

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 December 2012

Ongoing strikes in Bangladesh's garment industry

Over 100 garment factories closed in the Tongi-Gazipur industrial area after thousands of workers walked out on December 18 and protested along the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway. Their action was part of a national general strike called by the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), the Bangladesher Shamajtantrik Dal (BSD) and Gonotantrik Baam Morcha against the government increases to the price of oil, electricity and gas. Strike organisers also called for improved workplace safety and the arrest of Tazreen Fashions management, where at least 117 workers died in a recent fire.

Last week, Ajax Sweater factory management at Zirabo in Ashulia locked employees out for an unspecified period following a week of demonstrations. Workers were demanding a wage rise and suspension of the factory's production and general managers for sacking two work colleagues.

On December 14, 10 garment workers were injured after police fired teargas into a demonstration on the Dhaka-Tangail highway. The workers had walked out of the Gomati Textile factory in the morning to demand payment of last month's salary.

India: Chhattisgarh contract teachers on strike

At least 150,000 local government teachers in Chhattisgarh have been on strike since December 2 to demand employment under the Education and Tribal Departments. The teachers, who only receive 8,500 rupees (\$US172) per month, want pay parity with education department teachers who earn 20,000 rupees a month.

Around 50,000 teachers and their families have been holding a 24-hour vigil in the Sapre School Ground in central Raipur in support of their demands. Many of the teachers have been employed at the local government level since 1998. The government has categorically refused to meet their demands.

Karnataka child health workers protest

On December 15, hundreds of anganwadi (child health) workers and assistants, organised by the Karnataka State Anganwadi Workers' and Assistants' Federation, protested outside the Deputy Commissioner's office in Dharwad city, Karnataka. Their long outstanding demands include regularisation of their services as group C and D employees with a minimum monthly 10,000-rupee salary. They also want BPL (Below

Poverty Line) cards, provision of insurance and pension facilities and the immediate release of honorarium to mini anganwadi (child health care clinic) workers and the appointment of mini anganwadi assistants.

The protesting workers have demanded the government reverse moves to privatise child health care clinics and anganwadi services. Over 2,000 anganwadi workers in Bangalore district struck over this issue on November 19. That walkout followed the arrest of anganwadi workers protesting in Chickballapur over the issue.

Sri Lankan hospital paramedics walk out

On December 18, thousands of paramedics, including x-ray technicians, pharmacists, medical laboratory technologists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists, in 560 state-run hospitals struck for 24 hours over entitlements and conditions. Paramedics have demanded the resolution of long pending issues, such as staff promotions, on-call increments, communication and overtime allowances, and recruiting of Professions Supplementary to Medicine (PSM) graduates to the government service.

The PSM Federation, which consists of five paramedic associations, coordinated the strike. A federation spokesman said another strike would be called after December 31 if the government failed to meet their demands.

Sri Lankan public hospital nurses strike

Government Nursing Officers' Association (GNOA) members in Sri Lankan government hospitals walked off the job for 24 hours on December 19 over several demands. Their claims include recruitment of graduates only and cancelation of a Health Ministry ruling that allows the Provincial Health Secretaries to recruit nurses. The nurses also want a five-day week and bonus and allowance increases. Their action followed a strike by nurses in November over the same issues.

The All Ceylon Nurses Union and the State Services Nursing Union did not call their members out in solidarity, claiming that they had already been granted some of GNOA's demands.

Chinese shipyard workers win wage arrears

More than 1,000 subcontracted shipbuilding workers at the Singapore-owned Jiangsu Eastern Shipyard, in Jingjiang province, ended a two-day

strike on December 11 after management promised to pay five months' wage arrears. Government authorities had intervened in the dispute after strikers blocked the national expressway and the adjacent bridge over the Yangtze.

The company tried to blame subcontractors for the dispute. It is common practice for subcontractors to withhold several months of wages for migrant workers. The company's permanent employees told media, however, that they similarly are owed five months' wages and intended to strike if dues were not paid by the end of the year.

Hong Kong migrant workers demonstrate

Up to 1,000 migrant domestic workers from Southeast Asia rallied in Hong Kong on December 16 to demand better working conditions and higher wages. Foreign domestic employees, who usually live with their employers, do not have standard employment hours and can work up to 20 hours a day. The minimum monthly wage for these workers had increased by just \$60 in the past 13 years to \$3,920 (\$US505).

