

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 December 2012

Bangladeshi garment workers continue with protests

At least 50 people were injured when police used rubber bullets and teargas against 10,000 protesting workers in the Ashulia industrial zone north of Dhaka on December 3. Tensions amongst garment workers and employers have been running high since November 24 when a fire at the Tazreen Fashions factory in Ashulia caused the deaths of 112 employees.

Most plants in the industrial complex remained closed while a series of daily protests by angry workers demanding improved safety clashed with police and the notorious Rapid Action Battalion Force following the disaster.

Monday's protest was sparked when workers at the reopened Hyun Apparels plant reported for work and found a note on the factory gate declaring suspension of 101 workers accused of involvement in the Tazreen Fashions fire protests and no wage payments during the closure.

In another incident on Monday, at least 10 workers of the Pacific Blue Jeans Wear factory were injured as they tried to rush out through limited exits after a fire broke out in the factory. One worker was hospitalised in a critical condition.

India: Private bus employees in Kerala walk out

Private bus workers in Kerala's Kozhikode district struck without notice on December 3 over long-pending demands. An official of the Kozhikode District Motor and Engineering Workers' Union told the media that workers had vowed to stay on strike until demands were met. The action followed a state-wide strike on October 31 by the Kerala State Private Bus Transport Workers Federation with several demands, including higher wages and daily working hours to eight.

Meanwhile, the district collector, private bus owners and various unions met to discuss plans to end the strike immediately. The Kozhikode district police chief assured private bus owners that complete protection to these services would be given during unofficial strikes.

Tamil Nadu auto-rickshaw drivers in Pondicherry strike

Hundreds of auto-rickshaw owners and drivers struck and rallied in the Tamil Nadu city of Pondicherry on December 4 to oppose a government order to fix meters to their vehicles. Workers said they were not against the meters, but the rate announced by the transport department was too low.

Strikers' representatives were allowed to submit a memorandum of their

demands to the transport commissioner after police stopped their procession.

The Auto Drivers and Owners Association wants the meter fare rate increased from 20 rupees per 2km to 30 rupees. There are over 3,000 auto-rickshaws in Pondicherry. Many of them had not had meters installed by the government's December 7 deadline.

Andhra Pradesh powerloom workers walk out

Powerloom operators in Sircilla, Andhra Pradesh have been on strike since November 26 to demand implementation of Government Order 53, which orders the powerloom owners to increase wages for weavers. The workers claim that the government and powerloom owners are stalling on resolving the issue in an attempt to starve the strikers back to work.

Blind workers protest in New Delhi

On December 1, hundreds of blind workers from surrounding districts converged on New Delhi and rallied at parliament to protest wage exploitation and violation of their labour rights. The protest was held on World Disability Day.

The Blind Workers Union (BWU) said the demonstration was part of an ongoing campaign against the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), a well-known NGO.

The BWU told protesters that NGOs like NFB, and other employers, act as if they are doing blind workers a favour by employing them. "In reality employers earn huge profits from the labour of these workers," a BWU spokesman said.

NFB production unit employees are forced to work on the basis of a production-wage structure, which workers claim is only 2,600 rupees (\$US52) a month. A delegation of blind workers submitted a memorandum of demands to the Ministry of Social Justice.

Sri Lankan school principals and teachers strike

Government school principals and teachers struck on December 4 to demand implementation of recommendations made by Cabinet in 2008 to rectify salary anomalies. These include promotions and salary arrears and implementation of the national teachers' transfer policy. Additional demands are for the allocation of funds for distress and property loans,

allocation of six percent of the GDP for education and an end to political interference in the education sector.

A spokesman for the Teacher and Principal Services Collective told the media at a demonstration in July that the government had claimed that 278 million rupees (\$US2.4 million) was allocated for the salary arrears but no payments had been made.

Pakistan: Punjab sanitary workers protest privatisation

Hundreds of sanitary workers protested outside the Rawalpindi Press Club on December 2 to oppose the Punjab government's decision to privatise the city's sanitation department and impose a sanitation tax on its citizens. According to the Municipal Workers League (MWL), at least 700 daily wage workers will lose their jobs.

The union claims that sanitation workers employed by Lahore, the district capital, were contracted out and forced to accept a 3,000 rupee wage cut to 8,000 rupees (\$US88) per month. The MWL threatened to call a district-wide strike if the government continued with the plan.

Cambodian garment workers strike

Over 200 employees at the Nex-t Apparel factory in Phnom Penh walked off the job on December 3 to protest the sacking of two union leaders. The strike followed a march by 1,000 Nex-t workers to the Ministry of Social Affairs on November 26 with ten demands, including better pay and conditions and reinstatement of the two union leaders of the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers' Democratic Union.

Striking workers were attacked by police on Monday when they ignored a directive to return to work from a representative of the government-sanctioned peak union body the Cambodian Union Federation. Workers at Next-t have been striking at irregular intervals since the two union leaders were terminated in early November.

