

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 March 2013

## Singapore bus drivers jailed for leading strike action

Four Chinese drivers from SMRT, Singapore's second largest public transport operator, were jailed for up to seven weeks on February 25 for instigating an "illegal strike" last year, the first walkout in the city since the 1980s. At least 29 other drivers who participated in the two-day strike were deported back to China.

The Chinese bus drivers led a strike of 171 SMRT drivers on November 26 to demand higher wages and better living conditions. The drivers were among 450 workers recruited from China on two-year work permits by SMRT.

Bus drivers are amongst the lowest paid workers in Singapore. While the average monthly salary for Singaporean drivers is reportedly just \$S1,700, the Chinese drivers' monthly average was only \$S1,075 (\$US885).

## India: Madhya Pradesh contract teachers' strike continues

Around 300,000 contract teachers from 80,000 schools in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh are maintaining strike action begun on February 19, vowing not to return until their demand for pay parity with regularised teachers is resolved.

On February 25 more than 10,000 teachers and their families demonstrated outside the chief minister's residence in the state capital Bhopal presenting a memorandum of demands that included absorption of their services into the department of school education.

The teachers' action followed a three-day strike called by the Contract Teachers United Front on December 3 over the issue. The union has threatened to begin a hunger strike if demands are not soon met. Teachers have ignored a government threat to invoke the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) if the strike action is not ended

before exams begin next week. Under ESMA, the industrial action would be declared illegal with teachers facing heavy fines.

## Maharashtra university teachers maintain boycott

More than 45,000 teachers from eight universities in India's Maharashtra state are continuing to boycott exam preparation work. The industrial campaign that began on February 4 is to demand implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission arrears and the filling of vacant positions with qualified contract teachers. The Federation of University and College Teachers' Organisation threatened to call a "jail bharo" or "fill the jail" protest on March 8 if the issue is not resolved.

Last year, teachers at two colleges ended strike action after university authorities agreed to pay the Sixth Pay Commission arrears. The payments, however, were never extended to the other state universities and colleges.

## Orissa police attack private college teachers

At least 50 people were injured and 200 arrested when police used water cannon and tear gas in an attempt to break up a protest of private college teachers outside the Orissa Assembly in the state's capital Bhubaneswar on February 22.

Teachers and ancillary staff workers at 1,180 private colleges have been protesting for 80 days to demand repeal of the block-grant payment system and implementation of grant-in-aid salary system, which would increase the wages of 25,000 block school employees above the current 5,000 rupees (\$US100) per month. Teachers have vowed to maintain their protests and to boycott the Plus-II

examination, which was scheduled to begin on March 1.

Teachers and ancillary workers called off a 42-day strike in late 2011 after the government told parliament that it would abolish the block grant system. The legislation was never implemented.

### **Bangladeshi police attack protesting garment workers**

At least 15 people were injured when demonstrating garment workers were attacked by police using tear gas and batons in Dhaka's Kashimpur Industrial Zone on February 24.

Several hundred Cotton Club BD employees were joined by workers from the Alim Knit and Montex factories protesting over eight demands. These included increases in pay rates, attendance bonuses and night allowances and an end to management harassment of workers. The three factories remained closed for three days, the owners fearing further clashes.

### **Sri Lankan medical officers strike**

Hundreds of supplementary medical service workers—pharmacists, physiotherapists, radiographers, occupational therapists and medical laboratory technologists—in more than 20 Sri Lankan government hospitals walked out on February 21 to demand improved allowances for overtime, on-call work and risk.

According to the Joint Council of Professions Supplementary to Medicine, the government promised to grant workers' demands at a meeting last month but has not honoured the agreement.

Almost all state hospitals, including 21 teaching hospitals and seven general hospitals in Anuradhapura, Badulla, Galle, Matara and Monaragala, were affected by the strike.

### **Tasmanian bus drivers walk out again**

For the second time in a week, over 300 bus drivers in Tasmania's capital Hobart walked off the job for four hours on March 1 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 in the proposed enterprise bargaining agreement, but Metro has offered just 2 percent annual increases over three years. Under Metro's new wages offer, drivers would earn between \$715 a week in their first year and \$865 in the fourth year. This is well below Tasmania's average weekly ordinary time earnings for 2012 which was \$1,223.

### **Telstra workers in Victoria protest over job cuts**

On February 28, around 100 employees of Sensis, a Telstra subsidiary, which publishes phone directories, marched to Telstra headquarters in Melbourne's CBD to protest the outsourcing of their jobs. Workers carried signs saying "It's how we disconnect."

Sensis is slashing almost 700 jobs from its 3,500-strong staff as it cuts costs and moves from a print to digital business. About 390 jobs will be axed from backroom and sales roles, with most expected to be sent overseas to call centres in the Philippines or India.

An Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) official cynically told workers, "We're not going to back down. We're going to have this fight." These claims are a lie. The AMWU, like the rest of the unions, have not defended any of the tens of thousands of jobs destroyed in the manufacturing industry in the past two decades. No proposals for future action were put to the demonstrations by the AMWU.



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