

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 February 2012

India: Police break up occupation of Kerala nurses

Striking nurses at the Pynkulam Sacred Heart Hospital in the Idukki district, Kerala were forcefully removed from the hospital by police on February 14. Other nurses wanting to join the strike were locked in their hostel. An Indian Registered Nurses Association (IRNA) official said the hospital had refused nurses' calls for monthly wages to be lifted above the current meagre rate of 5,000 rupees (\$US101) and to be provided a special night allowance, among other demands.

Sacred Heart claimed it was paying the correct wage, but according to nurses, they have not been issued with proper pay slips. A sixth round of talks will begin on February 18.

Contract chemical workers in Gujarat down tools

About 800 daily wage workers employed by labour contractors at the government-owned Gujarat Alkalies and Chemicals Limited (GACL) downed tools for one hour on February 13 to demand improved wages or regularisation and better safety measures. Contract workers want their monthly average wage increased from 4,500 rupees (\$US91) to at least 12,000 rupees. Permanent GACL employees are paid salaries up to 20,000 rupees a month. Contract workers claimed that many of them have been on the low contract wage for 15 years.

The Chemical Mazdoor Panchayat has restricted industrial action and isolated the contract workers by not including permanent employees in the struggle. Contract workers called for a "full scale" strike for February 28 if their demands are not met.

Temporary workers at Air India strike

Up to 450 Air India temporary workers struck for 24 hours on February 15 and demonstrated outside the airline's office near the Chennai International Airport, Tamil Nadu to demand a wage rise and extra working days. Strikers complained that many were recruited 25 years ago as drivers, engineering helpers, office assistants and loaders, but were still working only 210 days a year on a meagre 275 rupees (\$US5.60) per day. Workers told the media that they faced several health issues, including hearing loss, because the airline failed to provide adequate safety equipment.

Pakistani water and power workers continue protests

For the second time in three weeks thousands of Pakistan Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) employees rallied at Parliament House in Islamabad on February 8 to oppose government plans to privatise power distribution and nine national thermal power stations.

The latest protest follows strikes and demonstrations by WAPDA employees over the issue since November 1. Last June, thousands of power workers demonstrated in 10 major cities over the rundown state of the power network and to oppose price increases, load shedding and under staffing. WAPDA workers are organised by the Pakistan Wapda Hydro Electric Central Labour Union.

Karachi power distribution employees protest

On February 10, hundreds of Karachi Electric Supply Company (KESC) employees that the company is attempting to push into its Voluntary Separation Scheme (VSS), rallied at the power utility's head office near Gizri. Thousands of KESC workers have been holding strikes and protests against the company's outsourcing of 4,500 "non-core" jobs.

The unions have limited the campaign to rallies and called on the government, which tacitly backed KESC'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 utility company. At least 70 percent of workers, worn down by the unions' inaction, have accepted the VSS package. The rest were told if they rejected the VSS it would be withdrawn and they would be sacked with minimum entitlements.

Karachi doctors and paramedics protest

Doctors and paramedics at the Civil Hospital in Karachi refused duties at the outpatients departments for several hours on February 11. The medical staff were protesting over delayed promotions and demanding regularisation of ad-hoc and contract doctors at provincial government facilities.

According to doctors, some colleagues have been serving for 17 years without promotion, and despite availability of vacancies, ad-hoc and contract doctors were not regularised.

Doctors and paramedics ended their protest after health authorities scheduled talks for the next day to draft a letter to the Pakistan's chief minister about their complaints.

Punjab paramedics protest in Lahore

Hundreds of Punjab Paramedics Alliance (PPA) members protested on Jail Road near the Punjab Institute of Cardiology in Lahore on February 8 over a long-running wage dispute. Paramedics lifted their road block after five hours, following talks in which health officials agreed to negotiate on workers' demands.

PPA members want a service structure for lesser qualified Grade 1 to Grade 4 employees, a health professional allowance, and regularisation of contract workers. According to paramedics, the Punjab chief minister has failed to honour a promise made in May to give "high priority" to their demands.

Cambodian garment workers strike

Up to 200 New Pex garment factory workers walked off the job and protested outside the Vattanac Industrial Park 2 complex in Phnom Penh's Dangkor district on February 13. The garment workers demanded management reply to a list of 12 demands presented last week and for the reinstatement of two leaders of their newly formed Trade Union Cooperation of Cambodia. The union leaders were fired on February 2, a day after informing the factory's administration that the union had been established.

