pradesh, staged protest demonstrations at the Collector's Office in the district on February 9. The protestors were demanding payment of salaries and regularisation of contract workers.

According to the workers, Bobbili municipal employees have not been paid salaries for the last seven months. Parvathipuram and Salur employees have been paid for the last six months and in Vizianagaram the last three months. Workers later submitted a memorandum to the Joint Collector.

West Bengal tea estate workers demand back-pay

On February 10, Jogmaya Tea Estate workers staged a two-hour blockade of National Highway 55 at Ghayabari in West Bengal's Darjeeling district for payment of three months' outstanding wages. They said they would continue their protests because they were facing "a grave livelihood problem".

Sri Lankan power workers protest for salary rise

Around 15,000 Ceylon Electricity Board power workers demonstrated outside their respective offices in Colombo, Kandy, Galle, Batticaloa and Kuliyapitiya on February 11 to demand a 40 percent salary rise.

According to the United Trade Union Front (UTUF), the government has failed to grant the salary increment due last month. The union called off a power workers' strike in June last year when the government said it would increase salaries. The promise was not kept.

UTUF general secretary Ranjan Jayalal said, "The last occasion the workers received a salary increment was in 2006". Workers have vowed to continue their struggle if the government fails to immediately solve the salary issue.

Sri Lankan railway station masters on strike

The Sri Lanka Railway Station Masters' Union (SLRSMU) launched a 48-hour strike on February 9 to demand implementation of salary revisions granted to station masters in 2006. Other demands include salary increments for station masters and the filling of all vacancies.

The station masters pointed out that there have been no new recruits after 2002 and that Sri Lanka Railways' management has ignored their demands for years. They have threatened to escalate industrial action if railway management continues to ignore their demands.

Hong Kong communications workers strike

More than 300 contract staff for PCCW, Hong Kong's largest telco, launched a half-day strike on February 10 over company plans to lay off 600-700 staff and cut the salaries of most other employees by 10 percent. They demonstrated outside PCCW Tower in Quarry Bay, Hong Kong.

PCCW Employees General Union chairman Leung Ting-to said the company had refused to fully disclose the extent of the cutbacks. Leung said, "The company said it was up to the various departments to decide how to cut costs, either by reducing salaries, cutting staff or working hours".

Hong Kong Telecommunications Industry Employees General Union chairman Ha Chi-hung said more than 1,000 outsourced workers have had their salaries cut by 10 to 30 percent. Sixteen subcontracting companies that provide services to PCCW have threatened to strike.

Thai holiday resort workers strike

A strike by 200 employees at the Laguna Phuket resort in Thailand over annual bonuses and pay rises entered its third day on February 7. The protesting workers have blocked three roads into the complex. Guests and residents are being allowed in and out on motorbikes but passage has been denied to larger vehicles and tour buses.

Union members are unhappy with their annual bonus, which they claim is half that of previous years and usually the equivalent of one month's salary. They are also complaining that there has been no increase in annual salaries, which they had expected to rise by 4 percent.

The resort's management claims only 5 percent of employees are involved in the protest but workers have set up tents and cooking facilities at protest sites, indicating that they are prepared for a long-term campaign.

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Queensland rail unions to strike

Queensland Rail (QR) workers have announced strike action in Brisbane, the state capital, next week.

The Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Engineers (AFULE), which represents just under half of QR's 1,000 city train crews, has called a 24-hour strike from midnight February 15. The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), which represents the remaining rail workers, will hold a 24-hour walkout from midnight February 17.

The unions are in dispute with the Queensland Labor government over a new enterprise agreement. The main sticking point is QR's demand for cuts to train crews' days off from 19 to 16 in an eight-week period. AFULE state secretary Greg Smith said the union was prepared to meet with QR but the employer had to scrap any idea of reducing workers' leisure time.

The government has applied to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission to have the bargaining period terminated to avert the strike action but RTBU secretary Owen Doogan said it was a "pointless exercise" because the AIRC had been stripped of its powers by the previous federal government.

Queensland Transport Minister John Mickel said he wanted the union to reconsider a previous pay offer, which he claimed would give workers an average increase of $20,000 over three years.

Air traffic controllers vote to strike

Australian air traffic controllers have voted by a 95 percent majority for industrial action over a long-running pay dispute with Airservices Australia. Civil Air, the controllers union, immediately announced that it had no immediate plans for action and it claimed significant progress in talks with Airservices.

According to the media, the parties reached an understanding on pay, sick, rostering and work classifications. Australian Council of Trade Unions president Sharan Burrow and Airservices Australia chief executive Greg Russell were reportedly involved in the talks.

The vote to strike followed months of negotiations that reached a deadlock with Airservices, which wanted to limit sick leave to 15 days. Air traffic controllers want to retain unlimited sick leave because they are on a 24-hour roster and have to meet higher health standards than other members of the community. Union members were also demanding a 7 percent annual pay increase. Airservices offered 4 percent each year for three years.

Civil Air executive secretary Peter McGuane said, "We're confident we can get to a position whereby we've allocated much of next week to work towards an agreement".

New Sydney ferry draws protest from union

Around 30 members of the Maritime Union of Australia held a protest picket at Circular Quay in Sydney on February 10 over safety, wages and working conditions on the new Manly Fast Ferry. The fast ferry is run by private Queensland whale tour company Bass and Flinders.

According to union organiser Warren Smith, the ferry did not meet union or WorkCover standards and was really designed for extended whale watching tours and not for high speed commuter services.

The union also claims that the vessels had not been properly examined by WorkCover and that crew members were being paid 25 percent less per hour than other Sydney ferry workers.

Sydney has been without a fast ferry service between the city and the Northern Beaches for the past six weeks after the NSW Government cancelled the Manly JetCat service, claiming it was financially unviable.

Industrial court grants South Australian teachers interim pay rise

South Australia's public school teachers this week were granted a 3.75 percent interim pay rise by the Industrial Relations Commission, half of the 7 percent they were seeking.

Australian Education Union (AEU) official Correna Haythorpe said the interim increase was welcome because teachers had not had a pay rise in 16 months. "This will allow them to keep up the fight with the state government because it's about many more issues than just salary," she said.

The union has been involved in a lengthy fight for improved pay and conditions and held several protest walkouts last year. AEU members want an 18 percent pay rise over three years but the South Australian Labor government has offered only 14.2 percent.

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