

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 March 2012

## South Korean public broadcasters' strike in fifth week

Around 500 journalists and technicians at the public broadcaster MBC in Seoul are maintaining strike action begun on January 30 over alleged biased coverage of major social issues. Strikers have refused to return to work until MBC president Kim Jae-chul steps down. Journalists from other public broadcasters, KBS and YTN, have formed a joint struggle committee to oppose government interference in public broadcasting and demand the reinstatement of fired MBC journalists.

KBS reporters plan to strike on March 6 to demand the resignation of the broadcaster's president, Kim In-kyu. Reporters at YTN and state-subsidised broadcaster Yonhap have also opposed the re-nomination of their CEOs, claiming they are political appointees of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak.

## India: More Kerala private hospital nurses on strike

Close to 300 nurses at the Gokulam Medical College and Research Foundation in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala walked off the job on February 25, after negotiations between the All India Private Nurses' Association and the hospital for a wage increase reached deadlock. Nurses began negotiating in November to demand minimum wages above the current 3,500 rupees (\$US70.51) per month and reduced duty time. According to nurses, some colleagues earn 6,200 rupees a month but work extended shifts up to 16 hours. Several nurses were hospitalised after beginning a hunger strike outside the hospital campus on February 26.

Nurses in private hospitals covered by the newly formed United Nurses' Association (UNA) and the Indian Registered Nurses Association (IRNA) began strike action in early February. Nurses at most private hospitals in Kerala are paid as low as 5,000 rupees (\$US101) a month and complain of excessive workloads.

## West Bengal tea workers starve to death during lockout

At least 12 tea workers have died of starvation during a four-month lockout at the Bhuban Valley Tea Estate in West Bengal. Nearly 1,000 tea workers downed tools at the estate in October to demand unpaid wages, provident fund benefits and a wage increase. Management immediately locked workers out, forcing them to seek employment in adjoining tea gardens for wages as low as 30 rupees (\$US0.60) a day.

The Bhuban Valley estate workers were paid 51 rupees a day, well below the West Bengal tea garden minimum of 81 rupees (\$1.63). The

estate was reopened in February due to pressure from the government, following an inquiry that found the tea workers' deaths were caused by starvation.

## Tamil Nadu: Former spinning mill workers protest

Former employees of the Salem Co-Operative Spinning Mill staged a protest and fast near the Salem Collector's office on February 25 to demand the mill, which was closed in 2004, be reopened. According to workers, they were jobless, without pensions. They demanded full pay and other employee benefits for the closure period. In addition, they want land previously occupied by the Employee Provident Office to be made available to workers.

The protest was called by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, the National Co-operative Spinning Mills Labourers' Union and other organisations. The unions have refused to mobilise other mill workers but have issued a series of appeals for the state government to intervene.

## Pakistan Railways workers continue protests

Pakistan Railways (PR) workers in Karachi rallied at the city station and protested outside the superintendent's office on February 28 over several demands. The workers are demanding an end to privatisation, the immediate restoration of all cargo and passenger trains, and payment of dues to retired workers. The demonstrations were organised by the Railway Workers Union, the Railway Mehnetkash Union, the Railway Mazdoor Union and the Pakistan Railways Employees Union.

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 over the 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. Over the past decade the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund has demanded privatisation of public assets in return for loans. In response, successive Pakistani governments have slashed PR's workforce from 113,000 in 1997 to 85,000 and severely reduced freight and passenger services.

## Pakistani government data input workers strike

Thousands of National Database and Registration Authority (NARDA) employees across the country struck on February 23 to demand immediate regularisation of their jobs and increased staffing levels. Workers claimed that there are more than 14,500 contractual employees out of the 16,000-strong NARDA workforce. Sixty employees were terminated during the walkout and police baton-charged workers protesting at the Karachi Press Club.

Workers ended the strike after two days, when the government agreed to reinstate the terminated workers and regularise contractual and daily wage employees. The government agreed to form a committee to consider increasing recruitment.

### **Sri Lankan non-medical health workers protest**

Non-medical casual employees in Sri Lankan public hospitals demonstrated outside the Health Ministry in Colombo on February 29 with several demands. The All Ceylon Health Services Union (ACHSU), representing hospital sanitation and non-medical support workers, wants a uniform allowance of 7,500 rupees (\$US62), a separate allowance for Saturday work, confirmation in service of all casual labourers and one day off every week.

The protest follows a four-hour stoppage by sanitation workers at nine government hospitals on February 17. The ACHSU, which claims to have been negotiating with the government since 2004, has called off industrial action each time the administration says it will enter talks.

### **Cambodian textile workers strike**

After four days of strike action by 2,000 Medtecs textile factory employees in the Manhattan Special Economic Zone (SEZ), Kampong Siem district, protesting workers began throwing stones at the factory on February 23 in an attempt to force management to begin negotiations. Over 400 police were rushed to the factory, but did not intervene.

Four days earlier, three women were shot by a suspected undercover police officer when 3,000 striking workers in the Manhattan SEZ protested outside several shoe factories to demand better wages and conditions.

Medtecs management agreed to meet workers' representatives after the protest intensified. During negotiations the company agreed to pay remaining wages and other benefits to workers dismissed without notice, and to those whose contracts were terminated. Workers maintained their protest, however, demanding that Medtecs implement an Arbitration Council order endorsing five of the workers' 12-point list of demands. These included an end to the illegal use of fixed duration contracts, and the payment of improved wages and working conditions.

### **Bowen basin coal miners maintain strike**

Workers at two BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) mines in Queensland's Bowen Basin are continuing strike action begun on February 25. The ten-day strike closely follows a seven-day walkout by over 3,500 members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the

Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union at seven BMA mines in the region.

The 15-month dispute is over a new EA (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, EA 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.

### **Western Australian fire fighters protest**

Up to 100 United Firefighters Union WA (UFUWA) members rallied outside state parliament in Perth on February 29 to demand changes to workers' compensation laws. The UFUWA claims that firefighters were contracting cancer from exposure to on-the-job hazards, such as toxins and carcinogens in smoke and chemicals.

The current laws put the onus on firefighters to prove which fire caused a cancer. According to a union official, studies had shown that firefighters were being diagnosed with cancer at far higher rates than the general population. The state Liberal government has refused to support a bill in parliament that links 12 types of cancers to occupational diseases for professional firefighters.

### **New Zealand aged care workers strike**

Caregivers, nurses and service workers employed by Oceania, New Zealand's largest rest home chain, walked off the job for two hours on March 1 in an eight-month dispute for a wage increase. Up to 1,500 employees at 20 of Oceania's 58 rest homes participated. The New Zealand Nurses' Organisation and the Service and Food Workers Union said more two-hour stoppages are planned for March 8.

The unions want a 3.5 percent pay rise from the expiry date of their collective agreement in June 2011. While New Zealand's 2011 consumer price index was slightly above 4 percent, Oceania has offered just 1 percent with no backdating and wants to slash overtime rates. Most workers were paid an hourly rate of between \$13.61 (\$US11.10) and \$14.20. New Zealand's minimum wage is \$13 an hour.



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