Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 January 2011

India: Rajasthan asbestos miners protest

On Tuesday, 30 miners and family members began a four-day protest at the National Institute of Occupational Health (NIOH) in Ahmedabad, Rajasthan to demand release of a medical report on their status as asbestosis sufferers. The report will allow them to seek compensation and free medical treatment.

According to the Rajasthan State Mine Labour Union, at least 18 out of 164 people tested by NIOH have died and many others, including family members, are critically ill from the deadly disease. A case to force NIOH to release the report has been filed at the Rajasthan High Court.

Union official Raghunath Manwar said that following a Supreme Court ruling, anyone afflicted with asbestosis is entitled to 100,000 rupees ($US2,240) compensation and free medical treatment at government hospitals. He claimed that the Supreme Court had ruled, however, that the "NIOH is the ultimate authority to ascertain whether a person is suffering from asbestosis."

Andhra Pradesh health workers strike in fourth week

Hundreds of members of the Andhra Pradesh Voluntary Health Workers' Union (Aasha) are maintaining strike action begun on December 13 over pay. The voluntary workers want pay scales in place of honorariums, a minimum wage, a 100-rupee travel allowance to attend district health officer meetings and the provision of uniforms and medical kits.

Strikers protest outside the office building of the tribal welfare minister in Visakhapatnam last Saturday and then, under surveillance by a large number of police, were allowed to enter the premises and present their demands to the minister.

Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) health workers claim the government promised wages with payments between 150 rupees and 500 rupees for each task but payments were irregular and delayed by up to five months. One worker complained that the government had cut some task payments by 70 percent and imposed additional work, such as registration of births, deaths and marriages, sanitation and government surveys.

Karnataka transport workers demonstrate

On Wednesday, Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation workers protested outside the Divisional Controller's office in Tumkur to demand managers end their "harassment" of staff, including drivers, conductors and mechanics. Their other demands include an end to salary deductions caused by unnecessary fines, compensation for working double and treble shifts and a day off each week.

Kerala university workers protest

Kannur University employees protested at the Mangattuparamba campus this week to demand improved conditions. The Kannur University Staff Organisation and the Federation of All Kerala University Employees want an end to unauthorised recruitment and all teachers employed through the Public Service Commission. They also want all punitive action against union leaders withdrawn and staff allowed to seek jobs in new medical, veterinary and fisheries universities.

Tamil Nadu road workers demonstrate

Salem road workers in Tamil Nadu launched a one-day protest on January 5 to demand a wage rise and an end to state highway privatisation. Their charter of ten demands included promotion based on qualifications, 10 percent of Grade I vacancies filled by the road workers, free bus passes and fixed travelling allowances, along with rain coats and winter clothes for the hill regions and immediate filling of all the 4,000 vacancies in road works.

Bangladeshi garment workers strike

At least 1,700 employees of Universe Knitting Wear in Ashulia walked off the job on Sunday after being shown a new wage sheet offering to pay 41 taka ($US0.58) for each garment produced. The knitwear workers wanted 45 taka per garment.

Management closed the factory and called police when the strikers refused to return to work. Several people were injured and hospitalised. The strike ended after management agreed to pay 44 taka per garment.

Bangladeshi bus workers boycott highway

Members of the Jessore District Bus Workers' Union and Narail District

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Bus Workers' Union have been refusing to operate buses on the Narail-Jessore highway since December 28. They claimed that the highway was "completely unusable" and highly accident prone from poor maintenance. The bus workers told management that they will only operate buses on the route when authorities begin renovations.

Pakistani power workers protest privatisation

The Pakistan Wapda Hydro-Electric Central Labour Union has announced national protests against the privatisation of power distributing companies from January 4. The union told media that action would begin with a rally at the National Press Club in Islamabad followed by a procession to Parliament House. On duty workers would wear black armbands and hoist black flags at their work site.

Meanwhile, workers at the privatised Karachi Electric Supply Company (KESC), burnt company letters offering voluntary redundancy at union-organised "gate meetings". Termination packages have been offered to 4,500 non-technical and non-core employees, including office boys, drivers, sanitary workers and security guards. The KESC Labour Union said that members attended over 60 gate meetings this week and that protests will continue until January 15, the deadline for the targeted workers to accept the termination package.

South Korean contract cleaners protest

More than 30 janitors and female cleaners in their 50s and 60s have been occupying Hongik University's main building in Seoul since Monday to demand the school withdraw the collective termination of their employment contracts. Around 170 subcontractors were fired last month. The terminations occurred not long after the workers organised a labor union last month and demanded higher wages and improved conditions.