Indonesian workers continue protests over outsourcing

On December 5, thousands of workers rallied in Jakarta at the Hotel Indonesia traffic circle, at several embassies and at the Presidential Palace, to demand that the government abolish outsourcing and "crack down" on foreign companies banning union membership. Over 8,000 police were deployed to monitor the demonstrations. The rally was organised by the Indonesian Workers' Assembly.

Employers in Indonesia use outsourcing to get around the country's limited labour regulations and deny wage rises and benefits. Although they work alongside regular employees, outsourced workers often lack access to health care, holiday pay and pension funds. In an attempt to end mass protests in October, the government announced plans to limit the use of outsourced labour. However, under the proposals companies engaged in the cleaning, security, transportation, catering, oil, gas and mining industries will still be able to use outsourced labour.

Western Australian port workers on strike

Around 130 stevedoring and maintenance workers at the state-owned Fremantle Port Authority's (FPA) Kwinana Bulk Terminal, south of Perth in Western Australia commenced an eight-day strike on December 7 in a year-long dispute for a new enterprise bargaining agreement. Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members want a 21 percent pay rise over four years and changes to rostering and working conditions. The action follows a four-day strike in October before which the MUA reduced its demand for a 20 percent pay rise over 3 years to a 12 percent pay rise over 3 years. Management refused to strike a deal.

The MUA has now conceded its demand for a roster of four-days-on and six-days-off to a reduced claim for a 39-hour working week. Many of the workers have been working up to 72 hours a week and some up to 120 hours a fortnight and are concerned over fatigue and safety factors.

Nurses in Perth protest over privatisation

On December 4, around thirty nurses and midwives at the Swan Districts Public Hospital, in the eastern suburbs of Perth walked off the job to protest the possible loss of working conditions and leave entitlements when the hospital is closed and replaced in 2015 by the publicly-funded but privately-run Midland Health Campus. The new hospital will be run by private operator St John of God.

According to the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF), nurses wanting to remain in the Midland area would have to resign from the public sector and re-apply for their jobs with the new private operator. An ANF official said that with the loss of sick leave, holiday leave, long service and maternity leave some nurses could lose up to \$50,000. The ANF has not called for any further industrial action and has not publicly opposed the closure or privatisation of the Swan District Hospital.

Airline pilots vote to strike over pay rates

More than 85 pilots employed by Cobham Aviation Services (CAS), which transport many of the fly-in fly-out mining workers throughout regional Western Australia, northern Queensland and the Northern Territory, have voted to impose work bans and strike for increased pay rates.

Members of the Transport Workers Union and the Australian Federation of Air Pilots are demanding that CAS, which is contracted by Qantaslink to run many of their regional services, increase the pay rates of first officers to 65 percent of the pay rate of higher paid and qualified captains. CAS has offered 55 percent.

The unions have not announced when industrial action will begin.

Sydney pie factory workers strike

At least 100 members of the National Union of Workers (NUW) at Sargent's Pies Colyton factory in Sydney, New South Wales walked off the job for 24 hours on December 3 and picketed the plant in a dispute over wages. All production ceased during the strike.

The workers, who earn just \$16 an hour (Australia's minimum wage is \$15.96 an hour) want a 6 percent pay increase, or 99 cents an hour. The company has said that it would not go above 3 percent. The NUW has not

planned any further action for this year.

New Zealand public school teachers vote to strike

On December 5, 840 primary school teachers in Christchurch, on New Zealand's South Island east-coast, voted for strike action to oppose the National Party government's cost cutting plan to close or merge 38 schools across the city. New Zealand Education Institute (NZEI) members will defy a law mandating that teachers may only initiate strikes over collective agreements, and will strike on February 19.

The action follows a demonstration in Christchurch by thousands of teachers and parents in September over the issue. The government plans to axe 13 schools; merge 18 into nine and relocate another seven. Christchurch has been ravaged by a series of large earthquakes beginning in September 2010, with aftershocks continuing to this day. Teachers and residents worry the government is using the natural disaster as an excuse to trial its cost-cutting education reforms before implementing them across the nation.

Chicken processing workers' union accepts inferior deal

Following a two-day strike last week, 200 workers at Tegel's chicken processing plant in New Plymouth, on New Zealand's North Island, succumbed to pressure from their union and accepted a 7.25 percent pay rise over the next two and half years. Workers had demanded a 10 percent increase that would give them pay parity with their counterparts in plants in Auckland and Christchurch.

Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union officials attempted to present the deal as a victory, telling workers, "this deal closes the gap significantly and our members can be proud of what they've achieved together."

Solomon Islands festival workers protest

On December 5, more than 100 workers hired by the government as cleaners, caterers, landscapers and security officers during the Festival of the Pacific Arts, in July, protested outside the Ministry for Culture and Tourism in Honiara to demand unpaid wages. Workers claimed the ministry owed them about \$6 million (\$US811,000).

Protesters said they had been pushed from one government department to another, but no one could tell them when they would be paid or if the payments had been approved by Cabinet. They said they would continue demonstrating until their wages were paid.



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