

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 January 2012

## India: Andhra Pradesh contract rural medical workers' strike in ninth week

At least 70 percent of emergency medical services in rural Andhra Pradesh have been affected since November 9, when contract employees of "104" ambulance and mobile health services walked off the job over several demands. On Monday, striking rural medical workers protested at the Vizianagaram district collector's office to demand immediate resolution of their demands. These include on-time salary payments, increased staffing levels, resolution of relocation issues, adequate medicines and the repair of faulty ambulances.

Up to 3,500 contract workers provide basic medical and ambulance services in rural areas. The 104 Contract Employees Union wants the government, which funds 95 percent of 104 services, to fully operate the services instead of outsourcing to private companies.

## Andhra Pradesh junior doctors and medical science staff on strike

Over 300 junior doctors at five teaching hospitals attached to the Andhra Medical College (AMC) have been on strike since December 26 to demand regularisation and payment of four months' dues. Elective surgery in most government hospitals in Andhra Pradesh has been affected.

A Junior Doctors Association official claimed that junior doctors were forced to go on strike at least once a year over delayed salary payments. The government has released 40 million rupees (\$US878,000) for salaries and on January 2 ordered doctors back to work. Doctors said they would remain on strike until the government provides a written commitment that all salaries will be paid on time and implements its 2009 promise of regularisation.

Andhra Pradesh Medical Employees Union members at the Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) in Kadapa began a relay hunger strike on December 29 to demand payment of outstanding salaries and permanency for 14 employees attached to the institution.

## Tamil Nadu police arrest striking power loom workers

At least 700 striking power loom workers, including women and children, were arrested by police after they marched in Sankarankovil, Tirunelveli district on January 2. Over 10,000 power loom workers

have been on strike since December 26 to demand improved wages and entitlements.

The Contract Weavers Association and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions have demanded a 75 percent wage rise and want leave pay increased from 50 rupees to 150 rupees (\$US3.30). Power loom workers typically work 11-hour days and are paid between 120 and 150 rupees a day. Sankarankovil power loom workers have not had a pay increase for three years.

## Karnataka midday meal workers protest

On December 31, over 100 women employed as cooks and assistants at midday meal centres in Gulbarga district schools held a street procession in Gulbarga to demand a wage rise and the same benefits paid to other government workers.

Samata Sainik Dal union officials have submitted a memorandum to the state's chief minister demanding wages for chief cooks be increased to 4,500 rupees a month and assistant cooks to 3,500 (\$US65.7) a month. The union also wants the government to drop plans to outsource the midday meal scheme.

## Assam tea garden workers locked out

Over 200 workers from the Borhat tea garden in the far north-east Indian state of Assam protested outside the Borhat police station on December 31 to demand tea garden management lift a lockout imposed on December 30, when workers protested over the death of a colleague.

Members of the Chah Janajati Mahila Mahasabha allege that the worker's death was caused by management negligence. According to workers, Raimati Majhi, who had received medical treatment at the garden hospital, collapsed and died on the job after she was forced back to work while still ill. The tea workers want the manager and hospital doctor removed and compensation paid to Raimati's family.

## Pakistan: KESC workers protest sackings

Several hundred Karachi Electric Supply Company (KESC) workers rallied outside the Karachi Press Club on December 31 and several began a hunger strike the next day to demand an end to the company's replacement of employees with contract labour.

In July, following six months of industrial action in protest against company plans to slash 4,500 jobs, union leaders made a deal with KESC to place workers in a "surplus pool" and offer voluntary separation. Workers who rejected the offer were supposed to be absorbed back into the company. According to the KESC Workers' Solidarity Committee, all employees who rejected voluntary separation have been sacked.

KESC was privatised in 2006 on the condition that the new owner upgraded the network's infrastructure. The company has come under increased criticism from the government and businesses over frequent power blackouts caused by load shedding and faulty infrastructure. The unions have accused KESC of shedding staff to cut costs.

### **Islamabad health workers on strike**

Health sector workers in Islamabad public hospitals, including doctors, nurses, paramedics and support workers, held 24-hour rolling stoppages from Monday to Wednesday this week against a new wage structure proposed in last year's Health Personnel Pay Scale Bill. Health sector workers claim the new scheme will have a negative effect on promotions and other benefits.

Striking health sector workers protested outside parliament where the government is preparing to table the new structure for approval. Most hospitals services, including the huge Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences, were affected by the strike.

Workers want time-scale promotions and full entitlements currently paid to civil servants in other departments and have said they will continue industrial action until their demands are met.

### **Sri Lankan power workers demonstrate**

More than 1,000 Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) power workers picketed the company's head office in central Colombo on January 3 to demand a 45 percent salary increase due since 2009. The CEB United Trade Union Front has threatened to organise strikes and protests involving other Sri Lankan power workers if their demand is not met by January 16.

### **Cambodian garment workers walk out**

At least 400 employees of the Taiwan-owned Kwei Yang garment plant in Ang Snuol district walked off the job on January 3 and protested outside the factory with nine demands. The action followed a walkout by 200 workers on December 31 after management began making deductions from a \$US5 monthly bonus if workers refused to work overtime. The strike ended after management agreed for the

dispute over bonus deductions and another issue to go to the Arbitration Council, and for talks to begin on the other demands.

### **DP World dock workers begin rolling stoppages followed by lockouts**

Up to 140 Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members at the DP World shipping container terminal in Port Adelaide were locked out for 24 hours on Monday, following a two-day strike. The MUA has been negotiating with DP World for eight months for a new work agreement. The union wants a 15 percent pay rise over three years for its 2,000 members at DP World terminals in Brisbane, Sydney, Fremantle, Melbourne and Adelaide. It also wants reduced use of casual workers and improved safety. DP World claims that the union's demands will cost \$60 million and has demanded productivity trade-offs, including improved crane rates and service levels.

The MUA has notified DP World that 600 union members at the company's Port of Melbourne terminal will strike for 24 hours beginning Sunday night. The company has threatened to lock out MUA members for 24 hours at the end of the strike, effectively closing the port for 48 hours and affecting 16 ships and the movement of around 20,000 containers. Negotiations between DP World and the MUA were due to resume last Thursday.

A similar pattern of MUA strikes, followed by lockouts, at stevedoring company POAGS in New South Wales and Western Australia late last year provided the pretext for the federal workplace relations minister, Bill Shorten, to intervene. At his request, the MUA called off industrial action for at least four weeks—a so-called "cooling off period"—and began closed-door negotiations in the government's Fair Work Australia industrial tribunal.

### **New Zealand firefighters resume negotiations**

The New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU) and the Fire Service Commission (FSC) resumed negotiations on Thursday in a ten-month dispute over a new work agreement. Work bans imposed on August 5 will be maintained during negotiations. The bans by 520 NZPFU members include paperwork, training, equipment maintenance and installation of smoke alarms. Emergency duties are not affected.

Firefighters want a 3.75 percent pay increase for the first six months in their new work agreement, backdated to January 1, and a 5 percent increase for the following 12 months from July 1. The FSC has refused to modify its original offer of 2.5 percent over 12 months with increased flexibility in shift rosters.



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