

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 December 2013

South Korean rail workers on strike

Over 7,300 workers, one third of the employees of South Korea's state-owned railway KORAIL, have been on strike since December 9 in a dispute over privatisation. While most freight services have stopped KORAIL has maintained most of its commuter services by transferring in workers from other areas. Close to 7,000 striking workers have been suspended and told that the suspensions will remain until the Railway Workers' Union ends strike action or they voluntarily return to work.

The strike was sparked by the company's decision to introduce a separate operator to run a new Suseo KTX line that will open in 2015. KORAIL will hold a 41 percent stake in the subsidiary. Workers accused KORAIL of attempting to pave the way for privatisation by diversifying its structure. They fear that privatisation will lead to poor service quality, fare hikes and layoffs.

The government tried to appease workers saying that KORAIL and other state institutions will take the entire stake in the new KTX subsidiary and block private investors from participating in the project. The union responded by threatening that if the government failed to withdraw its plan by Saturday industrial action would be stepped up.

Bangladeshi granite mine workers' strike in third week

Around 300 workers and miners at the state-owned mine of Madhyapara Granite Mining Company (MGMCL) at Parbotipur, 300 kilometres north of Dhaka, have been on strike since November 25 after management failed to respond to a charter of five demands. All production at the mine has stopped. Demands include a 20 percent dearness allowance, an end to retrenchments and outsourcing of jobs, reinstatement of eight retrenched miners and regularisation of the jobs of diploma engineers.

MGML has washed its hands of the dispute, claiming it signed a contract in September with a Belarus-based company for the mine's maintenance and production that and workers should take their grievances to it. MGML's managing director told the media that it had no intentions of changing its position on outsourcing, saying that the workers' demand for abolition of employment through outsourcing is impractical.

India: Bihar municipal workers end strike

Around 800 regular and daily wage workers of the Gaya Municipal Corporation in India's northern state of Bihar ended their four-day strike on December 10 following an agreement reached between management

and the union. The strike was sparked after several employees were attacked by residents while on duty. Demands included improved safety and immediate release of outstanding wages for the last five months.

Bharat Electronics workers to strike

Nearly 5,000 workers of the public sector company Bharat Electronics Ltd. (BEL), employed at nine facilities across India, have issued the company a strike notice and threatened to begin strike action any time after December 11 in a dispute over the Plant Performance Incentive (PPI) scheme. According to workers the method of calculating their bonus is flawed and has reduced their entitlement.

Uttar Pradesh homeopathy doctors on hunger strike

As part of a three-day state wide protest by 60,000 homeopathy doctors in Uttar Pradesh, doctors in Aurangabad began a hunger strike on December 9. The doctors want the government to allow the use of allopathic medicines during emergencies, involve them in public health service, and provide better salaries, stipends to interns and students of homeopathy.

Forty seven homeopathy doctors in Maharashtra were hospitalised when 100 of their colleagues went on hunger strike in July over the same demands.

Pakistan tourism industry workers protest

About 450 employees of the state-run Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC) protested outside the National Press Club in Islamabad on December 9 to demand immediate release of unpaid salaries pending for two years. Lower grade civil servants are the most impacted by the salary payment delays. The employees walked-out of their jobs over the same issue several times during this year and in 2012. The PTDC Union has threatened to call a strike and protest in front of parliament if the government fails to pay the salaries.

Punjab paramedics demonstrate

On December 5, hundreds of paramedics, including technicians, ward attendants, dispensers and sweepers, from all Punjab province teaching hospitals, demonstrated in Lahore to demand the Pakistan government honour previous commitments to them. A Punjab Paramedical Staff Association (PPSA) official claimed that the government had shelved their service structure case which would have guaranteed promotions and financial incentives of more than 90,000 paramedics and other government employees, and had failed to regularise the services of contract and daily wage employees, as promised. Paramedics gave the government seven days to respond to their demands before further action is called.

New South Wales public hospital nurses impose bans

In a dispute over cuts to public hospital funding cuts and bed closures, nurses and midwives at the Bathurst Base Hospital, west of Sydney, implemented work bans on December 9—the same day that the Western NSW Local Health District planned to close five beds in the hospital's medical ward.

