

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 February 2012

Protesting Bangladeshi garment workers injured

At least 40 workers were injured and several hospitalised after being attacked by security guards on January 30 during a protest against layoffs and the non-payment of an annual holiday bonus at the Rashida Knitting and Ware Limited and Megha Textile factories in the Ishwardi Export Processing Zone. After hearing about the vicious attack, thousands of angry workers from the two garment plants downed tools and occupied the premises.

Factory managers called the Ishwardi Police and the Rapid Action Battalion Force to evict the workers. Several administrative offices and equipment were damaged during the eviction. Union officials and company authorities met later that day for negotiations about the dispute.

Bangladeshi sugar mill workers strike again

For the second time last month, hundreds of workers at sugar mills in Thakurgaon, Natore, Jhenidah, Panchagarh, Natore and North Bengal stopped work for several hours on January 30 and 31 to demand a separate wage board for mill employees. Bangladeshi mill workers have been demanding a separate wage board since 2009 after the government announced a new pay-scale for government employees.

The Bangladesh Sugar Mill Employees' and Workers' Federation postponed industrial action in October 2010, after the government assured the union that its demand would be met. Workers resumed protest action on November 27 last year after the government had failed to honour its commitment.

Sugar Mills Workers' Union members in Natore and Jhenidah have threatened to strike for 24 hours on February 15 if their demand is not met.

India: Andhra Pradesh junior doctors continue industrial action

On January 31, junior doctors at the Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences stopped work and began a protest hunger strike as part of their state-wide campaign over salary and conditions. Andhra Pradesh Junior Doctors' Association (APJDA) members at ten medical colleges and teaching hospitals attached to the Andhra Medical College have been taking industrial action, including strikes and protests, since December 26.

The junior doctors want regular stipend payments and full payment of four months' outstanding wages. They have also called for a 15 percent salary increase every two years, improved security and better facilities,

and withdrawal of management plans to make one year's rural service compulsory.

On January 10, police entered the grounds of the Siddhartha Medical College in Vijayawada and the King George Hospital in Visakhapatnam and arrested around 270 striking JDA members. They were released after two hours, the police giving no reason for their detention.

Kerala private hospital nurses on strike

At least 600 nurses at the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (MOSC) Medical College in Kolenchery have been on strike since January 28 after negotiations for better salaries and service conditions with the hospital broke down.

Members of the newly-formed United Nurses' Association (UNA) at the Lakeshore Hospital and Research Centre at Maradu joined the strike two days later. Nurses at the 400-bed National Hospital at Calicut joined the strike on February 1. The nurses' association has served strike notices on five other hospitals.

The UNA, which was formed two months ago and has branches in over 430 Kerala hospitals, is supported by the State Women's Commission and the Indian National Trade Union Congress.

Jammu and Kashmir public transport workers on strike

Over 400 Jammu and Kashmir State Road Transport Corporation employees protested outside the corporation's headquarters at Bikram Chowk and began a three-day strike on February 1.

The transport workers want implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations, payment of a Common Living Allowance and announcement of the pending Department Promotion Committee. The walkout stopped all public transport buses and trucks, impacting on state and inter-state travel.

Madhya Pradesh college teachers demonstrate

College teachers in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh staged statewide protests on January 29 over long-standing demands for revised salary and arrears. The payments were stipulated by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 2009.

The State Government Collegiate Education Professors' Association

said that the revised UGC salary package was accepted by the government but the arrears and the new rates never paid. The protest also included members of the Sports Officers' Association and Library Officers' Association.

Sri Lankan nurses and doctors walk out

Government Nursing Officers' Association (GNOA) members at the Colombo National Hospital protested on January 31 to demand the government recruit more nursing graduates, provide uniform and telephone allowances, and implement promotions to Grade II and Super Grade according to previous directives.

Government doctors from hospitals run by the western provincial council in the Colombo district and other health facilities walked out on the same day to demand payment of telephone allowances granted to government medical officers. They also demanded disciplinary action against a government councilor accused of threatening a female colleague.

Sri Lankan railway workers strike

Thousands of railway workers, including station masters, guards and signal controllers, held a national strike on February 1 over long outstanding claims. These include improved salaries, changes in the current employment grading system and the elevation of middle-level managers to a higher grade. The unions called off the strike after four hours following written assurances by the transport minister that rail workers' demands would be met by the end of the week.

South Korean public broadcasters on strike

Up to 500 unionists at Korean broadcaster MBC in Seoul have been on strike since January 30 to demand the resignation of MBC president Kim Jae-chul over alleged biased coverage of major social issues. News and current affairs and the production of popular entertainment programs were affected.

The union has accused the broadcaster of intentionally omitting or reducing coverage of politically sensitive issues, including protest rallies against the country's free trade agreement with the US and corruption allegations against President Lee Myung-bak.

MBC management declared the strike illegal and has threatened strikers with "severe" disciplinary action.

This is the second strike by MBC unionists over political bias in recent years. In April 2010, journalists and technicians walked out for 39 days to demand that the broadcaster's newly appointed president, Kim Jae-chul, step down. Union members alleged that Kim was a "political parachute appointment" and demanded the public broadcaster be freed of political influence.

Victorian chocolate factory workers suspend action

On February 1, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members at the Mars Australia chocolate factory in Ballarat, central Victoria suspended industrial action while negotiations for a new work agreement in Fair Work Australia were proceeding.

AMWU members, who account for 60 percent of the Mars workforce, struck for 24 hours on January 18 and 26, after the company refused to negotiate a new agreement. Management claimed that the company had passed on pay increases at the beginning of the year, despite reaching no agreement.

New Zealand waterside workers vote to continue industrial action

On January 30, 300 Maritime Union of New Zealand (MUNZ) members unanimously voted for work bans at the Ports of Auckland (POAL) container terminal. Union members will refuse to process containers from Conlinxx contractors between February 15 and 22. POAL has been using Conlinxx, of which it has a 90-percent majority share-holding, as a vehicle for outsourcing jobs at the port. The MUNZ is trying to force POAL to restart negotiations for a new work agreement.

The company has maintained last year's offer of a 10 percent pay rise and performance bonuses of up to 20 percent on hourly rates in exchange for the "new flexible roster system" that places staff on call. The union has rejected the offer, claiming the money is not the stumbling block.

According to the MUNZ, workers' main concerns are the ongoing contracting out of port shuttle work to Conlinxx and a proposed new roster system that the union claims will result in fewer hours and reduced pay.

Logging workers protest in Solomon Islands

Some 23 Malaysian workers employed by logging firm New World Limited at its Suavanao camp in Isabel province, Solomon Islands rallied at the Ministry of Commerce, Industries, Labor and Immigration office in Honiara on January 25 over poor working conditions and "mistreatment." A spokesman said they were virtually prisoners, with no access to phones or any outside communications. He said the workers were sick of being treated like animals and demanded to be sent back to Malaysia.

The workers submitted a written complaint to the ministry alleging ill treatment, including seven-day working weeks in all weather conditions, unrealistic production targets, low-grade meals and no sick leave or medical facilities. The logging workers also claimed that they were promised 4,000 ringgits (\$US1,330) per month and 50 cents per cubic metre of finished timber when they were recruited. New World, however, only paid 2,300 ringgits and 30 cents per cubic metre.



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