

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 January 2012

Pakistan: Islamabad health workers' dispute in fourth week

Health sector workers, including doctors, nurses, paramedics and support employees, at several major medical facilities in Islamabad, are maintaining rolling stoppages and protests against a new wage structure included in the Health Personnel Pay Scale Bill. Only emergency services are unaffected.

Health sector workers claim that the new pay regime, which removes them from the civil service pay scheme, has affected promotions and stripped them of entitlements. Workers want all entitlements restored and time-scale promotions.

According to strikers, authorities at the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences, the Poly Clinic and National Institute of Rehabilitative Medicine have begun strike-breaking tactics and reopened some departments using scab labour.

Pakistan water and power workers hold more protests

Over 100,000 workers of the Pakistan Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) and the Pakistan Electric Power Company (PEPCO) protested in several cities on January 23 and 24 to oppose the government's plan to privatise power distribution and nine national thermal power stations. PEPCO employees in Islamabad, Faisalabad, Hyderabad and Sukkur locked their offices and protested outside the buildings. Workers also opposed the appointment of private sector management as part of a restructuring plan.

The latest action follows strikes and demonstrations by WAPDA and PEPCO employees over the issue since November 1. In June, thousands of power workers staged demonstrations in ten major cities over the rundown state of the power network and to oppose price increases, load shedding and under staffing.

India: Tamil Nadu rubber workers strike

Over 2,000 employees of the state-owned Arasu Rubber Corporation in Nagercoil walked out for 24 hours on January 23 to demand a wage rise. The strike, by tappers, field workers and factory workers, affected the company's plantation and its offices and factories in Keeriparai, Manalodai, Chithar, Mylar and Kodayar. The government has refused to negotiate a new contract and instead proposed a one-man commission to decide on a wage increase and draft the new contract. The union has opposed this and demanded negotiations.

Andhra Pradesh teachers protest

Over 100 members of the United Teachers Federation (UTF) demonstrated at the Collectorate in Chittoor on January 23 to demand their long-standing charter of 17 demands be implemented.

Teachers' demands, which the government previously agreed to, included pay increases for social welfare, apprenticeship, religious and philosophy teachers, and teachers taking 6th to 10th grades advanced to school assistants. The teachers also want all vacant posts in aided schools filled. UTF officials submitted a memorandum to the Joint Collector during the protest.

Karnataka midday meal workers strike

Hundreds of midday meal cooks at government schools in Bangalore struck on January 23 for a pay increase, an end to job outsourcing and other claims. Their major demand is for an increase in daily pay—from 38 rupees (\$US0.85) to 150 rupees—in line with a labour department directive.

The midday meal cooks also want regularisation of their services and provident and pension fund payments in line with other government employees. Strikers pointed out that at least 30,000 of them had lost jobs after the government decided to outsource their work.

Strike leaders claimed that over 20,000 midday meal workers had not been paid for two months. The workers are members of the Karnataka Rajya Akshara Dasoha Naukarara Sangha, and the strike was organised by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions. Over 100 midday meal workers protested in Gulbarga on December 31 over the same issues.

Sri Lankan power unions impose inferior wage deal

At least 20 unions attached to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and covering thousands of Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) employees called off planned industrial action on January 20. The unions accepted the government's pay rise offer of 25 percent over three years in direct opposition to their members' demands.

On January 18, about 8,000 CEB employees struck and rallied at the CEB headquarters in Colombo to oppose the 25 percent offer and demand a 45 percent pay rise over three years. The protesters voted to implement a work-to-rule until their claims were met. Two days later, CEB union representatives told a press conference that they would "not allow anyone to disrupt the power supply."

CEB workers have not had a pay increase since 2006. 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.

Indonesian workers protest for minimum wage

Tens of thousands of workers in West Java's Cikarang industrial area walked off the job on January 19 to oppose the Indonesian Employers Association's (Apindo) lawsuit against the West Java government's decision to lift the minimum wage in the Bekasi district by up to 30 percent. Demonstrators rallied in the streets, stopping traffic throughout most of the Cikarang industrial area.

Workers ended their protest late in the afternoon, after Apindo claimed it would withdraw its legal case. Workers remain sceptical, however, pointing out that it was the second time this month that Apindo promised to drop its lawsuit.

The West Java governor's decree set the minimum monthly wage in Bekasi between 1,491,866 and 1,849,913 rupees (\$164-\$203). Bekasi's previous minimum wage was 1,420,000 rupees. Employers have refused to pay the increase.

