

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 February 2012

Pakistan: Health workers' unions call off strike

Unions representing health sector workers at the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS), National Institute of Rehabilitation (NIRM) and the Polyclinic in Islamabad called off five-week strike action last week, after accepting a sell-out deal from the government. Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani promised one additional month's pay if the unions dropped their opposition to a new wage structure.

Health sector workers claim that the new pay regime removes them from the civil service wage scheme and has affected promotions and entitlements. Workers wanted all entitlements restored and time-scale promotions. The deal accepted by the union's Joint Action Committee (JAC) does not resolve these issues.

Two sacked Karachi power workers attempt self-immolation

Two former employees of the Karachi Electric Supply Company (KESC) tried to immolate themselves on February 3, as a large number of power workers protested outside the power utility's head office in Karachi. KESC workers want an end to the ongoing replacement of employees with contract labour and the reinstatement of workers sacked in a downsizing program.

Last July, following six months of industrial action against company plans to slash 4,500 jobs, power 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 cut-backs, 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, union activists have had their wages withheld and, in some instances, terrorist cases filed against them by the KESC.

Pakistan Railways workers protest over dues and privatisation

Pakistan Railways (PR) workers blocked rail engines leaving marshalling sheds on January 30 in a dispute over wages and pension payments. National passenger services were suspended for 10 hours. Employees were also protesting over electricity disconnections at 26 PR housing estates because the service had failed to pay its power bills. Industrial action ended after the government promised to inform workers

about the payment of outstanding amounts within 24 hours.

On February 4, PR employees in Karachi demonstrated against a new privately operated passenger service between Karachi and Lahore. The protests followed ongoing strikes and rallies since last year over privatisation, downsizing and delayed wage and pension payments.

The government announced in November that the state-run rail service would be semi-privatised on a priority basis with freight and major passenger services operated by public-private partnerships. In preparation for privatisation, the Pakistani government split the railways into separate business units and disposed of all "surplus assets." Shutdowns and layoffs have slashed the workforce from 113,000 in 1997 to 85,000.

India: Garment workers in Gujarat on strike

At least 5,000 garment workers at Reliance Industries Limited in the Naroda Industrial Area, 8km northeast of Ahmedabad, Gujarat walked off the job and stopped all production on February 2 to demand higher wages. Three union members were arrested twice in two days under section 151 of the Criminal Procedure Code. The wide-ranging law states "a person can be arrested to prevent commission of cognisable offences."

The Reliance Employees' Union has issued the company with 14 demands, including a 60 percent wage rise to lift monthly salaries to 10,000 rupees (\$US203), overtime payments and better working conditions. Workers rejected a management offer to increase wages in April, and said they would remain on strike until all demands are met.

One-day walkout by New Delhi hospital sanitation workers

About 300 sanitation workers at the Jai Prakash Narayan Apex Trauma Center, which is part of the All India Institute of Medical Science (AIIMS) in New Delhi, struck on February 6 over delayed pay and a wage increase.

The sanitation workers want a pay rise in line with the official minimum wage, on time wage payments and the provision of a provident fund and medical cover. Sanitation workers are currently paid 4,500 rupees (\$US91.35) per month. The official minimum monthly wage is 6,656 rupees.

Tamil Nadu film workers protest

Nearly 5,000 members of the Film Employees' Federation of South India (FEFSI) held a day-long hunger strike at Kamala Theatre Music Union in Vadapalani to demand that producers drop their demand for wage cuts. Salaries were raised by between 50 and 100 percent six months ago, after discussions between the Tamil Nadu Film Producers' Council (TNFPC) and the FEFSI.

Two weeks ago, TNFPC, which represents 300 producers, demanded that FEFSI members revert to the old pay scale and threatened to recruit new employees if the wage cuts were not accepted. FEFSI members claim that their daily wage will drop from 450 to 250 rupees.

Nepalese soap manufacturing workers on strike

Over 100 workers at Unilever Nepal's Hetauda factory walked off the job on February 3, after three months of negotiations for better wages and conditions reached deadlock. Employees want a 50 percent increase in salary and allowances as well as one million rupee interest-free housing loans and an annual 100,000-rupee housing maintenance allowance for each production worker. Current average monthly take-home pay, including overtime, allowances and bonuses, is 10,500 rupees (\$US145).