The cleaners said they were being paid 4,120 won ($US3.65) per hour, which is less than the 4,320 won legal minimum. University officials claim that they cannot negotiate with the protesting workers because they were hired by another agency.

Burmese workers in Thailand strike

Over 300 Burmese migrant workers at the SYK Autopart Import-Export Company in Bangkok walked off the job on Monday for improved conditions and to protest labour rights violations. They want paid national holidays, medical leave and the right to obtain temporary passports and work permits. The workers also called for CCTV cameras to be installed in the workplace so that their hours of work could be properly recorded.

The strikers returned to work after three hours when worker representatives claimed management, in the presence of police, agreed to meet all their demands.

SYK, which manufactures motorcycle helmets, spare parts and accessories, employs around 500 people, including more than 300 Burmese migrant workers.

Vietnamese electronics manufacturing workers strike

Up to 1,000 workers at the Taiwan-owned Neo-Neon factory in Thai Binh City, Vietnam walked off the job on Tuesday to demand a 13th month salary payment and extension of the Lunar New Year (Tet) holiday from four to eight days to bring them in line with government employees. Strikers returned to work the next day after factory management agreed to their demands.

New South Wales nurses close public hospital beds

NSW Nurses Association (NSWNA) members have closed 300 beds at hospitals around the state with more closures expected next week. NSWNA members in public hospitals and community health services on Tuesday started closing one in four beds as part of their campaign for a minimum nurse to patient radio of 1 to 4. Nurses also want improved skill mix for nursing in ten specialised areas.

The NSWNA called industrial action after the state Labor government refused to accept an Industrial Relations Commission recommendation that it "formulate a written offer" in response to the nurses' claims. The association has been demanding an offer on staffing ratios and skill mix since August.

On November 24, up to 35,000 nurses took state-wide industrial action with thousands participating in a mass meeting in Sydney over the issues. The overwhelming support for industrial action is a measure of the anger felt by nurses towards the increasingly dysfunctional public hospital system.

Target office workers in Victoria continue industrial action

On Tuesday, for the third time in three weeks, clerical workers at Target, one of Australia's largest retailers, stopped work for four hours at the company's headquarters in Melbourne—the third time in three weeks—over a new collective agreement.

Australian Services Union (ASU) members have overwhelmingly rejected a company offer of an $11.50 a week increase every six months during the three-year agreement. Workers want a $38 a week pay rise in the first year and $30 a week for the remaining two years. An ASU official claimed the difference between the workers' total claim and Target's offer was only $500,000 over three years.

According to the union, Target management has refused to enter collective bargaining talks, ignoring a May ruling by the federal Labor government's Fair Work Australia, which ordered the company to negotiate with the union.

Queensland bus drivers cancel strike

Sunbus drivers in Townsville and the Sunshine Coast cancelled a strike planned for January 4 and agreed to enter into talks with the company next week for a new work agreement.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) claims that the Transit Australia Group, which owns and operates Sunbus, wants to force its 200 drivers

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back onto award pay rates and conditions. This means wage cuts of up to $4 an hour and the elimination of allowances won over the last 10 years. The TWU wants a 4 percent pay rise and current entitlements maintained.

Sunbus drivers struck three times in December over the issue and said they will walk out again if the company doesn't put anything "sensible" forward at next week's talks.

New Zealand casino workers begin industrial action

Over 1,100 StarCity casino employees in Auckland began a series of stop-work meetings on January 1 for a new collective agreement. Unite and the Service and Food Workers Union want $15 an hour minimum wage with proportionate increases for all staff.

The unions claim that new employees begin on $12.81 an hour; and in order to meet the $15 minimum demand, wage rates would have to increase by up to 7 percent. The company has offered 3 percent a year for 3 years if all other union demands are withdrawn.

The casino workers also want payment for parking and meals, inclusion of frontline salaried staff in the collective agreement, and regular hours or shifts for part-time employees.

Papua New Guinea teachers in Madang protest

Over 400 Madang province public school teachers are protesting at the education office in Madang to demand payment of leave entitlements due on December 10. The entitlements include a transport allowance that enables them to return home for the school holiday period. Teachers are furious that they still remain in Madang with only two weeks remaining before schools reopen. Teachers have threatened to boycott classes if entitlements are not paid.

Hundreds of Papua New Guinea teachers are left stranded across the nation each year because the National Teaching Service Commission refuses to provide adequate funds for the end of year allowances.

The PNG Teachers Association, while condemning the plight of stranded teachers each year, has never organised a unified campaign to win teachers' allowance demands. The PNG Teachers Association sub-branch representative in Madang issued a lame call for teachers to meet with union executives during the week.

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