

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 January 2013

Asia

Chinese electronics factory workers strike

Over 1,000 employees at Foxconn supplier Jiangxi Xin Hai Yang Precision Components in Fengcheng in China's Jiangxi province walked off the job on January 10 to demand higher wages. The workers are paid a base monthly salary of 1,300 yuan (\$US198).

Strikers protested outside the plant the next day but were attacked by riot police who used pepper spray and arrested seven workers. The electronics workers ended their strike later that day with no real settlement of their demands. The factory manufactures computers, servers, printers and mobile phones, and employs 5,500 people.

India: Uttarakhand government workers on strike

Over 30,000 government employees in India's northern state of Uttarakhand have been on strike since December 27 to demand pay parity with government workers in neighbouring Uttar Pradesh.

The government has stopped the strikers' pay under "no work-no pay" anti-strike laws. The Uttarakhand Federation of Ministerial Services Association said its members would remain on strike until their demands were met.

Kerala government employees end strike

On January 13, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and CPI-Marxist led unions, covering government employees and teachers in Kerala, called off a week-long strike without resolving their members' demands.

Government workers and teachers walked off the job on January 7 to oppose a proposed Participatory Pension Scheme (PPS), which requires all workers beginning government service on April 1 to contribute part of their wages to the scheme. The unions' capitulation came just days after workers vowed to remain out until the government dropped the pension plan.

To help the unions to convince workers to end the strike and claim victory, the Congress-led United Democratic Front government said there would be minimum pension rates for low paid workers and gave a vague

commitment to "create a mechanism" to examine any difficulties faced by employees during implementation of the new scheme. Kerala has about 450,000 government employees.

Andhra Pradesh bank workers protest

On January 12, employees of the state-owned Syndicate Bank in Andhra Pradesh protested outside its Ananthapur regional office calling for increased staffing levels, better infrastructure, restoration of special assistant jobs, and regularisation of temporary and part-time employees. They also demanded implementation of welfare schemes and an increase in petrol and mobile phone allowances.

The Syndicate Bank Employees Union, which is affiliated to the All India Bank Employees' Association, plans national strike action on January 24.

The Syndicate Bank, which was nationalised in 1964, has over 2,700 branches throughout India. It relies on hundreds of thousands of regular, small deposits, collected door-to-door by field agents, from low wage earners.

Maharashtra state transport workers strike

About 35,000 Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) employees stopped work on January 11 and demonstrated in Mumbai Central over long-outstanding demands. These included a 40 percent increase in pay and allowances and for the government to pay the MSRTC an outstanding 1,600 million rupees (\$US320 million) required to upgrade equipment and facilities.

In 2011, MSRTC employees protested over long hours and working conditions, demanding enforcement of 8-hour shifts, as per the Transport Act, and the end of back-to-back shifts.

Andhra Pradesh air cargo handlers end strike

Hundreds of cargo handlers at the International Air Cargo Complex of Chennai Airport ended a 30-hour strike on January 15, after their employer, Bhadra International, agreed to a pay increase. No details have been released about demands made by temporary workers for permanency and the provision of basic medical and canteen facilities.

The strike followed industrial action by 20 employees on January 9.

Cargo handlers receive a monthly salary between 6,000 rupees (\$US120) and 8,000 rupees, which has remained unchanged for the past two years.

Bangladeshi non-government school employees walk out

Tens of thousands of teachers and employees of over 33,000 non-government secondary schools, colleges and madrassahs across the country are continuing industrial action over a charter of 16 demands. Around 500,000 teachers and ancillary workers are involved in the dispute.

Industrial action began on January 10 with teachers and ancillary workers walking out in several districts on January 10. On Monday, some strikers started a “fast-unto-death” campaign. The protests follow a six-day national strike last September.

Teachers’ and workers’ main demand is for the nationalisation of all non-government education institutions and for state-endorsed monthly pay rates. They also want increased house rent, medical and festival allowances, the retirement age fixed at 65 and annual pay increments in line with teachers and employees at government educational institutions.

Concerned about an approaching election, the Bangladesh government has begun limited nationalisation of primary schools employing 104,000 teachers but refused to extend this further, claiming “funds restraint”.

Pakistan: Punjab government doctors walk out over victimisation

Young Doctors Association (YDA) members across Punjab walked out and protested outside public hospitals on January 16 to demand that the state government stop victimising young doctors. Hundreds protested on January 10 against the termination of six doctors, the suspension and withholding of salaries of another 12, and the transfer, without valid reason, of over 60 doctors.