Indonesian battery workers strike

Nine hundred employees of the German-owned PT Varta Microbattery Indonesia plant in Batam on Riau Island walked off the job on January 19 over housing allowances. Workers said the company had discriminated against the majority of employees, who are locals, and given 300,000-ruppee housing allowances to 11 Javanese workers. The strikers, who had rejected a 50,000-ruppee monthly housing allowance offer, returned to work within 24 hours, following a management commitment to "issue a decision" on January 27.

PT VMI's Indonesian Metal Workers Union had threatened to blockade the Batamindo Industrial Zone if their demand for a 250,000-ruppee housing allowance was not met.

Cambodian footwear factory workers end strike

Nearly 900 employees at the Shimano Cambodia footwear factory in Kampong Speu province returned to work on January 24 after the company agreed to reinstate a disabled administration chief. Workers walked out on January 20 after discovering that the administrator, Touch Manin, who had encouraged the hiring of people with disabilities, was being moved out of his position. Manin said that 127 of the factory's 887 workers, including him, were disabled.

Parks Victoria staff implement bans

Field staff at Parks Victoria imposed state-wide work bans on January 26 to protest the Baillieu government's annual 2.5 percent wage rise

ceiling. Members of the Australian Workers Union, the Community and Public Sector Union and the Australian Services Union boycotted several parks and reserves across the state, leaving many closed for most of the day.

Last year the state government granted police close to a 20 percent pay rise over four years, but has refused to offer similar increases to nurses and other public sector employees unless they agreed to productivity gains.

Schweppes offers bonuses if strikers cross picket line

Japanese-owned Schweppes Australia has offered 150 striking employees at its Tullamarine plant in Melbourne bonuses of up to \$5,000 if they cross the picket line and return to work. The United Voice members turned down the offer saying they would maintain the 24-hour picket, which they established on December 15 after being locked out by the company. The lockout 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 implement 12-hour shifts to reduce overtime penalty payments. Schweppes has refused to resume negotiations unless UV accepts a 12-hour roster.

The union has already imposed regressive enterprise agreements at other Schweppes plants across Australia. These include the elimination of overtime penalty rates on Saturday and, in at least one instance, establishment of a two-tier workforce with new hires receiving substantially lower wages.

Western Australian waste-clothing workers demonstrate

At least 60 workers and supporters protested on January 23 outside the Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Association's (ParaQuad) head office in Shenton Park, West Perth over the sacking of four employees. The dismissed workers were involved in organising a petition requesting an Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) at Windsor Wiper Sales, ParaQuad's clothing recycling plant.

Fair Work Australia has directed the Australian Electoral Commission to ballot the workers on whether the majority supports the petition for an EBA. While the protest was organised by the National Union of Workers, the union has not demanded reinstatement of the sacked workers.

The Windsor Wiper plant is part of the lucrative ParaQuad Industries, which distributes bulk industrial cleaning cloth and recycled clothing, including bulk clothing sales to third world countries. ParaQuad Industries and its subsidiaries employ large numbers of disabled workers.

BHP workers in New South Wales threaten to strike

About 100 Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members at BHP's coal terminal in Port Kembla and 300 at the company's West Cliff coal mine have threatened a seven-day strike if new enterprise deals are not reached at both sites by January 31.

Port Kembla terminal employees are demanding a 4.5 percent pay rise with enhanced entitlements, stronger job security provisions and retention

of certain work. At West Cliff union members want a 4.5 percent pay increase and changes to the existing bonus scheme. Separate negotiations are currently underway.

New Zealand aged-care workers stop work

Around 900 nurses, caregivers and service workers from 20 facilities of aged-care provider Radius Residential voted at a stop-work meeting on January 23 to strike action for up to eight hours. The decision was made after six months of talks for a wage increase ended in deadlock. Workers had rejected Radius's offer of a 1.72 percent pay increase for 2011, well below New Zealand's inflation rate of 4.6 percent.

A spokesperson for the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) and the Nurses Organisation (NZNO) alleged Radius Residential has not passed on increased funding from district health boards in 2010 that was intended for wage increases.

SFWU claimed its members at Radius are the lowest paid in the industry at just \$13 and \$14 an hour. The official minimum wage is \$13 an hour. The SFWU and NZNO represent 70 percent of Radius's 1,300-strong work force.



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