Participants also protested about their right of abode in the city. In March, a local court overturned a landmark ruling that would have allowed thousands of foreign maids to claim permanent residency in the city. There are more than 300,000 foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong, mainly from Indonesia and the Philippines, but also from Thailand, Sri Lanka and Nepal. The protest was organised by the Asia Migrants Coordinating Body.

Cambodian court forces striking casino employees back to work

Over 300 striking employees at the Tropicana Casino and Resort in Poipet, Banteay Meanchey province, on Cambodia's north-west border with Thailand, ended a five-day strike on December 13 after the Provincial Court ordered them back to work or face dismissal. The court claimed the employer had previously agreed to most of their demands.

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' 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.

Victorian mental health union finalises pay-cut deal

The Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) and the Australian Nursing Federation concluded negotiations with the Victorian Hospitals Industrial Association this week that impose a real wage cut for mental health nurses. The sell-out agreement follows several months of work bans and rolling stoppages earlier in the year.

Under the arrangement workers will receive just 2.5 percent per year during a three-year enterprise agreement and the state government will only provide funds for 43 additional mental health positions.

HACSU members had originally demanded an 18 percent pay rise over

three years, more night-shift and high-dependency unit staff, and better training.

The union attempted to talk up the deal by claiming that members could boost their pay by up to 4.6 percent through professional development allowances. The new enterprise agreement covers over 350 employees, including psychiatric nurses, support staff and mental health employees.

Western Australian nurses threaten strike action

The Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) has threatened to call out its 13,000 West Australian members if the state Liberal-National government fails to begin negotiations by December 31 for a new enterprise agreement. Over 70 percent of nurses voted in November in support of industrial action for a 20 percent pay increase over three years that would restore pay parity with state public school teachers. An ANF spokesman said the increase would lift nurse's average annual income from \$73,000 to \$87,000.

The union also wants a new \$1,000 annual retention bonus, 20 percent loading for afternoon shifts, Friday afternoon penalty rates increased to 25 percent and the right to convert unused sick leave into annual leave, potentially giving nurses an extra two weeks' holiday each year.

The health minister said the government would not begin negotiations until January.

New Zealand rail union accepts more job cuts

On December 13, 2,500 rail workers succumbed to pressure from the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) and voted to ratify a new two-year collective agreement with state-owned KiwiRail that will lead to significant job cuts. The agreement includes a pay increase of 1.2 percent in its first year, followed by 2 percent. One rail worker told the WSWS that the pay rise was at the expense of manning levels in terms of guards per passenger car. Previously one guard was responsible for every two train cars, but supervisors have indicated that in future one guard will supervise a minimum of four cars.

KiwiRail, which employs 4,100 staff nationwide, is looking to shave \$200 million from its books over the next three years, including \$14 million per annum in wages. The union has played a central role in facilitating the government cuts. Plans to make the workforce bear the brunt of the cost-cutting program were first outlined in joint "consultation" meetings in July where the RMTU said it would negotiate "all options for achieving cost savings."

In September, KiwiRail announced that it intended to axe 158 jobs from its Infrastructure and Engineering division. Up to 90 workers at KiwiRail's Dunedin's Hillside Engineering Workshops have been told that their jobs are redundant. This follows the termination of 140 Hillside workers last July.

An RMTU spokesman falsely claimed that rail workers accepted the latest collective agreement because "this was the best offer available." The union has not called for any industrial action to save rail workers' jobs.

Solomon Islands festival workers continue demonstrations

Hundreds of contractors employed for the Festival of Pacific Arts (FOPA) in July threatened to destroy the Ministry of Culture and Tourism office in Honiara on December 18 over unpaid wages. The workers were employed as shell money makers, landscapers, security guards, cleaners and caterers during the festival. The protest ended after government representatives, in the presence of the police, agreed, once again, “that their claims would be dealt with.”

The contractors have been protesting outside government offices in Honiara since December 5, claiming the ministry owed them about \$6 million (\$US811,000). Two weeks ago, Honiara health clinics were severely disrupted when nurses held sit-in protests over the government’s failure to pay duty allowances to 300 health employees who worked for the festival. The government failed to meet its own deadline to make the payments by December 6 and said the money would be paid to nurses by December 20. Nurses claim they are owed over \$1 million.

Papua New Guinea school teachers protest

More than 100 teachers, mainly from the coastal provinces but teaching in the Western Highlands, are stranded in Mt Hagen waiting for their leave fares to be processed so they can return home for the annual festive break.

Teachers have begun gathering in front of the Western Highlands provincial education office to demand payment. “This is a problem we the teachers face every year and it is getting bigger every end of the year,” a protesting teacher told the media.



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