The latest protest was sparked when several doctors were arrested after they entered a medical superintendent’s office in Gujranwala to renew their contracts. The YDA claims that fabricated charges are being brought against the doctors and fear they will not get a fair hearing in court.

Despite repeated promises over the past year, the government has failed to implement a new service structure, increasing the wages and benefits of government doctors. A three-week strike at public hospitals last July was called off by the YDA, following a return-to-work order by the courts.

Sri Lankan rail workers to strike

For the third time in two months, Sri Lanka Railways employees will walk out for 56 hours on January 22 in a dispute over pay. The action, which will involve drivers, foremen, station masters, railway guards and other ancillary workers, follows a 48-hour national strike on January 9 and a 24-hour strike last December.

According to the Joint Trade Union Alliance, which includes 111 rail unions, rail employees have not received a “proper” wage increase since 2006. The unions also want 9,000 vacant positions filled.

Cambodian garment workers picket factory

About 50 workers at the closed Kingsland garment factory in Phnom Penh’s Meanchey district have been picketing round the clock since December 29 to prevent their bosses from stripping the plant of machinery.

Workers said the bosses suddenly closed the factory and fled to Hong Kong owing them a combined \$800,000 in wages and benefits. Kingsland employed over 700 workers and made underwear for Walmart and H&M.

Electrolux employees in Thailand detained in factory

Over 100 workers at the Swedish-owned Electrolux factory in Thailand’s eastern province of Rayong were detained in the plant by security guards for up to eight hours on January 11.

The provocative management action followed the expulsion from the plant and then dismissal of a local union official during a mass meeting called by the company to discuss wages.

After workers began a sit-down protest to demand reinstatement of the union official, management called security guards and police who held them captive, releasing them one-by-one, after eight hours. Three days later, when employees returned to work 127 were given dismissal notices.

The conflict originally started when Electrolux management announced a two-month bonus but refused to discuss the workers’ long-pending demands for fair wage increases and permanent employment for agency workers after six months. While a new minimum wage and annual wage adjustments were due to be implemented by 25 January 2013, management rejected the union’s proposal and then attempted to impose wage adjustments that workers had already rejected.

The Electrolux plant, which employs over 200 people, 145 on the production line, manufactures washing machines, refrigerators and other electrical appliances for European and Asian markets.

Australia and the Pacific

BHP mine supervisors in New South Wales strike

Over 80 supervisors (mine deputies) at two of BHP’s coal mines—Appin and Dendrobium—in the Illawarra region south of Sydney, walked off the job on January 11 and 14 in a six-month dispute for a pay rise.

Members of the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers, Australia (APESMA) want a “market adjustment” 18 percent pay rise plus annual 4 percent increases over three years in a new enterprise agreement. The union says this would give supervisors pay parity with their counterparts at other New South Wales coal mines. Appin mine supervisors struck for two weeks in November over the issue.

APESMA claimed that BHP wanted to lock supervisors into an agreement with no guaranteed annual increase for four years. Supervisors are maintaining bans on non-rostered overtime.

New South Wales rail coal carrier workers to vote on strike action

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), representing about 850 workers at rail operator Pacific National were to vote yesterday on whether they will take industrial action over a new enterprise agreement. The RTBU has to give three working days' notice of any strike action.

After 12 months of negotiations, the RTBU rejected the company's latest offer of 4 percent annual pay increases along with roster changes. The union also wants the company's drug and alcohol policy changed to oral swab testing. It claims that this is fairer than the current urine testing, which can detect drug and alcohol use over a longer period.

Pacific National, which carries two-thirds of NSW's coal, is owned by the Asciano ports and rail group. Asciano is currently in dispute with the Maritime Union of Australia over a plan to automate operations at Port Botany in Sydney.

Victoria's emergency call centre operators to vote on strike action

Three unions representing emergency call centre (triple 0) operators in Victoria have been given approval from Australia's industrial tribunal, Fair Work Australia, to ballot members for industrial action. The centres receive emergency calls from across Victoria for police, ambulance and fire fighters.

The unions want an 18 percent pay rise over three years and more flexible working conditions. Industrial action could include 24-hour walk outs from next month. The state Liberal government has offered annual pay increases of just 2.5 percent with productivity goals.

Solomon Islands teachers set deadline for strike action

The Solomon Islands' Teachers Association (SINTA) has given the national government until January 18 to award teachers a promised pay rise or union members will take industrial action, starting next week when the 2013 school year begins.

According to SINTA, last February the government, after three years of negotiations, agreed to increase teachers' salaries and allowances. The commitment was never honoured. The union put off strike action last year after the government again promised that the payments would be made by December.



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