

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 December 2012

Pakistan hospital paramedics walk out again

Paramedics at government hospitals in Pakistan's eastern state of Punjab walked off the job on November 21 to demand a new service structure. The strike was part of a series organised by the Punjab Paramedical Alliance (PPA). Strikes were held in early November and several more throughout the year. According to the PPA, the provincial government has held over 20 discussions with union officials over 12 months but failed to implement a service structure previously agreed to by the chief minister.

In June, the PPA called off a 33-day state-wide strike after various commitments from the government. These included approval of a 1,500-rupee monthly risk allowance (\$US30) for Grade 1 to Grade 4 paramedics and to regularise employees working at teaching hospitals and autonomous medical institutions. The monthly wage of paramedical staff begins as low as 8,000 rupees (\$US83).

India: Rural childcare workers protest

At least 100,000 rural childcare (anganwadi), health and education workers from 25 states, representing over ten million colleagues, held a sit-in protest in Jantar Mantar, New Delhi on November 26 and 27 to oppose the central government's move to privatise the childcare schemes. Protesters alleged that schemes like the Integrated Child Development Service, the midday meal service for school children and the National Rural Health Mission are to be handed over to private operators such as Vedanta, or NGOs like the Naandi Foundation.

Protesters also demanded fair treatment and a salary of at least 10,000 rupees (\$US179.5) a month, instead of an honorarium. A health care worker is only paid 400 rupees (\$7.9) per delivery in rural areas, which includes travel expenses. A midday meal worker is paid an honorarium of 3,000 rupees (\$53.9) and an assistant 1,500 rupees.

The protest followed a strike by 2,000 government childcare centre employees in Bangalore district last week to demand the repeal of an agreement between the state government and the Vedanta Foundation which they said will lead to privatisation of over 2,600 childcare centres.

Visakhapatnam Steel Plant workers down tools

Members of 18 trade unions at the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant (VSP) in Andhra Pradesh downed tools on November 22 and protested in Ukkunagaram against central government plans to sell 10 percent of its equity in Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Limited (RINL). RINL is the corporate entity of VSP. The Congress-led central government hopes to raise 25 billion rupees (\$US445 million) from the sale.

VSP workers struck for 24 hours in July over the issue. Union leaders called off a 48-hour strike in October on a vague promise from the steel minister who said she would delay the sale and take up their issue with the Prime Minister.

Protesting VSP workers pledged solidarity with National Mineral Development Corporation (NMDC) employees who struck for 24 hours the following day over the same issue. The date for the 10 percent divestiture has not been announced.

Indonesian workers rally for better conditions and pay

In an ongoing campaign by the major trade unions that began in July, tens of thousands of Indonesian workers held street processions through Jakarta on November 21 and 22 to demand higher wages, better working conditions, free health care and an end to outsourcing of workers. Similar rallies were held in West and East Java, home to more than 40 industrial estates and more than 25 million workers.

In October, more than two million workers in Java, Batam and Sumatra from 700 companies held a one-day stoppage at 80 industrial estates, in 24 cities. The turnout was driven by pent-up anger over low wages and the outsourcing of work to contract workers. Employers in Indonesia use outsourcing to get around the country's limited labour regulations and deny wage rises and benefits such as pensions.

Indonesia is one of the world's fastest growing economies but social inequality continues to expand. Almost 40 percent, or up to 20 million, of 35 million people working in the formal sector have been underpaid and left unprotected. Even after a 25 percent wage increase in the minimum wage in many districts earlier this month most unskilled and semi-skilled workers are paid wages below 1.8

million rupiah (\$US200) a month.

Korean workers at US military bases to strike

Over 95 percent of the 9,400 union members employed at various US Forces Korea (USFK) bases around South Korea have voted to strike for 48 hours on December 1 to oppose a US government plan to impose a three-year pay freeze and reduction of the workforce. The USFK Korean Employees Union said 13,000 workers are affected by the decision.

A union official said workers, who do administration, basic custodial services, facility maintenance and restaurant duties, want a wage increase that reflects a 7.1 percent hike in inflation in the last two years and no lay-offs. The media reported that over the past six years, wages in Korea have increased by 33 percent but wages for Koreans at USFK bases have risen by only 11.5 percent. The average annual salary of these workers is around 32 million won (\$US29,400).

Cambodian footwear manufacturing workers on strike

Close to 1,000 employees at the Global Footwear factory in Cambodia's southern province of Kandal, have been on strike since November 15 with 12 demands, including a \$US9 monthly pay raise. The workers, who are paid just \$61 a month have ignored a directive from the Arbitration Council to return to work.

One worker told the media that management had refused to meet with workers but were holding talks with labour officials. Management claimed that the strikers' demands were illegal and it had begun legal action against the strike leaders.

Filipino health workers protest hospital privatisation

Health workers picketed the Aquino government's Public-Private Partnership Centre in Quezon City on November 27 to condemn the privatisation of public hospitals. The action followed a token one-hour walkout on October 25 by 1,000 hospital workers in Manila over the issue.

According to an Alliance of Health Workers (AHW) official, at least 26 hospitals are to be turned into corporations—a step toward full privatisation. First to be privatised are the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine in Muntinlupa and the Philippine Orthopedic Center in Quezon City.

Remaining state-run hospitals will privatise medical services, including libraries. Any new health facility construction will be provided under a public-private partnership initiative.

Victorian wine estate workers locked out

Nearly 70 members of the Australian Workers Union (AWU) at the Treasury Wine Estates in Karadoc, north-west Victoria, were locked out on November 28 in a dispute over a new pay deal. The company has offered annual 3.5 percent increases over three years but no back pay. Workers want 4 percent annual increases with back pay to June 30 when the old agreement expired.

Despite an earlier unsuccessful attempt to resolve the dispute in Fair Work Australia, the AWU has sought the estate workers' approval to have their case heard again in the industrial court.

Western Australian school and hospital support workers increase bans

Thousands of United Voice (UV) union members employed as support workers in state public schools and hospitals have voted to increase work bans in their campaign for an \$80 a week pay rise. UV members had rejected the last offer by the Barnett state Liberal government of a 4 percent pay rise over two years and 3.5 percent for the third year.

According to UV, the 10,000 workers affected by the dispute, including education assistants, cleaners and gardeners, are among some of the lowest paid public sector employees, earning on average around \$41,000 a year. The government's pay offer equates to a weekly increase of between just \$20 and \$28. In addition to existing work bans, UV members will refuse to wash dishes, deliver linen and clean offices.

While the state government had refused to improve its pay offer, the UV leadership has restricted industrial action to limited bans and ruled out unified state-wide strike action.



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