

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 December 2012

Pakistani newspaper workers strike

Daily Times workers took unscheduled strike action on December 11, following an attempt by two colleagues to self-immolate after being denied their wages for over 11 months. Many workers at the English-language publication have not been paid for several months. The newspaper is owned by the Media Times Group, which also publishes the Urdu-language *Daily Aaj Kal* and runs the Business Plus TV channel.

According to the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), delays in salaries are common at *Daily Times*. A PFUJ spokesman claimed many newspapers and television stations in Pakistan do not pay salaries to their correspondents working in remote areas.

The International Federation of Journalists reported in mid-August on the suicide of Ms Semaab who worked for local Lahore newspaper, the *Daily Anti-Crime*, following management's persistent refusal to pay her salary. Journalists working for Channel 5 and Aaj TV in Pakistan have also committed suicide after being denied salaries for several months.

Pakistan road transporters end nine-day strike

On December 12, road transporters (mainly truck owner/drivers) ended a nationwide strike begun on December 4, after reaching agreement with the government on a 15-point charter of demands. Thousands of shipping containers remained at sea ports and factory docks waiting to be delivered and shops across the country ran short of fresh food and other essentials.

The Goods Transporters Association's main demand is for the government to provide adequate security and to stop the police issuing false fines and illegal tolls. The Pakistan government has agreed to increase security on trucking routes and eliminate illegal toll plazas. The union agreed to participate in a government committee to resolve remaining issues.

Pakistan Railways female teachers protest

On December 9, hundreds of female teachers of the state-owned Pakistan Railways protested in Lahore to demand service regularisation. The women work in low-income public schools in Pakistan, which were originally set up on railway land for the children of employees. Most of the schools have fallen into disrepair and are attended only by children from poor families.

According to the Railway Schools Lady Teachers' Association, union members are only paid 7,500 rupees (\$US77) per month and are

struggling for a living wage and permanent contracts. Teachers warned that they would continue the protests until their demands are met.

India: Police assault protesting Uttarakhand contract teachers

At least ten people were injured when police used water cannon and baton charged protesting contract teachers on December 10 in Dehra Dun, in the north Indian border state of Uttarakhand.

The contract primary school teachers were marching towards the Uttarakhand Assembly to demand a salary increase from the current 10,000 rupees (\$US184) a month to 22,000 rupees, and exemption from the mandatory qualification test.

Maharashtra milk delivery workers strike

Milk delivery employees for Bombay Panjrapole, a charitable organisation, struck for three days on December 10 in the Mumbai suburb of Buleshwar. A spokesman for the Mumbai Gumasta union said workers were demanding reinstatement of emergency and marriage loans of up to 200,000 rupees from their Provident Fund and salaries.

Kerala private bus workers walk out

Private bus employees struck for 24 hours on December 10 in Kochi city, Kerala to demand a 50 percent pay rise and removal of anomalies in the Motor Workers' Welfare Fund rules. Private bus employees currently work at least 12 hours a day for 577 rupees (\$US11) per day for drivers, 428 rupees for conductors and 400 rupees for cleaners.

The District Private Bus Workers' Coordination Committee warned that Kochi workers would join a state-wide strike planned for December 29 if their demands were not met. The bus employees' unions are affiliated with the All India Trade Union Congress and the Indian National Trade Union Congress.

LPG cylinder delivery workers in Tamil Nadu strike

Around 500 LPG delivery workers in Madurai, stopped work for 24

hours on December 10 to demand their employers pay a salary. The impoverished employees are forced to beg for work from 25 dealers, including those of the Indian Oil Corporation, Bharat Petroleum and Hindustan Petroleum.

The workers deliver full LPG cylinders to customers and return with the empty cylinder, using tricycles. They are not paid by the dealers and rely wholly on tips given by customers for their income; earning between 150 and 200 rupees (\$US4) a day.

Sri Lankan rail workers walk out

On December 7, Sri Lanka Railway workers across the nation, represented by 111 unions, walked off the job for 24 hours over several demands. Almost all commuter trains and postal trains were affected. Demands included a salary increase, distress loans and the immediate filling of 9,000 job vacancies.

The Graded Trade Union Collective of Sri Lanka Railway had cancelled strike action planned for December 4 after the transport minister agreed to take up their demands with the Salary Commission. He reneged on the agreement. In February, the unions also called an early end to a national strike over the same issues after government falsely promised to resolve workers' grievances.

Sri Lankan steel smelter workers on strike

A group of 76 Indian nationals employed at the Bhuwalka Steel Industries (BSI) smelter at Madampe, on Sri Lanka's mid-north coast, have been on strike since December 10 in a dispute over wages. The strikers said they were not paid the salary agreed by the company when they were sent to Sri Lanka and have not been paid anything for three months. The industrial action follows a strike in October by 59 Indian nationals over a salary cut.

