

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 February 2013

India: Kerala container truck workers on strike

Drivers and helpers of over 1,000 container trucks in Kochi Port and the International Transshipment Terminal at Vallarpadam Island struck on February 4 to demand increased wages to compensate for increased fuel prices, as well as better working conditions and basic amenities. At least 11 unions are involved in the strike. A third round of talks between the truck owners and the Trade Union Co-ordination Committee, called by the Labour Minister, failed when the truck owners refused to make concessions.

Union representatives alleged that container lorry owners had gone back on an initial agreement to pay 11 percent of trailer rental to the driver and 5.5 percent to the helper, a charge contested by the Cochin Container Carrier Owners' Welfare Association.

Karnataka health assistants on protest hunger strike

Karnataka State Senior & Junior Health Assistants' Central Association in Bangalore started a relay hunger strike on January 28 with a raft of demands. The protest was held outside the Directorate for Health Services' office with at least 1,000 participating every day. Demands included equal pay for equal qualification, reduction of back-breaking workloads, regular payment of monthly wages, filling in vacant and abandoned positions and granting of rural health allowance.

Meanwhile, 65,000 hospital workers, including 4,000 doctors who had joined the protest on February 4 before walking out of most hospital departments, including emergency, returned to work after five days on February 8, citing severe hardship of patients as the reason.

Members of the Karnataka Government Health Department Officers and Employees' Welfare Samiti, were on strike to demand that the 10 government district hospitals run by the Health Department be delinked from government medical colleges run by the Medical Education Department. Strikers complained that since amalgamation of the two institutions in 2006 promotions had been restricted and salaries for rural workers have been irregular.

Indian central government school teachers on strike

Teachers and assistants at central government schools for talented students (Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya or JNV schools) across India began indefinite strike action on February 11 to demand a retirement pension for workers who commenced before 2004 and a residential

allowance for non-teaching staff. Teachers complained that even after daily work of 18 hours and 26 years of service they will retire without a pension while other central government school teachers get pensions.

JNV schools are funded by the central government and select talented rural children and provide them with an education comparable to the residential school system, without regard to their family's socio-economic condition. There are nearly 600 JNVs across India, or one school for each district.

Andhra Pradesh Revenue Department workers protest

For the second time in two weeks, Village Revenue Assistants (VRAs) in Vishakhapatnam, a port city of Andhra Pradesh on India's east coast, protested outside the Collector's office on February 11, with a raft of demands. These included recognition as Class IV employees, a minimum monthly wage of 10,000 rupees (\$US200), promotion as Village Revenue Officers for eligible VRAs, group insurance increased to 100,000 rupees, immediate insurance payments to families of deceased VRAs and jobs for their dependants, and sanction of houses or land to all VRAs.

An official from the VRA's union addressed protesters and called for them to participate in a two-day nationwide strike on February 20 and 21, called by peak union bodies affiliated with various political parties including the Communist Party of India (CPI) and CPI-Marxist) to protest over low wages, the escalating cost of living and implementation of labour laws, among others.

Pakistan: Police attack striking Lahore government doctors

Striking members of the Young Doctors Association (YDA) were brutally attacked by police in Lahore on February 11 as they marched towards a highly publicised opening ceremony of a new bus service. Police baton-charged the doctors' procession and also attacked the doctors' hunger strike camp outside the Services Hospital. At least 22 doctors were arrested and many more seriously injured. The doctors retaliated by extending their current boycott of outpatients departments to include hospital emergency departments across the Punjab province. The emergency department boycott was lifted after police released the arrested doctors.

Over 100 YDA Punjab-chapter members began a hunger strike outside the Services Hospital in Lahore on February 4 over the failure of the government to implement their demands for a new service structure, increased wages and benefits and an end to discrimination against association members. Hundreds of YDA doctors protested in early

January 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 doctors have refused to attend to the outpatients departments in hospitals across Punjab since January 16 following the arrest of several colleagues when they entered a medical superintendent's office in Gujranwala to renew their contracts. They are calling for criminal charges against the doctors to be dropped.

Islamabad teachers and non-teaching employees demonstrate

Striking non-teaching staff at Islamabad's government colleges protested in Islamabad on February 12 to demand the regularisation of 1,100 jobs, time-scale promotions for about 8,000 staff and payment of other allowances. Bus services for students were halted due to the protest. The strikers had set up a protest camp in front of National Press Club a week earlier. The strike and protest was called off after the authorities gave a commitment to implement their demands.

Meanwhile, teaching staff at the same colleges protested in Islamabad on February 12 over the delay in their promotions as agreed in 2010 by the government.

