

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 March 2011

India: Mumbai doctors and paramedics strike

Up to 10,000 paramedics, including nurses, ward boys, lab technicians and outdoor staff, at 16 civic-run hospitals in the city struck for 24 hours on Thursday and were followed yesterday by 3,500 doctors and 5,000 interns. Their demands include the urgent recruitment of additional paramedics, wage parity with other states' interns, implementation of the Doctor Protection Act, and fee cuts for post-graduate courses.

According to a Municipal Majdoor Union official, hospital management are attempting to overcome a shortage of 2,500 paramedics by cancelling holiday leave and imposing excessive amounts of overtime. An Association of State Medical Interns spokesman said that interns work up to 20 hours a day and are paid labourers' salaries.

Punjab civil servants demonstrate

Hundreds of civil servants, including teachers, draftsmen and administrative staff, walked off the job and held seven separate protests in the city of Mohali on March 22. Central city traffic came to a standstill when the protests spilled onto the streets. The demonstrators were demanding regularisation of employment, the source of numerous strikes and protests during recent years.

Unions leading the protests included the Panchayat Secretary Union, Zila Parishad Category-4 Employees Union, ETT Teachers Union, Municipal Corporation Employees Union and the Punjab State Education Board Employees Union. Panchayat secretaries were also demanding payment of outstanding salaries, seniority lists to be released and changes to the payment of provident funds.

India: Meghalaya government workers protest low wages

Members of the All Garo Hills Muster Roll Workers' Union and All Garo Hills Daycare Centre Workers Association rallied in Tura, in the Garo Hills district, Meghalaya on March 19 to demand regularisation and a salary increase. Workers are demanding wage rises to compensate for unprecedented increases in the cost of essential goods.

Up to 5,000 municipal workers are employed under the muster-roll category and receive daily wages ranging from as little as 100 rupees

(\$US2.22), for unskilled workers, to 150 rupees for highly skilled workers. About 1,300 daycare workers are paid 1,500 rupees (\$US33.33) per month.

Goa public servants on strike

Members of the 40,000-strong All Goa Government Employees Association (GGEA) began indefinite "pen- and tool-down" industrial action on March 21 to demand a revision of salary grades.

The government responded by implementing the Essential Services Maintenance Act, which makes all industrial action illegal. A Goa government spokesperson told the media last Saturday that any workers "not discharging their assigned duties during the strike period, shall be treated as absent and the principle of 'no work no pay' will be invoked."

While the union claimed the strike was indefinite, it called off the industrial action on March 23, following assurances from Goa's chief minister Digambar Kamat that the government would resolve their grievances following a report from a committee headed by the law secretary. The walkout was part of ongoing protests that began in September to demand restoration of pay parity across all ranks.

Sri Lankan university teachers on strike

The Federation of University Teachers Association called a national stoppage on March 15 to demand a wage rise, an upgrade of lecturers to the professional category and a 6 percent increase in university funding. An Open University Teachers Association official told the media that Sri Lanka has one of the lowest salary scales for academics in the South Asian region.

Pakistani power workers demonstrate

Thousands of Karachi Electric Supply Company (KESC) employees marched through to the Karachi Press Club on March 14 to protest the utility's new employment plan, which will transfer regular workers onto contracts. Workers fear that KESC management wants them on contracts in order to make it easier to sack them.

In January, the government pressured former state-owned KESC to reinstate over 4,000 employees made redundant in a series of cost-cutting measures following its privatisation. KESC sold more than 70 percent of its shares to a Middle Eastern consortium in 2005.

Hong Kong cleaners and security employees protest

Nearly 100 cleaners and security workers belonging to the Cleaning Service Industry Workers Union and the Buildings Management and Security Workers General Union held a street procession and rallied outside the government administration building in Hong Kong to demand standardisation of the working day.

The unions want legislation enacted to restrict the working day to eight hours. A union official said up to 150,000 security employees are forced to work a minimum of 12 hours a day. The demonstration ended after a letter was submitted to a government representative. In 2009, Hong Kong's 550,000 cleaners, who make up 15 percent of the work force, earned on average \$HK7,960 (\$US1,021) a year.

Australian government research scientists maintain industrial action

More than 2,000 Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) employees at 43 sites around Australia began two-hour rolling stoppages on March 22 for an improved work agreement. The dispute has been ongoing for the past six months. Workers' demands include an annual pay rise, redundancy payouts and calls for improved staff consultation.

The CSIRO Staff Association wants a 4.6 percent pay increase but two other unions in the dispute—the Community and Public Sector Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union—have indicated that they are willing to negotiate for less.

CSIRO management is holding out for a 3 percent per annum increase over three to four years, which the Staff Association claims does not cover rising living costs.

Queensland municipal council employees strike

Up to 500 employees of the Fraser Coast Council, north of Brisbane, walked off the job and rallied outside the council's office in Maryborough on Thursday to oppose the council's Certified Agreement offer. Nine months of negotiations reached deadlock last week with the three unions involved rejecting a "final" management offer of a 2.7 percent annual pay increase or \$26.50 per week, whichever is greater. Council workers are concerned about the removal of a no-redundancy clause and that management is planning to implement various cost-cutting measures.

A Queensland Services Union spokesman told the media that Fraser Coast workers were among the lowest paid regional council workers and that administrative staff were granted a 4 percent annual pay

increase over three years in July. Other unions involved in the dispute are the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union.

Victorian cemetery workers end strike

Cemetery workers at Altona and Fawkner Cemeteries in Melbourne ended a five-day strike this week after the Greater Metropolitan Cemetery Trust agreed to increase staff numbers. Australian Workers Union members walked off the job on March 17 to protest over management's refusal to hire sufficient staff to maintain decent standards. They were later joined by indoor workers who struck in support.

Northern Territory paramedics maintain work bans

Over 80 paramedics in the Northern Territory are maintaining work bans imposed in late February in a pay dispute with St John Ambulance. The action includes bans on overtime and the transport of discharged patients to their homes. Members of the United Voice union want a 15 percent pay rise over three years to achieve pay parity with other paramedics in Australia, plus allowance increases to bring them in line with state government employees.

United Voice officials have predicted that the paramedics will reject St John's latest offer of a 3 percent annual pay increase over three years with increased allowances for higher grade officers. The union and management plan to resume talks at the end of next week.



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