

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 May 2012

South Korean broadcasters' strike in fourth month

Over 4,000 journalists and production staff at South Korea's major public TV and cable broadcasters, KBS, MBC, YTN and Yonhap News Agency are maintaining strike action that began on January 30 when MBC journalists walked out to protest alleged political bias by management. Strikers have demanded the resignation of their CEOs who they claim are political appointees of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak and are censoring coverage critical of Lee.

In addition, journalists want the reinstatement of sacked journalists and the CEO-appointment system reformed to include nominations from the National Assembly and local governors. At least ten journalists have been sacked at MBC and YTN for criticising the government.

On May 7, strikers erected 80 tents and began a sit-in protest at a park near the MBC and KBS offices in Seoul. News and current affairs productions remain severely affected.

India: NLC contract workers' strike continues

Over 13,000 contract workers at the Tamil Nadu state-owned coal and power generating company Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) have been on strike since April 21 to demand better pay. The Madras High Court has issued an injunction declaring the strike illegal and police are staging mass arrests in an attempt to intimidate the strikers. Nearly 2,000 workers were arrested this month as they picketed NLC power plants and while attempting to hold public demonstrations.

The poorly paid contract workers are demanding full implementation of a contract settlement reached after a 39-day strike in October 2010. Their demands include regularisation of their employment, equal pay with permanent workers and an increase in the retirement age from 58 to 60. Regular workers are paid around 13,300 rupees (\$US256) a month. Contract workers—miners, labourers and other ancillary workers—receive between 4,500 rupees (\$US91) and 6,900 rupees a month.

NLC has been able to maintain close to full production at its three open cut mines and three power stations through its 14,000 regular workers. As they did during the October 2010 strike, the Jeeva Union and the All India Trade Union Congress and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions have not called on regular workers to join the walkout.

All sections of the state—the Congress Party-led central government, Tamil Nadu's AIADMK state government, and the courts and police—have lined up behind NLC management, supporting its refusal to regularise the contract workers' employment and taking repressive measures aimed at breaking the strike.

Tamil Nadu sugar mill workers' strike in sixth week

In a dispute that began in December 2010, around 6,000 workers at 15 cooperative and two public sector sugar mills in the Vellore district have been on strike since April 4 to demand a pay rise and dearness allowance on par with other employees on government pay scales at the mills. Nearly 400 strikers were arrested on May 4 after picketers spilled onto the streets outside the mills. After 15 rounds of talks between the Tamil Nadu Federation of All Trade Unions of Cooperative and Public Sector Sugar Mills and the Directorate of Sugars, workers rejected a 25 percent pay rise offer, far short of the 41 percent they had demanded.

On May 9, the government, in an attempt to end the strike, offered immediate payment of a 10 percent residual of an ad-hoc payment granted in 2010, in addition to a previous offer to increase the base salary by 25 percent. If accepted, workers will get rises ranging between 1,595 and 1,907 rupees per month. This will leave mill workers with 35 years' service on a maximum of 14,900 rupees (\$US300) and well short of the 40,000 to 80,000 rupees for government wage scale workers. Minimum base wage employees will only be paid 9,600 rupees (\$US194) a month.

Mill workers struck twice last year over the issue and again in February. The sugar unions, supported by the Labour Progressive Federation, called off these strikes after the government promised to resolve the issues.

Karnataka child-care centre workers walk out over privatisation

On May 4, child-care centre (Anganwadi) workers from Chickballapur (50 km north of Bangalore) protested at the Bangalore district panchayat office against government moves to outsource management of the state's 2,635 day-care centres to Vedanta Prathishtana, a corporate arm of global mining company Vedanta Resources.

Vedanta Resources has been under investigation for alleged violation of human rights laws in various parts of India. The protest was organised by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

Air India pilots on mass sick leave

About 150 Indian Pilot Guild (IPG) members have been on mass sick leave at Air India (AI) since May 7 to protest being denied training on the airline's new fleet of Boeing 787 Dreamliner planes. International flights have been disrupted, over 20 pilots have been sacked, the IPG derecognised, and doctors sent to the homes of pilots who reported in sick. The dispute is connected to unresolved wage differentials between pilots

when AI merged with its sister airline India Air in 2007.

In May 2011, 800 pilots of former India Air—members of the Indian Commercial Pilots' Association (ICPA)—struck for several weeks over the pay parity issue. ICPA pilots claimed their wage was 50 percent below that of IPG pilots. While IPG pilots are paid a fixed salary, ICPA pilots are only paid for the hours they are called to work and are not paid for training. The ICPA called off the 2011 strike after ten days without resolving any of the disputed issues.