Bangladesh: Police intervene to end garment factory protest

At least 20 people were injured when 450 employees of Mahbub Apparels at Ashulia, on the outskirts of Dhaka, clashed with factory supervisors and managers in a dispute over pay anomalies on February 7. Several people were severely injured and hospitalised, including management and workers as a result of the conflict. Management called in police who forced workers back to work and remained on the premises to maintain order. The protest was sparked when workers realised their January salaries were short-paid.

On February 12, police attacked demonstrating workers at the DECO Group garment factory in Ashulia injuring 15. Workers were protesting the sudden and indefinite closure of the plant and made several demands including a wage increase and annual increment.

Laid-off workers in Taiwan sit-in

Over 200 laid-off workers from four bankrupt companies 16 years ago staged a sit-in protest at the Council of Labor Affairs (COA) in Taipei on February 7 to protest COA's demand that they repay compensation received from the government when they lost their jobs. COA added interest and fines to the repayments.

The protest followed the occupation of Platform 3 at the Taipei Railway Station two nights earlier. Forty of the 200 protesters lay on the tracks delaying 15 trains before over 200 police were called in to evict them.

South Korean child supplementary educators protest

Two former instructors of the international supplementary educator for children Jaeneung Educational Institute (JEI) in Hyehwa-dong, have been protesting on top of the 20-metre Hyehwa-dong Catholic Church bell tower in Jongno, Seoul since February 6 to demand their jobs back. The church is opposite the JEI headquarters.

The two instructors, along with other members of the JEI chapter of the Korean Educational Materials Industry Union have been protesting outside JEI headquarters for nearly five years since being sacked in a dispute over the company's breach of their 2008 collective agreement.

Australian construction workers demonstrate

On February 11, thousands of construction workers and supporters marched to building sites and offices of international building company Lend Lease in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. The protest was over legal action brought by Abigroup, a Lend Lease subsidiary, against unionist Bob Carnegie, who organised a nine-week work stoppage at the group's Queensland Children's Hospital building site in Brisbane last year. Under the Gillard government's industrial relations laws the strike was illegal and Carnegie, a former Maritime Union of Australia official, faced 54 contempt of court charges.

The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union and other building unions had walked off the job at the Brisbane hospital site on August 6 and subsequently ignored Fair Work Australia return-to-work orders saying they would remain on strike until contractor Abigroup agreed to guarantee that employees of sub-contractors received equal pay for doing the same job. At the heart of the dispute was a decision by Abigroup to have sub-contractors bid against each other—effectively undercutting wages. Several sub-contractors had reportedly gone bankrupt because of Abigroup's policy.

After two days in the Brisbane Federal Magistrates Court on February 11 and 12, Carnegie was found not guilty of 34 charges, two charges were withdrawn and the case was adjourned until April 2.

Victorian bus assembly workers strike

Up to 110 members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) at bus manufacturer Volgren walked off the job for five days in late January and early February and picketed the factory in Dandenong South, east of Melbourne, in a dispute for a new enterprise agreement. The strike followed a 24-hour stoppage in August over the issue.

While still maintaining their picket on February 7, the union announced that Volgren had backed down on its national goal of having employees fund increases to employer superannuation contributions by discounting pay rises. The union claimed that Volgren had made a slightly improved pay offer from a 3 percent annual pay increase to 10 percent over three years.

Key issues, including a new classification structure that seeks to downgrade non-trade certified workers from 90 percent to 70 percent of a tradesman's wage and a company attempt to remove workers' \$770 tool allowance, remain unresolved.

New Zealand teachers' union calls off strike

The New Zealand Education Institute (NZEI), representing primary school teachers, has betrayed workers who voted for strike action opposing school closures and mergers in the earthquake-affected city of Christchurch, on the east coast of the South Island. The NZEI has replaced the one-day strike, originally to take place on February 19, with a “Community Open Day”, followed by a public event at the CBS Arena. The union had earlier said that the planned strike was not in opposition to school closures, but to protest the fact that the government had not consulted the union sufficiently about its plans.

Teachers and community members have reacted with outrage at the strike’s axing. One teacher, writing to the Save Our Schools Facebook campaign, stated: “It is absolutely appalling. Christchurch members voted overwhelmingly for a strike, not some pathetic community day. NZEI should be ashamed of themselves. They don’t represent teachers at all.”

The Key government is due to announce on Monday which schools it intends to close. NZEI will not oppose the closures and has tried to appease teachers and parents by announcing that the ministry “has now agreed to discuss ways to ensure that from now on teachers and school communities are at the heart of genuine engagement and changes to education in Christchurch.”



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