

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 March 2013

## Strikes and protests continue in China

According to the Hong Kong-based *China Labour Bulletin*, it recorded at least 32 strikes and protests in China during February, primarily in the manufacturing and service industries. There were 22 protests at factories, mostly in the Pearl River and Yangtze River delta regions, with workers demanding both the payment of outstanding wages and salary increases. Ten of the protests occurred in foreign-owned enterprises and five in enterprises owned by Hong Kong or Taiwanese companies.

In the service sector, there were transport strikes in Guizhou, Hubei and Zhejiang, with drivers demanding fuel subsidies and lower administrative charges. In retail, supermarket employees protested the cancellation of bonuses and wage arrears, and demanded the payment of medical insurance and pension contributions, which in one government-owned store were reportedly a decade in arrears. Sanitation workers and cleaners in Guangdong, Guangxi and Guizhou stopped work to demand proper bonuses and government subsidies.

In response to increasing industrial unrest, eight administrative regions in China have so far this year announced increases in their minimum wage. At present, Shenzhen has the highest rate at 1,600 yuan (\$US254) per month, followed by Guangdong at 1,550 yuan per month and Zhejiang at 1,470 yuan per month.

## Indian police attack striking teachers in Bihar

On May 5, about 5,000 striking Bihar state contract teachers were attacked by police using water canon, teargas shells and lathis (long batons with steel tips). Police attempted to disperse the teachers' protest outside the Bihar State Assembly. Protesters responded by throwing stones. Hundreds of teachers and supporters were injured in the three-hour confrontation. Several police vehicles were set on fire.

Around 250,000 contract teachers at government schools have been holding limited boycotts and protests since the education minister refused their demand for a pay increase, from 6,000 rupees (\$US120) a month to 8,000 rupees, and permanent employment. A spokesman for the Bihar Panchayat Nagar Praranbhik Shikshak Sangh trade union warned that teachers

would boycott matriculation examinations, due to commence on March 13.

## Kerala tile manufacturing workers on strike

Workers at tile manufacturing plants in Kerala state's Feroke-Cheruvannur industrial belt walked off the job on March 4 to demand a pay increase. Factory owners had told workers that wage rises would not be considered until their current agreement expired in 2014. Workers demanded a 25 percent interim pay increase, citing the escalating cost of living. A Labour Commissioner said he would enter a fourth round of talks with employers and workers to try to resolve the issue.

## Assam paper mill workers down tools

Hundreds of contractual labourers at the Hindustan Paper Corporation (HPC) Jagiroad Mill, in India's north-eastern state of Assam, staged a sit-in strike on March 6 to demand pay in accordance with their revised pay scale. The government has sent the notorious strike-breaking Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) to the mill. A HPC Contractual Labourers Union official said the workers would remain on strike until they were paid the correct wage.

## Tamil Nadu horticultural workers strike

Hundreds of workers from various parks run by the Tamil Nadu Horticulture Development Agency walked off the job and demonstrated in front of the office of the Joint Director of Horticulture in Udthagamandalam on March 4 in a dispute over long-standing demands.

Demands put forward by the Tamil Nadu Government Office Assistants and Basic Servants Association include time scale salary and regularisation of workers who have completed 10

years' service, promotion of eligible workers to junior assistant, and the raising of the retirement age to 60. Other demands include a basic increase in wages and allowances, and exemption from paying professional tax for basic public servants.

### **Maharashtra power loom workers end five-week strike**

Over 45,000 power loom operators and ancillary workers in Ichalkaranji, a town in Maharashtra's Kolhapur district, better known as the Manchester of Maharashtra, called off a 37-day strike on February 28 after factory owners offered a 48.7 percent increase in wages and provided workers the option of working eight-hour shifts, for the first time in 28 years.

Workers walked off the job on January 21 and held protests in Mumbai to complain about forced 12-hour shifts, low wages and violations of labour laws. Before the strike, a worker earned a maximum of just 5,000 rupees (\$US100) a month.

According to the Lal Bawata General Workers Union, affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, workers in the 5,000 textile factories operating the 120,000 power looms of Ichalkaranji town can now earn between 5,500 to 6,000 rupees a month for an 8-hour shift, or between 8,000 and 9,000 rupees for a 12-hour shift.

### **Cambodian Khmer Rouge tribunal staff strike**

About 30 Cambodian staff members from the translation section at the United Nations-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal in Phnom Penh walked off the job on March 4, complaining that they received no salary for three months. Court proceedings were expected to be delayed for over a week. A court official said countries that had agreed to fund the tribunal had not contributed on time. Foreign workers involved in the trial are paid through a separate budget and are not affected.

Khmer Rouge leaders, charged with alleged war crimes and other offences committed during their four-year rule of Cambodia in the 1970s, have been on trial since November 2011.

### **Union halts Tasmanian bus drivers' industrial action**

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), covering 300 bus drivers at the Tasmanian state government-owned Metro bus company in Hobart, Burnie and Launceston called off overtime bans and a four-hour stoppage planned for May 5 after Metro agreed to restart talks over a new three-year enterprise agreement. The RTBU wants 3 percent annual pay increases over three years—barely matching inflation. Metro has offered just 2 percent annual increases.

At Tuesday's negotiations Metro told the RTBU that it was "prepared to look at what happens in the third year if inflation rises at a faster rate than expected." In return, the union said it was willing to consider greater flexibility in the use of satellite bus yards.

The union called one-hour stopwork meetings on Thursday and Friday to discuss the outcome of the negotiations. Further negotiations are planned for next week. 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. Drivers work overtime shifts on weekends to enhance their take home pay.

### **New Zealand health workers oppose hospital cuts**

On March 7, over 500 hospital staff, doctors and community supporters rallied in Blenheim, on the north east of New Zealand's South Island, to protest the Marlborough District Health Board's (DHB) cost cutting proposals for the local Wairau Hospital. The DHB plans to cut surgery and orthopedic services, forcing patients to travel for one hour-and-a-half for the closest treatment. In addition the DHB wants to close after hours emergency services at Wairau hospital.

### **New Zealand teachers protest over pay**

New Zealand primary and intermediate teachers gathered at National Party MP offices around the country on March 5 to protest over the government's Novopay payroll system. Novopay has frequently underpaid or failed to pay teachers millions of dollars in total since it was implemented six months ago. The largest trade union covering teachers, the New Zealand Education Institute (NZEI), has been meeting weekly to consult with the government, and assured the government that nothing resembling a strike was taking place and that the teachers' protests would not "interrupt the school day."

In another bid to defuse teachers' anger, the Post Primary Teachers Association, with 18,000 members, has begun court proceedings to claim compensation for financial and personal suffering caused by the payroll system.



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