

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

25 February 2012

Chinese steel workers strike

Over 5,000 workers at the Hanzhong Steel Company in the northern province of Shaanxi walked out on February 14 to demand a pay rise. The following day, several thousand strikers marched into the city holding banners proclaiming “We want our rights, we want to eat.” At least 12 protesters were detained by local police who attempted to block the protest. Workers said that they had to work weekends and holidays but their average monthly wage remained low, at between 1,000 (\$US158) and 1,500 yuan.

The strike follows a three-day walkout of around 10,000 workers in January at a steel plant in Chengdu, the provincial capital of Sichuan. Workers at Pangang Steel and Vanadium had demanded a 400 yuan increase in their monthly salaries and a 3,000 yuan year-end bonus. Pangang workers earn around 1,200 yuan a month.

India: Kerala private hospital nurses resolve some issues

The four-week strike by 600 nurses at the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (MOSC) Medical College in Kolenchery was called off on February 25, after management agreed to improve salaries and service conditions. Under the deal, wages will be increased to 8,500 rupees per month during probation and then lifted to 11,000 rupees after one year. A 500-rupee increment would be paid for each year of service.

MOSC Medical College nurses, members of the newly formed United Nurses’ Association (UNA), walked out on January 28 and were followed by UNA nurses at the Lakeshore Hospital and Research Centre at Maradu two days later. UNA nurses at the 400-bed National Hospital at Calicut joined the strike on February 1. Amritha Institute of Medical Sciences nurses walked out on February 21 over their high workload and dues.

Indian Registered Nurses Association (IRNA) members at the Pynkulam Sacred Heart Hospital ended a six-day strike on February 20, after reaching agreement with the management on wages and conditions. The nurses walked out after management rejected demands for monthly salaries to be lifted above the current meagre rate of 5,000 rupees (\$US101).

Tamil Nadu transport loading workers strike

Transport loading workers in Salem, Tamil Nadu have been on strike since February 17 to demand wages be increased to 3.75 rupees (\$US0.8) for loading and unloading a 90-kilogram gunny bag from trucks as per a

2009 government directive.

According to workers, transport employers are only paying 2.6 rupees for loading and 3 rupees for unloading bags and not paying a 50-rupee daily Dearness Allowance. Thousands of tonnes of goods are stranded in storage yards in the district.

Manipur teachers join national protest

As part of nationwide protests over pay anomalies and to oppose privatisation, 1,000 members of the All Manipur College Teachers’ Association (AMCTA) demonstrated outside the Imphal College, Manipur on February 17. Teachers across India have demanded payment of outstanding wage rise recommendations by the Sixth University Grants Commission (UGC) from January 2006 to 2010. Manipur teachers claim that they are still being paid on Fifth UGC pay scales.

AMCTA officials presented a log of claims to the state governor. This included removal of pay disparities between teachers and librarians, and payment of contractual, ad hoc, part-time and guest teachers at correct pay and pension rates. The association also demanded that an additional 6,000 million rupees (\$US120 million) be allocated to improving college facilities and increasing the number of colleges in the state.

Andhra Pradesh sanitation workers demonstrate

On February 19, Bhagyanagar Municipal Employees Union members, including street sweepers and garbage collection workers, staged a three-hour protest outside the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) office to oppose the state government awarding its solid waste management contract to Ramky, a private company. The private contract was shelved in 2008, after workers protested.

Pakistan: Sacked KESC employees protest

At least 250 Karachi Electric Supply Company (KESC) employees, joined by family members and other KESC workers, marched to the Karachi registry of the Supreme Court on February to protest their pending forced retrenchment. Under the company’s outsourcing plan, nearly 1,000 “non-core” employees, out of 4,500, have refused to accept the management’s Voluntary Separation Scheme (VSS).

Thousands of KESC workers have been holding strikes and protests for

over a year against the company's outsourcing of the 4,500 jobs. In the last six months unions have limited the campaign to rallies and called on the government, which tacitly backed KESC's plans, to resolve the dispute. At least 70 percent of workers, worn down by the unions' inaction, have accepted the VSS package.

Workers were told that if they rejected the separation package it would be withdrawn and they would be sacked with minimum entitlements. The VSS acceptance deadline was February 10.

Pakistan power loom workers protest

On February 20, thousands of power loom workers from the Faisalabad industrial area downed tools and marched to the Faisalabad Electricity Supply Company (FESCO) office to protest ongoing power shedding. Workers claimed that frequent and lengthy power outages were causing loss of income and unemployment. Industrial workers in nearby cities also held demonstrations.

Last June, thousands of power workers protested in 10 major Pakistani cities over the rundown state of the power network and to oppose price increases, load shedding and under staffing. Widespread riots erupted in October over prolonged load shedding by electricity distributors.

On February 8, thousands of Pakistan Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) employees rallied at Parliament House in Islamabad to oppose government plans to privatise power distribution and nine national thermal power stations. The International Monetary Fund and World Bank have demanded that the Pakistan government privatise state-owned utilities for continued funding.

Sri Lankan tea workers protest excessive production demands

Bogawantalawa Plantations tea estate workers launched a work-to-rule campaign on February 20 and will only pluck one kilogram of tender tea leaves per day. The tea pickers were protesting against excessive production targets that require them to pluck 18 kilos before they receive the daily wage of 515 rupees (\$US5). Workers complained that their pay was reduced by up to 23 percent if they picked under the target.

