

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 February 2011

Indian power-loom workers ignore unions' return to work order

Tens of thousands of Indian migrant textile workers who operate more than 450,000 power-loom at Surat City, in Gujarat state, are refusing to return to work after textile unions claimed they had reached an agreement with factory owners on a pay increase. Many workers are returning to their homelands, fearing reprisals by employers for their participation in the five-day strike that ended on January 20. The unions had accepted a 10-paise (0.2 US cents) increase per metre of cloth produced, and ordered strikers back to work.

One migrant worker told the media: "There are a lot of problems in the factories and they beat us. If anyone asks to increase the wages, then the rich men kill them. The factories have been closed for the last 15 days. We are in a lot of trouble and we don't even have our wages. We don't even have money. We will have to manage, somehow."

The Surat City weaving sector manufactures 30 million metres of fabric per day and employs about 700,000 migrant workers from the states of Orissa, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra. Most factories remained closed this week and the government deployed police to all factories in the city to quell any further action by workers.

Meanwhile, power-loom workers in the Jolva industrial estate on the outskirts of Surat, who were not involved in the January strike, have walked off the job, forcing the closure of 1,000 weaving factories containing over 30,000 looms. Striking workers want a 25-paise (0.5 US cents) pay increase for each metre of cloth produced.

Port workers on strike at Kochi

Workers at Kochi Port, in the south-western Indian state of Kerala, walked off the job on Tuesday and marched to the office of Dubai Ports World, which operates the Rajiv Gandhi Container Terminal, to demand job protection. Workers want Kochi Port to be developed as a domestic cargo hub after container operations are shifted to a new terminal at nearby Vallarpadam Island. Port authorities assured protesters there would be no job losses but gave no details.

Berhampur sanitation workers on strike

More than 400 sanitation workers of the Berhampur Municipal Corporation (BMC), in the eastern Indian state of Orissa, have joined striking municipal casual workers to support their claim for permanent status. Up to 560 members of the BMC Casual Employees Association

walked off the job on January 26 to demand permanency and for the same entitlements as permanent workers. The strike has affected road cleaning and rubbish collection.

According to an association spokesman, several of the casual workers have worked for the BMC since 1992, and workers had demanded permanency over many years.

Protesting Karnataka child care workers arrested

Over 350 child care workers (anganwadi) were arrested when police tried to break up a protest in the city of Davanagere on January 28. Anganwadi centres in the district, in India's south-east, were closed for the day. Hundreds of women workers rallied at Gandhi Circle to demand the government fulfil their long-pending demands for regularisation of their jobs, a pension and increased salaries.

Karnataka power workers protest despite union opposition

Non-permanent workers of Mangalore Electricity Company (Mescom) staged a protest at the company's head office in the port city of Mangalore on January 31, to demand regularisation of all contract employees. Protesting members of the Non-Permanent Workers Association condemned union officials for not mobilising the permanent workers for a united struggle. They accused the officials of issuing statements discouraging the permanent workers from joining the protest.

Bangladeshi garment workers protest

At least 100 garment workers rallied in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, on January 30 to demand the government enforce laws against "indiscriminate" rises in house rents for garment workers. According to the protesters, workers often face rent hikes twice in a year. Having fought for months for pay rises, their gains had been wiped out by rent increases.

Anju, a protesting worker from Mirpur, said her landlady had put the monthly rent up to 3,300 taka from 3,000 (\$US42) in December, but would only allow her to share her room with one person. Since her monthly salary was 3,000 taka, half her salary went in rent. Despite politicians urging the protesting workers to pressure the government, Anju said the government alone could not stop the rent rises; rather the workers

needed to join hands and take action.

Vietnamese garment workers strike

More than 700 garment workers at a South Korean firm, Ba Sao Garment Company, in the central Vietnamese city of Da Nang, walked off the job on January 25 to demand their December salaries and Tet holiday bonuses. Other complaints included poor quality lunches, too many extra shifts and no guarantee of social insurance, even though they had paid for it regularly for the past two years.

An earlier investigation by the government's labour department found that the company owed 203 million dong (\$US10,400) in workers' social insurance payments to the insurer, and had denied several female workers pregnancy support. The government has ordered the company to pay the December and January salaries.

Australian waterside workers hold rolling strikes

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members at Patrick bulk and general facility at Melbourne's Webb Dock yesterday began their second four-day strike in a month for a new work agreement. The action came two days after 160 MUA members at Patrick docks in Western Australia ended a five-day strike over the agreement. The union's claim is for a 30 percent pay rise over three years, improved safety and reduced casual employment.

