

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 March 2012

Pakistan Railways workers maintain anti-privatisation protests

As part of ongoing national protests, 3,000 Pakistan Railways (PR) workers gathered in Lahore on March 20 to oppose the run-down and privatisation of the state-run transport utility. Rail workers from across Pakistan joined the demonstration, which concluded with a three-hour protest outside PR's headquarters.

In early February, Karachi PR rail workers 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.

In November, the Pakistan government announced that the state rail service would be semi-privatised on a priority basis, with freight and major passenger services operated by public-private partnerships. 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 resume action

On March 20, hundreds of National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) contract employees protested outside the authority's Islamabad headquarters to demand the regularisation of their jobs and reinstatement of 61 employees sacked for striking last month. At least 25 demonstrators were arrested and many injured when police baton-charged the protest.

The All-Pakistan NADRA Employees Union said its members would maintain protests until their demands were met. NADRA's 16,000-strong workforce includes more than 14,500 contractual employees.

NADRA employees across Pakistan struck on February 23 to demand immediate regularisation of their jobs and increased staffing levels. The strike was called off after several days when the government promised to meet their demands and reinstate sacked workers. No employees have been reinstated and instead of regularising jobs, contracts have been extended until retirement.

Mass arrest of protesting Pakistan government clerks

About 300 All Pakistan Clerks Association (APCA) members were arrested when police intercepted a march by clerks who planned to demonstrate outside the Baluchistan provisional assembly in Quetta on March 15. Clerks carried placards demanding payment of dues and housing and educational facilities that the government had agreed to

provide several months earlier. APCA members said they would keep protesting until the government honoured its agreement.

India: Lakeshore private hospital nurses remain on strike

Over 400 nurses at the Lakeshore Hospital in Cochin, Kerala have been on strike since March 12 to protest the dismissal of 18 probation nurses involved in last month's strike and management's repudiation of an agreement to revise salaries. Nurses have been picketing the hospital since mediation talks between both parties and the government deadlocked on March 15.

The striking members of the newly formed United Nurses Association gained the support of local youth organisations, residents, clubs and merchant organisations that joined a nurses' protest outside the hospital on March 20. At least five nurses were injured when several high-level staff rammed their vehicles into the nurses' picket.

Nurses at Lakeshore and several other Kerala private hospitals struck in February to demand a wage increase and reduced workloads. Nurses in most private hospitals in Kerala are only paid 5,000 rupees (\$US101) a month.

Gurgoan textile workers riot

Around 2,000 workers at three Orient Craft factories in Gurgoan just outside New Delhi struck on March 19 after a contracted employee was physically assaulted by his boss. The contractor had verbally abused several workers because they had refused to work overtime on Saturday and Sunday. After the contractor stabbed one employee, workers at all three factories walked out and began throwing stones at buildings and vehicles in the company compound. Over 100 police armed with steel-tipped batons were deployed to the site. At least five workers and the contractor were arrested.

Andhra Pradesh municipal workers demonstrate

Several hundred Vijayawada Municipal Corporation (VMC) employees have been holding lunchtime protests and a relay hunger strike outside the council gate since March 12. The VMC Employees and Workers' Joint Action Committee, representing 4,000 regular staff and 3,000 contract workers, wants regular payment of salaries, all vacant posts filled, an end

to contracting and outsourced recruitment, and health cards for all staff. The council workers said they would escalate protests until all their demands were met.

Orissa rural veterinary doctors on strike

At least 126 government veterinary doctors attached to mobile veterinary units (MVU) have been on strike at the Master Canteen Square in Bhubaneswar, Orissa since March 14 over low wages. The doctors, who treat and vaccinate domesticated animals in remote parts of the state's western districts, are paid 9,300 rupees (\$184) per month, well below other government employees with the same level of university qualifications.

Sri Lankan public hospital minor employees strike

Nearly 30,000 minor workers at government hospitals across Sri Lanka held a 24-hour sick note campaign on March 21 on several demands, including rectifying salary anomalies, 10,000-rupee uniform allowance, 5,000-rupee transport allowance and a five-day week. At least 2,000 workers from across Sri Lanka marched from Viharamahadevi Park in Colombo to the Health Ministry.

Eleven health department unions have formed a joint committee to coordinate action and negotiate with the government. The strike follows a four-hour stoppage by sanitation workers at nine government hospitals over similar issues in mid-February. The All Ceylon Health Services Union, which claims to have been negotiating with the government since 2004, has called off industrial action each time the administration said it would enter talks.

The workers vowed to continue their campaign unless the government and health department authorities do not immediately address their grievances.

Fremantle port workers end rolling stoppages

Around 115 members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) at the Patrick Stevedores operated container terminal in Fremantle, Western Australia ended four days of strike action this week, after terminal-owner Asciano and the MUA agreed to resume talks in an 18-month dispute over wages and conditions.

In November, the MUA agreed to relax some safety requirements in an in-principle deal with Patrick Stevedores for a five-year agreement at its container and general cargo terminals around Australia. The agreement, which was to be ratified by members at individual Patrick terminals, provides for a 22.5 percent pay rise over five years, back-dated to October 2010, with an extra 0.75 percent annual increase linked to productivity targets. In return, the union had agreed to speedups and relaxation of some safety requirements that restricted the number of crane movements.

The union claims that the main sticking point in reaching a final agreement is Asciano's refusal to allow Fair Work Australia to arbitrate on all future disputes. Asciano claims that this would take away its "right to manage."

In a separate dispute, 20 MUA members at Patrick's maintenance

contractor Ativo struck for 48 hours at Fremantle Port on March 14 and 17 in a dispute over a new work agreement. According to the MUA, an in-principle agreement was finalised three weeks ago with Ativo but Patrick rejected a dispute resolution clause in the deal.

Western Australian construction workers protest

Construction work at the Hale House redevelopment site in West Perth stopped for 24 hours on March 15 when over 100 members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) picketed the site over unpaid wages and other entitlements. A CFMEU delegate claimed that a dozen workers employed by sub-contractors on the project had outstanding wages and that the wages of another dozen were regularly delayed. He said one worker was owed about \$10,000 and that some subcontractors employed on the project had not paid staff superannuation in two to three years.

New Zealand meat workers remain locked out

Nearly 2,000 members of the New Zealand Meat Workers Union at Affco's eight New Zealand processing plants are either locked out or implementing rolling stoppages in industrial action that began on February 29. The company has threatened to lock out all other employees until April 16 if they participate in further strike action. The meat workers had planned a 48-hour stoppage for March 22.

Affco workers are in dispute over the company's proposed "flexible hiring" and productivity speed-ups in a new collective agreement. Their struggle follows a similar dispute last year in which over 100 meat workers at CMP Rangitikei accepted a union-negotiated pay cut to end a 65-day lockout. The workers were locked out after refusing to sign a collective contract that involved wage cuts, shift changes and cuts in allowances.

Strikes continue at Oceania's aged-care homes

On March 19, caregivers, nurses and service workers at Oceania, New Zealand's largest aged-care chain, held four-hour stoppages on all three shifts at 22 rest homes in a nine-month dispute for a wage rise. The latest action follows two-hour rolling stoppages earlier this month and a national two-hour stop work by 1,500 employees at Oceania's 57 rest homes on March 14.

Members of the New Zealand Nurses' Organisation and Service and Food Workers Union 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 only offered 1 percent, with no backdating. The company also wants to slash overtime rates.



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