The current dispute was triggered because AI management has offered 50 percent of training places on the Dreamliners to the cheaper ICPA members, meaning 150 IPG members will not be trained. IPG members have refused to man flights carrying ICPA pilots to Singapore for the training.

Pakistan water and power workers continue protests against privatisation

Pakistan Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) workers struck on May 8 and demonstrated in several cities to oppose government plans to privatise power distribution companies covered by the Pakistan Electric Power Company (PEPCO). The government intends to transfer PEPCO's duties to a new Central Power Purchasing Agency, acting under the ministry of water and power.

The workers, who have taken action over the past six months, closed down key functions, including recovery of dues, billing and installation of new electricity connections. They have threatened to maintain their action until the government withdraws its plans and stops appointing senior officers from the private sector. WAPDA's 100,000 workers are members of the All Pakistan Hydro Electric Workers Union.

Police attack Pakistani human development workers

For the third time in five weeks, contract workers for the semi-government National Commission for Human Development (NCHD) were assaulted by police with water cannons, tear-gas and batons while protesting outside the Karachi Press Club. Over 60 workers have been arrested and 11 injured in the attacks.

Over 700 NCHD contract workers began protesting on March 29 to demand job regularisation and the reopening of projects that affect 5,000 jobs. After a decade on the job, the NCHD contract workers were still denied benefits received by full-time employees. NCHD contract workers assist in the improvement of education and healthcare at 3,000 schools in the Sindh province.

Indonesian paper workers end strike

Over 7,600 union members at the Asia Pulp and Paper's (APP) PT Pindo Deli's twin mills in Karawang, West Java ended a two-day strike on May 8 after the company agreed to increase wages by between 11 and 18 percent, depending on classification. APP is part of the Indonesian Sinar Mas Group, which operates nine pulp and paper mills in Indonesia.

The salary rise will apply to over 13,000 workers but even with the increase, the monthly pay rate for most will only be \$US180. The strike

was organised by the Pulp and Paper Union of Indonesia.

Queensland construction workers' strike in fourth week

At least 350 members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) at the Mackay Base Hospital Redevelopment site on Queensland's central coast have been on strike since April 18. The building workers are employed by the Baulderstone construction company.

The industrial action is part of a six-month dispute over a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). The building workers have voted to remain on strike until the company inserts a clause in the proposed EBA which commits contractors to providing all their employees with pay and conditions on a par with Baulderstone workers.

Central Park building workers walk out over safety

On May 9, 500 CFMEU members walked off over safety concerns at Sydney's Central Park, the largest construction site in New South Wales. A CFMEU official said the dispute related to substandard scaffolding erected by a sub-contractor on the site. The union claimed that the scaffolding did not comply with Australian standards and members were directed not to recommence work until the scaffolding has been dismantled.

Victorian fire brigade support employees stop work

Up to 400 Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) administrative staff and mechanics stopped work for four hours on March 7 and protested outside the Brigade's headquarters in Eastern Hill, Melbourne over a pay dispute. A United Firefighters Union official said the workers, among the lowest paid in their fields, were demanding an annual 4.5 percent pay rise for the next three years. The state government's wages policy is a 2.5 percent per annum rise.

Negotiations over a new pay deal for firefighting support services staff have been dragging on for more than 12 months. Industrial action includes rolling stoppages and bans on answering the phone, mail processing and other duties.

Melbourne cosmetics manufacturing workers stop over EBA

About 60 employees at the Tullamarine cosmetics factory of Ross Cosmetics have begun a series of four-hour stoppages and overtime bans after six weeks of negotiations for a new enterprise bargaining agreement reached deadlock. The National Union of Workers members want continuation of the previous EBA and a 3.5 percent pay rise to cover the cost of living. The company has offered a 1.5 percent pay rise and wants to withdraw 13 provisions from the EBA.

Ross Cosmetics produces cosmetics, sunscreens and therapeutic goods, which are stocked in supermarkets such as Coles and Woolworths.

South Australian paramedics impose bans

Ambulance paramedics delivering patients to the Flinders Medical Centre emergency ward in Adelaide imposed a 24-hour work ban on May 9 in protest over long delays at the hospital.

The Ambulance Employees Association (AEA) said too many patients were being left in ambulances because there was no room in the hospital's emergency department. The action was sparked after a seriously ill patient with internal bleeding was left in an ambulance for over 40 minutes.

Paramedics called off proposed industrial action in September after the health minister promised that new hospital renovations would end the delays. According to the AEA, up to eight ambulances at a time are regularly left waiting to offload patients.



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