

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 February 2013

Punjab government doctors end strike without resolving issues

The Young Doctors Association (YDA)-Punjab chapter called an end to their month-long strike on February 18 without resolving any of its members' long-standing grievances. The doctors walked out of the out-patient departments in government hospitals in the Punjab province on January 16, followed by a two-week hunger strike and a series of demonstrations and street processions that were brutally attacked by police. Over 20 doctors were arrested and face criminal charges.

The YDA sent members back to work on a vague assurance from the government that their "problems" would be considered on a priority basis in a newly-formed Senate committee to look at issues in the health system and to make recommendations to parliament by February 25.

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. That was preceded by an eight-day strike in April to protest the transfer of 700 doctors with no valid reason, which the YDA claimed was part of a plan by health authorities to weaken the association after a series of walkouts that commenced in 2011 over service structure and other grievances.

India: Jharkhand university non-teaching staff on strike

Jharkhand University non-teaching workers union members at 64 colleges affiliated with five universities in India's eastern state of Jharkhand walked out on February 19 over several demands, including a pay rise in line with the sixth pay commission recommendations, regularisation of pay, and the retirement age lifted to 62.

A union official complained that other college and university employees are currently paid according to the sixth pay commission rates. "There have been many agreements with the government in the past 16 years but still nothing has been done," the official said.

Madhya Pradesh contract teachers resume strike

For the second time in two months, 300,000 contract teachers from 80,000 schools in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh walked out on February 19, vowing not to return until their demand for pay parity with regularised teachers is resolved.

Contract teachers are ignoring government threats to invoke the

Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) which would make the strike illegal and subject them to heavy fines. The teachers' action followed a three-day strike called by the Contract Teachers United Front on December 3 over the issue.

Kerala fishermen protest after deaths at sea

Kerala Independent Fish Workers Federation members in Thiruvananthapuram, the state capital, marched to the weather observatory on February 18 in protest against the lack of weather forecasts. The fishermen claim the non-issuance of forecasts led to the death of several fishermen and damage to their property last week.

A spokesman for the National Fishworkers' Forum said there would be further demonstrations if observatory officials did not meet with them by February 22.

Kerala bottled-gas workers end strike

Following a threat by district authorities to invoke ESMA, workers at the Indian Oil Corporation's LPG bottling plant at Chellari, Kerala ended a two-day strike over a pay dispute on February 18. Contracting employer C.O. Johnson agreed to pay a 25 percent wage rise but workers were forced to drop their demand for a 5,000-rupee (\$US100) interim payment. Other demands remain unresolved.

Andhra Pradesh contract health workers protest

National AIDS Control Society and Andhra Pradesh State AIDS Control Society contract workers demonstrated outside the Prakasam Bhavan Hospital in Ongole city on February 18 with a raft of demands. These included pay parity with central government employees, job regularisation and the implementation of pension schemes, health cards and other social security benefits.

The contract health workers also want to be integrated into government staff positions based on seniority and receive 180 days' maternity leave for female staff and fraternity leave for male staff in line with government employees. A union official said that workers had been in contracts for more than ten years and could not survive on their current low wage levels.

Women workers protest in Tamil Nadu

On February 18, over 100 female workers from garment factories, the domestic sector and agricultural sector, organised by the Woman Workers Union, protested in Tamil Nadu's capital, Chennai against poor working conditions. Their demands included provision of social security, implementation of minimum wages, extension of Employment State Insurance and enforcement laws against sexual harassment in the workplace.

General Motors workers in Thailand on strike

Around 5,000 auto manufacturing workers at the General Motors Pluakdaeng factory in the coastal city of Rayong, in the Gulf of Thailand, have been on strike since February 8 after managers added a Saturday shift without paying overtime. The strike has brought daily production of about 600 Chevrolet-branded vehicles to a halt. Striking workers have had their pay cut.

The company has not commented on revenue loss, but during a 10-day strike at the plant in 2009 GM estimated that it lost about 200 million baht (\$US6.5 million) per day.

Indonesian housemaids demand bill of rights

On February 17, hundreds of housemaids rallied at the Hotel Indonesia traffic circle in Central Jakarta to demand that the government and the House of Representatives pass legislation to protect their rights.

A spokesperson for the Domestic Workers Advocacy Network said protesters wanted the House to pass the Decent Work for Domestic Workers Bill which requires that domestic workers be paid the regional minimum wage along with other rights. The government suspended deliberation on the bill in 2010.

Western Australian nurses vote to close beds in pay dispute

On February 18, over 1,000 state government nurses and midwives at a stop work meeting in Perth, Western Australia's capital, voted to close one in five beds in the states' major hospitals in their pay dispute with the Barnett Liberal government. The action by Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) members was in response to the government reneging on a promise to start negotiations in January, then refusing to enter any agreement until after the state elections on March 9.

The federation has reduced the nurses' original pay increase demand from 20 percent over three years, which would have restored pay parity with state school teachers, to 15 percent over three years. The government has offered 9 percent over three years. Other demands include a \$1,000 annual retention bonus, 20 percent afternoon shift loading, Friday afternoon penalty rates increased to 25 percent, the right to convert unused sick leave into annual leave and to address the escalating parking fees for staff and visitors at Perth's public hospitals.

An attempt by the government to stop the bed closures by appealing to the Industrial Relations Commission has failed with the nurses ignoring

the commission's recommendation to end industrial action.

Tasmanian bus drivers walk out

More than 300 bus drivers in Tasmania's capital Hobart walked off the job for four hours on February 21 to attend stop-work meetings to discuss further industrial action. It followed a breakdown in negotiations between the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and the state run Metro for a new work agreement.

The RTBU wants 3 percent annual pay increases over three years and for members to work no more than five continuous hours in the proposed enterprise bargaining agreement. Metro has offered just 2 percent annual increases over three years, which 85 percent of drivers rejected.

The stop work meeting decisions have not been made public. Metro told media it would consider "trade-offs" if drivers can find savings.

New South Wales quarry workers strike

Following a breakdown in negotiations over a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA), 33 quarry operators at Hanson Quarry, south of Sydney, walked off the job for 24 hours on February 18. The walkout followed four hours of protected strike action three days earlier over the issue.

An Australian Workers Union spokesman said members want the same conditions as the last EBA—annual 4 percent salary increases over three years. The company has offered just 3.5 percent. The last agreement expired on January 1.

New Zealand teachers and supporters protest school closures

On February 19, more than one thousand teachers and supporters turned out to protest school closures in the earthquake-affected city of Christchurch, on the East Coast of New Zealand's South Island. The Key government announced a day earlier that seven schools would close, with another 12 schools merged into six, for a total of 13 closures.

Christchurch teachers had voted overwhelmingly to strike over the issue but their union, the New Zealand Education Institute (NZEI), cancelled the walkout and replaced it with a community protest, which outraged both teachers and supporters. Union officials claimed to the media that members wanted to cancel the strike so as to "be with their pupils and fellow staff" when the government announced its school closure plan. NZEI officials, in an attempt to maintain control of their increasingly angry members, told the media they would not rule out future industrial action.



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