

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 January 2012

Bangladesh: Non-government school teachers strike

About 100,000 teachers from 24,000 non-government primary schools held a three-day strike on January 17 to demand that they be brought onto the government's payroll. The teachers threatened to walk out over the issue in March last year and last December several thousand struck and demonstrated at the Shaheed Minar national monument in Dhaka.

While registered non-government school teachers are paid through government financial assistance, their salaries are about half that of government primary school teachers. Assistant teachers at non-government schools receive 5,300 taka (\$US71) per month and headmasters 5,900 taka.

A spokesman for the National Non-Government Primary Teachers United Alliance said the union members would hold an indefinite strike after the next national budget if the government fails to resolve the issue.

Pakistan: Islamabad hospital workers strike again

For the second time this month, thousands of employees at the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences, Poly Clinic and the National Institute of Rehabilitative Medicine stopped work and protested near parliament house in Islamabad. The government responded with a heavy contingent of riot police.

Medical and non-medical staff are demanding implementation of the Basic Pay Scale and equal benefits with other civil servants. Hospitals remained closed except for emergency services. Hospital workers have also rejected a new Health Personnel Scale, which they claim is the first step towards privatisation of public hospitals. Health sector workers held three days of rolling stoppages from January 2 over these issues.

Karachi power workers continue protests

Karachi Electric Supply Company (KESC) workers marched and held a two-hour protest outside parliament this week to demand an end to the ongoing replacement of employees with contract labour.

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

While the KESC is determined to proceed with its downsizing plans, the

unions have restricted the campaign and called on the government, which tacitly backs the utility company's plans, to resolve the dispute. As a result, employees involved in union activity have had their wages withheld and in some instances the KESC has filed terrorist cases against workers.

Pakistan oil and gas field contract workers walk out

Thousands of contract workers for the state-owned Oil and Gas Development Company Limited (OGDCL) have been on strike since January 12 to demand job regulation, annual increments, health cover and accident and retirement benefits. The workers have held sit-in strikes and protest at Kunar, Tando Alam, Pasakhi, Bobi and Daru oil and gas fields which have severely restricted energy supplies throughout Pakistan.

"We have no employment letter, no duty card, no electronic attendance, no annual increment, no health cover and no accident or retirement benefit," said contract employee Amir Ali Khoso.

Kunar Pasakhi gas-field strikers in Hyderabad returned to work on Wednesday after the government agreed to a welfare package, including provision of insurance against accidents, and that third-party hire contracts would be terminated after January 31. It is not clear whether this deal will include all OGDCL contract workers. OGDCL employs up to 6,000 workers through a third party contractor.

India: Air India pilots walk out in defiance of union order

Air India pilots defied a union order and walked off the job on January 14 over salary payment shortfalls since August. The strike began just before negotiations between the Indian Commercial Pilots' Association and Air India were due to begin. Pilots returned to work the next day, after airline management promised to clear their "salary backlog in phases."

Over 600 cabin crew and members of the Aviation Industry Employees Guild (AIEG), walked out in sympathy with the pilots.

The 8,000-strong AIEG, which includes ground handlers, engineers, booking and check-in staff, previously issued a strike notice with the Labour Commission for January 14 over salary payment delays but has not activated industrial action. Most Air India employees have not been paid for the last two months. The company's current debt is \$13.3 billion and was unable to pay salaries to its 33,000 employees and 7,000 casual workers in May.

Sri Lankan university teachers strike

Sri Lankan universities were paralysed on January 17 after strike action by nearly 4,000 members of the Federation of University Teachers Association (FUTA) over a proposed private university bill and delays in rectifying salary anomalies. An FUTA official said that members want the private university bill abolished and for the government to honour an agreement to increase wages that ended a strike in July.

After a one-day national stoppage on May 8, FUTA members banned voluntary duties to demand their monthly pay be lifted to 168,000 rupees (\$US1,531), separation from the Central Bank of Sri Lanka's salary structure, and creation of a special professional category. The FUTA has also demanded that the government spend 6 percent (\$US830 million) of the nation's Gross Domestic Product on education.

Sri Lankan academics have not had a rise since 1996 and are among the poorest paid in Asia with monthly salaries as low as 20,700 rupees (\$US190) for a junior lecturer and 57,000 rupees for a professor. In 2006 the Rajapakse government cut their academic allowances by 5 percent, to 25 percent of their monthly salary.

Sri Lankan power workers walk out

Up to 8,000 Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) employees struck on January 18 and rallied at the CEB headquarters in Colombo to demand a 45 percent pay rise over three years. The protest followed a government announcement that there would only be a 25 percent increase. The protesters voted to implement a work-to-rule until their demand was met. CEB United Trade Union Front members will not attend to breakdowns and other repairs after their stipulated working hours.

The CEB has over 14,700 employees represented by various unions. In 2009 during the Sri Lankan government's war against the Tamil Tigers, the racist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-led CEB union alliance shelved its demand for a 22 percent pay hike. CEB workers have not had a pay increase since 2006.

Cambodian garment workers strike

Over 200 Kwei Yang garment workers in Ang Snuol walked off the job on January 19 and protested outside the factory on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. The walk out followed the company's refusal to recognise their newly-formed union and the sacking of seven union leaders. Workers have filed a list of 12 demands with the Kandal District Labour Department. It includes less stringent procedures for requesting leave, a \$US10 monthly reimbursement for transportation expenses, reinstatement of terminated workers and union recognition.

Schweppes lockout in fifth week

About 150 workers at soft drink and cordial producer Schweppes Australia have been locked out of the Tullamarine plant in Melbourne since December 15. The company provocation was in response to limited work bans and stoppages during negotiations for a new enterprise

bargaining agreement (EBA).

Schweppes wants to abolish the eight-hour working day and reduce wage costs by undermining overtime penalty rates. Workers are currently employed on a 35-hour week, Monday to Friday. The company is demanding round-the-clock production with 12-hour shifts operating six or seven days a week, and the removal of most penalty rates for Saturdays.

While United Voice (UV) union members are maintaining a 24-hour picket outside the factory, the union has isolated the locked out workers. United Voice has already imposed regressive enterprise agreements at other Schweppes plants across Australia. These deals include the elimination of overtime penalty rates on Saturday and, in at least one instance, the establishment of a two-tier workforce with new hires receiving substantially lower wages.

In December the Fair Work Australia industrial tribunal dismissed an application by Schweppes to terminate protected industrial action at the Tullamarine plant and have the dispute resolved by arbitration. UV claims that this directive will force the company to "come to its senses."

Victorian chocolate factory workers strike

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members at the Mars Australia chocolate factory in Ballarat, central Victoria stopped work for 24 hours on January 18 over a new enterprise bargaining agreement.

Only 60 percent of employees at the plant are union members and less than 50 percent of the workforce joined the strike. Management claims the company passed on pay increases at the beginning of the year, despite a formal agreement on the issue. The AMWU has threatened to escalate industrial action if there is no "resolution" in negotiations this week.

Queensland construction workers down tools

Construction workers at the \$50 million Mt Sheridan Plaza building site in Cairns walked off the job on January 11 after a 40-tonne crane collapsed. No one was hurt but workers walked out until inspectors gave the all-clear to principal contractor Broad Construction. The company's initial response was to direct employees to continue working around the fallen crane.

The crash is the second time Workplace Health and Safety officers have investigated an accident at the site. In June, a worker was hospitalised after falling from a concrete slab. An Electrical Trades Union organiser told the media that the site was the worst he had seen but the unions have allowed work to continue even though a safety audit in late December found serious breaches of the state's safety legislation.



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