According to the MUA, 60 percent of Patrick workers were casual and the union has called for long-term casual workers to be offered permanent positions. Another issue is improved safety training—three port workers were killed in accidents during 2010. The union is seeking a settlement, accusing Patrick of refusing to put an offer on the table during seven months of negotiations.

Western Australian aged care workers locked out

Up to 50 aged care employees at Carinya nursing homes in Perth were locked out on Monday because they held a four-hour stoppage on Saturday, which the employer claimed was illegal. Carinya management told workers they would be locked out, with no pay, for seven days, but on Wednesday the Fair Work Australia (FWA) tribunal ruled that the lock-out was illegal. Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) members have been taking limited industrial action for two weeks, with two four-hour stoppages.

Carinya workers have not had a pay rise for two years. For seven months the LHMU has been attempting to negotiate a pay rise of \$1 an hour and annual leave entitlements. Management has offered an increase of just 26 cents an hour. The union and management agreed to resume negotiations and report to FWA next Wednesday.

New South Wales power workers end strike

After an eight-day strike, about 60 contract workers at the Eraring power station on Lake Macquarie, north of Sydney, voted to go back to work after their employer Power Projects International (PPI) reached an interim agreement with the Australian Workers Union (AWU).

PPI is carrying out a \$600 million upgrade on one of the power station's four boilers. The AWU claimed members were doing construction-type work but were paid at a maintenance rate, \$10 an hour less than the construction rate of pay. The union has accepted the company's terms of a \$5 per hour allowance as well as \$100 a week paid into a redundancy trust fund.

Tasmanian nurses to hold stop work meetings

The Tasmanian branch of the Health and Community Services Union, covering 600 nurses and more than 800 allied health professionals, will hold stop work meetings next week over a state Labor government plan to introduce nursing assistants in public hospitals. The plan is a cost-cutting measure, with no extra budget for the positions, which will take the place of more senior qualified nurses.

About 90 per cent of the union's members voted against the government's recent enterprise bargaining deal because it included a trial of nursing assistants, who will carry out such tasks as showering patients and basic monitoring. However, the Australian Nursing Federation, which represents most nurses, supported the agreement.

Queensland bus drivers' dispute goes to industrial court

After two months of industrial action, which included strikes by 200 Sunbus drivers and lockouts in Townsville and the Sunshine Coast, north of Brisbane, the Transport Workers Union (TWU) has done an about-face and agreed to allow their long-running pay dispute to be referred to Industrial Relations Court mediation talks.

Sunbus's owner, Transit Australia Group, wants to force the drivers back onto award pay rates and conditions. This could mean wage cuts of up to \$4 an hour and the elimination of allowances won over the past 10 years. The TWU has proposed a 4 percent pay rise, with current entitlements maintained.

New Zealand casino workers strike

Workers at Auckland's SkyCity Casino held a 12-hour strike on Wednesday to protest the company's refusal to allow staff to take leave during the Chinese New Year period. The Unite union claims that the policy discriminates against Chinese workers, who make up a third of the staff. According to the union, the casino targets "high value" Chinese gamblers to play over the New Year period.

Around 1,100 of the casino's 2,500 staff are members of either the Unite union or the Service and Food Workers Union. On January 1, they began a series of stopwork meetings for a new collective agreement. The unions say new hires are paid just \$12.81 an hour (\$US9.93) and are proposing a \$15 an hour minimum wage, with proportionate increases for all staff. The company has offered an increase of just 3 percent over three years.

Papua New Guinea teachers protest

A group of teachers rallied at the education office at Mendi, in the Southern Highlands, on Monday and locked it with a padlock and chain to protest their low pay. A PNG Teachers Association (PNGTA) official told the media that the teachers would refuse to return to their respective schools when the school year began next week.

Around 4,000 teachers in the province are calling for increased pay and housing and hardship allowances. Teachers are also demanding an allowance of 400 Kina (\$US152) to compensate for the impact of natural gas projects on the cost of living. The PNGTA also wants the 6-Kina housing allowance increased to 100 Kina.

Meanwhile, more than 30 teachers from coastal provinces remain stranded in the Western Highlands, unable to return home to visit their families in the annual holiday period, because their travel allowances were cut by more than 60 percent. Last month, more than 400 teachers in Madang protested against the government's non-payment of travel entitlements.



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