Unilever Nepal has refused to pay any salary increase, claiming it would add 21,000 rupees per employee to its monthly wage bill. The union insists that it would only add 5,200 rupees per person. Management has offered a pension insurance scheme, in addition to life insurance, and a 150,000-rupee interest free housing loan for each worker.

The All Nepal Free Industrial Workers Union has indicated that it was willing to make a deal that suited the company. One official told the media that the union was "very much flexible" and would end the strike if management compromised.

Burmese shoe manufacturing workers strike

More than 1,000 workers at the Tai Yi Slipper factory in the Hlaing Tharyar Industrial Zone in Rangoon walked out on February 4 after discovering that they would not be paid for the five-day Chinese New Year break. Workers were also protesting against deductions from their wages whenever ferry services to the factory were delayed.

A demonstration by the shoe workers outside the Chinese-owned shoe plant was broken up by riot police after four days without the issue being resolved.

Singapore construction workers strike

At least 200 construction workers refused to work and rallied near their living quarters in Tampines on February 4 in a dispute over unpaid wages. The mostly Bangladeshi labourers claimed that their employers—Sunway Concrete Products and Techcom Construction & Trading—had not paid wages since November. The amounts owed, they said, ranged from \$2,500 to over \$3,000 (\$US2,500). Their basic salary is \$18 a day.

Other complaints include compulsory 12-hour days without overtime payments, poor quality meals and \$1,500 wage deductions for work permit renewals, which, according to law, should be paid by employers. The construction workers ended the strike later that day after the

companies paid outstanding November wages and promised December dues by February 10. The Ministry of Manpower claims that it is investigating workers' complaints.

South Korean public broadcasters' strike in second week

A strike by 500 journalists and technicians at the public broadcaster MBC in Seoul won support from colleagues at KBS and YTN who joined an occupation of the MBC lobby on February 7. The protesters launched a joint struggle committee "for the restoration of impartial broadcasting, the resignation of parachuted MBC presidents Kim Jae-chul and the reinstatement of fired workers."

Unionised workers at MBC walked out on January 30 over alleged biased coverage of major social issues. The union has accused the broadcaster of intentionally omitting or reducing coverage of politically sensitive issues, including rallies against the government and corruption allegations against President Lee Myung-bak. MBC workers struck for 39 days in April, 2010 to oppose the appointment of Kim Jae-chul to head the broadcaster.

Western Australian metal workers take industrial action

Metal workers employed at Heat Exchangers Australia (HEA) in Perth began industrial action on February 1 in a six-month dispute over a new enterprise agreement. The action includes overtime bans and possible 24-hour stoppages.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) is demanding an 11 percent pay increase over two years (6 percent and 5 percent), a 36-hour week and payment of sick-leave entitlements upon termination of their jobs. Workers rejected the company's offer of 3.5 percent annual pay increases over two years, pointing out that their counterparts at a sister company, W E Smith in New South Wales, were granted 5.5 percent annual rises.

HEA produce pressure vessels and heat exchangers, primarily for the petro-chemical industries.

Victorian council workers vote to strike

Twenty-five outdoor employees of the Indigo Shire Council in Victoria's northern highlands held a stop-work meeting on February 8 in a dispute for a pay increase. Australian Services Union (ASU) members voted unanimously to apply 18 types of bans and possible 24-hour strike action. The union wants a 14 percent pay increase over three years. The council had offered just 11.7 percent.

ASU officials, however, suspended industrial action, claiming that the council had said in talks that it "might" lift its pay offer to 12 percent over three years and accept other claims. The council's chief executive officer, however, has refused media requests to confirm union officials' claims.

New Zealand waterside workers step up industrial action

On February 9, the Maritime Union of New Zealand (MUNZ) issued a seven-day strike notice on Ports of Auckland (POAL) in a long-running dispute for a new work agreement. The strike will begin on February 24 and is in addition to bans on containers from Conlinxx beginning on February 15. POAL has a 90-percent majority holding in Conlinxx and has been using it to outsource work at the port. The union said that the industrial action could be reconsidered if POAL management resumed negotiations.

POAL refuses to budge from last year's 10 percent pay rise offer 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 that the money is not a stumbling block and that workers' are mainly concerned over contracting of port shuttle work and the proposed roster system which will result in fewer hours and reduced pay.



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