The strikers returned to work the next day, after the company, under pressure from the Ministry of Labour, agreed to reinstate the union leaders and implement various demands. Workers are demanding New Pex management stop discriminating against union members, allow pregnant workers to leave 15 minutes early each day, and that the company cover medical costs for all work-related accidents and injuries.

Queensland coal miners walk out

Over 3,500 miners at seven BHP-Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) mines in Queensland's Bowen Basin began a seven-day strike on February 15. The 15-month dispute over a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) involves members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union.

BMA has offered annual pay rises of 5 percent over three years and a \$15,000 bonus for each worker but with various tradeoffs. The Bowen Basin miners want three breaks for workers on 12-hour shifts rather than the present two, EBA conditions for contractors, and maintenance of existing health and safety conditions. BMA has rejected these demands, describing them as "productivity-destroying" and insisted that health and safety should be determined by its own supervisors.

According to a union spokesman the Bowen Basin workforce generated \$3 million profit each day for BMA, and BMA's attempt to remove safety clauses from the enterprise agreement was putting worker safety at risk in pursuit of the bottom line. BMA's Bowen Basin mines produce a million tonnes of coking coal a week—20 percent of world production.

About 100 CFMEU members at the Port Kembla coal loader on the New South Wales south coast are maintaining rolling strikes over their EBA. The coal terminal is managed and part-owned by BHP-Billiton.

Coal terminal workers have struck for seven days and held two separate 48-hour walkouts and a 24-hour strike this month. A 24-hour stoppage will begin today and two-hour walk outs on Monday and Tuesday. The union is seeking annual 4.5 percent wage increases, job security and the maintenance of existing conditions for current and future employees during the 3½-year agreement.

Talks have broken down with the company refusing to guarantee existing conditions for future employees. The CFMEU, however, opposes coordinated action with the BMA coal miners and agreed to move coal for the Peabody company. Union officials have also told the media they were "not opposed" to the company using Fair Work Australia to arbitrate the long-running dispute.

Schweppes lifts lockout after union betrays workers and accepts arbitration

A two-month lockout of 150 employees at the Schweppes Australia soft drink factory in Tullamarine, Victoria was lifted on February 13 after the United Voice (UV) union accepted the company's demand to have their dispute over a new work agreement arbitrated in Australia's industrial tribunal, Fair Work Australia. The dispute will now go to 21 days' conciliation, with FWA to arbitrate if a solution cannot be found within that time.

At the centre of the dispute is Schweppes' demand for abolition of the 35-hour week, Monday to Friday, and imposition of round-the-clock production with 12-hour shifts operating six or seven days a week with reduced penalty rates. When Schweppes refused to negotiate unless UV accepted the proposed roster in the new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA), the union isolated the locked out workers and have now began closed-door negotiations in FWA.

UV union has already imposed enforced regressive enterprise agreements, including axing overtime penalty rates on Saturday and, in at least one instance, establishment of a two-tier workforce with new hires on lower wages, at other Australian Schweppes plants. UV will now impose the same sort of arrangements at Tullamarine.

Newcastle machine fitters to resume industrial action

Some 15 fitters at the mining machinery manufacturer Schenck Process in the west Newcastle suburb of Thornton in New South Wales have voted to resume industrial action in a dispute over pay. The action follows a two-hour strike on December 22, which the German-owned company responded to by locking out workers until January 9.

Members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Australian Workers Union want pay parity with their counterparts at the company's Queensland factory. Fair Work Australia documents show the Thornton workers earn between \$24.54 and \$34.30 an hour in five bands, while their Queensland counterparts were on \$26.67 to \$37.25. A union spokesman said members would implement a variety of selected actions until their demand was met.

New Zealand aged care workers issue strike notice

The NZ Nurses' Organisation and the Service and Food Workers Union, representing 1,500 employees of New Zealand's largest rest home operator Oceania have issued a strike notice effective from May 1. Strikers will include nurses, health care assistants and support staff who provide direct resident care, laundry, cleaning and food services at 20 Oceania rest homes. The action comes after eight months of failed negotiations for a pay increase.

The unions want a 3.5 percent pay rise from the expiry date of their collective agreement in June 2011. Oceania has offered just 1 percent with no backdating and wants to slash overtime rates. New Zealand's consumer price index for 2011 was slightly above 4 percent.



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