Sri Lankan Water Board workers on hunger strike

Five contract employees of the National Water Supplies and Drainage Board climbed to a 60-foot water tank in Bandaragama (35 km from Colombo) and began fasting on February 15. Other protesting water board workers said they had been on a contract basis for between four and eight years and want regularisation of their employment.

Burmese shoe workers strike in third week

Nearly 1,800 employees at the Tai Yi Slipper factory in western Rangoon's Hlaing Tharyar Industrial Zone are continuing strike action over pay and conditions. The strike began on February 4 when workers

learnt that they would not be paid for the five-day Chinese New Year holiday. They are also protesting against pay deductions whenever ferry services to the factory are late.

Strikers are picketing the main gate of the Chinese-owned factory and refused to return to work unless their wages are doubled to 150 kyat (\$US0.18) an hour and the monthly bonus increased from 6,000 kyat to 8,000 kyat (\$S10). Management has only offered a 25-kyat per hour rise. Workers have rejected Department of Labor officials' demands that they accept this offer.

Most workers receive about 60,000 to 70,000 kyat (\$75 to \$87.50) a month, including overtime, bonuses and other cash benefits. The management exacts heavy penalties for mistakes or lateness—employees are fined if they are not at the factory by 7 a.m. The Tai Yi dispute is reportedly the longest strike in Burma for many years.

Three separate strikes at Cambodian shoe factories

In a sign of increased industrial unrest over low wages, poor working conditions and escalating living costs, thousands of workers at five different shoe factories walked out in Cambodia this month.

On February 20, three female strikers participating in a strike by 3,000 workers from factories owned by Kingmaker Footwear, Kaoway Sports and Sheico, were hospitalised, one critically with wounds to the chest, when undercover police allegedly fired into their demonstration in the Manhattan Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Bavet city. Workers walked out on February 17 to demand better wages.

On February 20, 300 employees at the Magnate Footwear factory in Phnom Penh's Choam Chao commune in Por Senchey district walked out to demand the reinstatement of three colleagues sacked for trying to form a union. One worker said they tried to establish a union after management failed to respond to 16 demands for improved conditions.

On February 16, over 500 workers at the Sun Well Shoes factory in the Dangkor district, Phnom Penh walked out over management's refusal to negotiate a 21-point charter of demands. The company has referred the dispute to the Arbitration Council in an attempt to force an end to the strike.

BHP miners in Queensland extend strike action

Following a seven-day strike by over 3,500 workers at seven BHP-Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) mines in Queensland's Bowen Basin, unions representing the workers have issued a strike notice for a 10-day stoppage at two of the company's mines. Members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union will implement ten consecutive, legally protected 24-hour strikes at Norwich Park and Saraji from February 25.

In the 15-month dispute over a new enterprise agreement, 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.

Port Kembla coal terminal union ends strike

On February 23, the CFMEU, representing 100 workers at the Port Kembla Coal Terminal (PKCT), 70 km south of Sydney, called off all industrial action, after reaching agreement with the company for a new enterprise bargaining agreement. Coal terminal workers have struck for seven days and held two separate 48-hour walkouts and a 24-hour strike this month. The coal terminal is managed and part-owned by BHP-Billiton.

According to the CFMEU, PKCT management agreed to a 4.5 per cent pay rise per year for three years and job security provisions. The union has not revealed whether the company has withdrawn its demand that various positions, including middle management and contractors, not be covered by any future enterprise agreement. The union, however, has agreed to parts of a deal being arbitrated by Fair Work Australia.

Western Australian construction workers strike

Two hundred construction workers at the Chinese-owned Sino Iron Ore project in Western Australia's Pilbara region walked off the job for 24 hours on February 21 in protest against moves by subcontractors to extend shifts from 10.5 hours to 12 hours.

The CFMEU said that it would raise concerns in the Industrial Relations Commission that Chinese workers on the project were being paid up to 40 percent less than other employees. The union has not announced whether any further action will be taken to support the Chinese workers.

Immigrant loggers remain stranded in the Solomon Islands

Twenty-three Malaysian and Indonesian employees of the New World Logging Company remain stranded in the Solomon Islands after the Labour Department of Ministry of Commerce, Industries, Labor and Immigration refused to help retrieve unpaid wages and allowances or assist workers' attempts to return home. The commissioner of labour declared that workers' claims for outstanding salaries was an issue between them and the company, and that their repatriation requests were up to the Malaysian employment agency who hired them.

The loggers walked out of the company's Suavanao camp in Isabel province, Solomon Islands on January 25 over poor working conditions and "mistreatment." A spokesman said they were virtual prisoners, with no access to phones or any outside communications.

The workers submitted a written complaint to the ministry last month 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. Loggers also claimed that they were paid 40 percent less than what was stated on their contracts. A Solomon Island immigration official has admitted that it was the second incident of its kind with New World Logging.

New Zealand maritime workers resume strike action

Up to 300 members of the Maritime Union of New Zealand (MUNZ)

walked off the job on February 24 to begin a 14-day strike in a dispute for a new work agreement with the Ports of Auckland (POAL). The MUNZ has also issued the company with a seven-day strike notice for March 9. Although the company has already been hit by six walkouts during the dispute it has refused to budge from its 10 percent pay rise offer and performance bonuses of up to 20 percent on hourly rates in exchange for a new, on call "flexible roster system."

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 to Comlinxx, of which POAL has 90 percent ownership, and the proposed roster system which will result in fewer hours and reduced pay. A MUNZ official said strike action would be lifted only when POAL withdrew its contracting-out plan.



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