As part of the action, nurse to patient ratios have been enforced on the medical and surgical wards in accordance with their award, and any beds not fully staffed to those minimum award requirements will remain closed until the required nurses are provided. If there are more than two admitted patients or patients awaiting transfer to a ward in the hospital's Emergency Department, nurses will advise the Ambulance Service to bypass the facility.

The action by NSW Nurses & Midwives Association (NSWNMA) members follows months of a limited campaign that included street protests, a 24-hour nurses and midwives' strike at the hospital on November 29 and a public meeting in Bathurst last week.

Meanwhile, Bathurst hospital ancillary workers, including cleaners, wards men, physiotherapists, psychologists, kitchen staff and ward clerks, protested outside the Bathurst office of the local member of parliament to demand improved staffing levels and increased hospital funding. The Health Services Union, which covers hospital ancillary workers has indicated it is willing to negotiate the cuts by calling on the government to "provide specific details on what they're proposing."

The 2012-13 New South Wales budget imposed by the Liberal government reduced funding for public hospitals by more than \$158 million, in a long term plan to cut \$3 billion from the public health system. Although funding in the 2013-14 budget rose by 5.2 percent, according to the Australian Medical Association a minimum 7 percent increase is needed to maintain current levels of care.

Queensland construction workers walk out

Close to 1,000 construction workers at a gas plant site near Gladstone in central Queensland walked off the job on December 11 over food contamination concerns. Workers at the QCLNG gas export plant construction site on Curtis Island claimed that kitchens at the workers' camp are unsanitary and that the walkout was legal because it is an occupational, health and safety issue.

Workers complained of dirty cutlery, poor treatment of catering staff, undercooked chicken and a maggot in broccoli, and have alleged that the poor quality of meals had contributed to ill health. One worker told media, "We've had concerns for 10 months, and it's only a matter of time before

somebody's going to die."

Construction giant Bechtel said the strike was illegal and workers would be docked a day's pay. The workers are covered by the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, the Australian Workers Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union. None of the unions have made a statement.

New Zealand: Auckland Airport taxi drivers protest

Around 200 taxi drivers went on a hunger strike on December 9 after Auckland Airport notified 50 drivers working for President Taxis that it planned to cut their company's contract. The drivers, members of the Auckland Taxi Association, are picketing outside airport headquarters with several demands.

A key concern of drivers is that the airport charges large fees for companies to have a space on taxi ranks, and smaller companies who struggle to pay the fees pass these expenses on to their drivers. One fasting driver told the media that they are surviving on as little as \$4 an hour after factoring in the expenses on the job, nearly \$10 below New Zealand's hourly minimum wage of \$13.75.

Drivers also complained that airport management has been slow to provide promised shade, drinking water and toilet facilities.

Pak'n Save supermarket workers protest

Workers for the Pak'n Save supermarket in the suburb of Botany Downs, Auckland, picketed the store on December 7, to protest the owner's continued refusal to negotiate a new work agreement and discuss job security. The collective agreement expired in October.

The workers are covered by the FIRST Union, which claims to represent 27,000 workers in finance, industrial, retail, stores & transport. The union has not proposed any concrete industrial action and urged workers to "encourage customers to find a supermarket with a better set of ethics." FIRST Union has discouraged any further action by claiming the Employment Relations Authority could seek an order to force the supermarket owner to negotiate.

Solomon Islands telecommunications workers issue strike notice

The Solomon Islands Telecommunications Workers Union (SITWU) issued a strike notice to the nation's major telecommunications provider Our Telekom on December 10 in a dispute over the company's restructuring plan. According to SITWU, the restructuring, which requires all employees to re-apply for their current jobs, will most likely result in up to 20 percent of the company's 395 local employees losing their jobs.

SITWU has not called for the defence of all jobs but appealed to Our Telekom management to resume talks and negotiate "in a way that is beneficial to both the employees and the organisation." The strike notice can be invoked after 28 days of being issued.

Solomon Telekom Company Limited (Our Telekom) is a joint venture company. Ownership is divided between Solomon Islands National Provident Fund, with 64 percent of the shares, Cable & Wireless Plc of the United Kingdom with 33 percent, and the Investment Corporation of the

Solomon Islands which owns 3 percent.



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