BSI (Sri Lanka) is a wholly owned subsidiary of BSI (India) and has over 300 employees, of whom about 200 are Indian immigrants. BSI has been accused of being part of a scam where impoverished workers in India are shipped by agents to Sri Lanka and forced to sign work contracts written in English, a language they do not understand. They are paid a fraction of what was promised.

Cambodian bicycle factory workers on strike

Over 1,000 employees at the Smart Tech bicycle factory in the Tai Seng Bavet Special Economic Zone, on Cambodia's south-eastern border with Vietnam, walked off the job on December 11 and threatened to remain out until their claims were met. Demands include salaries between \$US75 and \$80 per month along with \$20 bonuses for skilled workers, \$3 for those who work until 9 p.m., a \$15 transport allowance and work shoes.

Smart Tech exports bicycles to Great Britain, the Netherlands, Portugal and Canada.

Cambodian casino workers walk out

At least 300 employees at the Tropicana Casino and Resort in Banteay Meanchey province on Cambodia's north-west border with Thailand walked off the job on December 8 and began picketing the premises.

The casino workers have been taking limited industrial action since early 2012 over conditions and the sacking of two union leaders. In order to end a two-day strike in September the company falsely told workers it would implement 18 of their 21 demands.

Workers' demands include a guaranteed maximum eight-hour day, paid sick leave and 18 days of annual leave, on top of Cambodia's 26 national public holidays. Free Trade Union-Banteay Meanchey branch members want the two sacked union leaders reinstated with back pay.

Management has filed for an injunction against the strike and summonsed five trade union leaders to appear in court.

Indonesian workers strike for minimum wage rise

Industrial estate workers in Medan, North Sumatra began a week-long strike on December 11 to demand full implementation of a minimum wage already approved by the Greater Jakarta administration.

The strike, which was called by the North Sumatra Workers Council, saw thousands of workers surge out of the Belawan Port and the Medan Industrial Estate to protest on the Tanjungmorawa-Belawan (Belmera) toll road, closing it for over 24 hours.

The minimum monthly wage for workers in Jakarta and surrounding districts will rise by 44 percent in 2013—from 1.5 million rupiah to 2.2 million rupiah (\$US227). The North Sumatra provincial government has announced that it will only lift monthly wages to 1.375 rupiah.

Western Australian port workers' union suspends strike action

Scheduled eight-day strike action by 130 stevedoring and maintenance workers at the state-owned Fremantle Port Authority's (FPA) Kwinana Bulk Terminal in Western Australia was cancelled by the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) on December 7. The union suddenly called off the walkout and agreed to a Fair Work Australia (FWA) recommendation to suspend industrial action and restart negotiations, despite 12 months of fruitless discussions with port management.

MUA members want a 21 percent pay rise over four years and changes to rostering and working conditions. The union's action follows a four-day strike in October.

The MUA previously cut its demand for a 20 percent pay rise over 3 years to a 12 percent pay rise over 3 years. It 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 MUA members at the port who have been working up to 72 hours a week, and some up to 120 hours a fortnight, are concerned about long-term fatigue and its impact on health and safety.

Queensland community health workers protest

Health workers rallied outside the Chermside Community Health Centre in Brisbane on December 13 to protest the axing of 200 community health jobs. Social workers, dieticians, speech pathologists and occupational

therapists are among those being made redundant.

In September, the Queensland Liberal National Party government announced 2,754 jobs would be shed at Queensland Health, including 1,537 full-time positions at Hospital and Health Services, under a budget plan to slash 14,000 state public service positions.

The public sector unions have no fundamental differences with the job cuts and have opposed unified state-wide industrial action. They have called a series of isolated, harmless protests to dissipate workers' anger.

Solomon Islands school teachers protest

Over 600 public school teachers are stranded in the Solomon Islands capital after the Honiara City Council (HCC) and the government failed to pay their sea fare allowance. The teachers rely on the allowance to return to their home provinces for the Christmas holiday season and are currently protesting outside the HCC office.

According to the Solomon Islands National Teachers' Association, the government and the HCC each pay 50 percent of the \$1.6 million (\$US216,200) for the allowance. The HCC has not yet paid its share and Prime Minister Gordon Lillo's government contribution was \$30,000 short. An association spokesman said the same problem happens every year. Teachers have threatened to boycott next year's classes if the allowance is not paid in full.

Solomon Island nurses protest

Honiara health clinics were severely disrupted last weekend when nurses held sit-in protests over the government's failure to pay duty allowances to 300 health employees who worked for the Festival of Pacific Arts in July.

The government failed to meet its own deadline to make the payments by December 6 and says the money will be paid by December 20. Nurses claim they are owed over \$1 million.

The nurses' action follows a protest outside government offices in Honiara last week by 100 workers hired as cleaners, caterers, landscapers and security officers during the festival. Workers say the government owes them about \$6 million.



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