

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 December 2013

Strike by South Korean rail workers in second week

Close to 8,000 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. The strike has crippled railway services nationwide, with freight rail movement reduced by 70 percent and commuter services by 40 percent. Truck driver members of the 12,000-strong Korea Cargo Transport Workers' Union have refused to deliver cargo normally transported by rail.

KORAIL has suspended 7,900 striking workers and launched disciplinary procedures against 145 full-time union members after lodging complaints last week against 196 unionists. Police have also raided the two Seoul offices of the Railway Workers' Union and seized computer hard drives and issued arrest warrants against 28 union leaders for organising an "illegal" strike.

The strike was sparked by the company's decision to use a separate operator to run a new Suseo KTX (bullet train) line linking the south of Seoul with the port city of Busan. The line is supposed to open in 2015. KORAIL will hold a 41 percent stake in the subsidiary. Workers have accused KORAIL of attempting to pave the way for privatisation and fear that it will lead to poor service, fare hikes and layoffs.

Cambodian garment workers locked out

About 30,000 garment workers from 40 factories in Bavet town on Cambodia's eastern border with Vietnam were locked out for 48 hours on December 16 after 100 workers at one plant walked out and entered other factories calling for workers to join them to demand better conditions and a rise in the minimum wage.

Fearing the strike would spread the government immediately ordered the lockout and sent a large contingent of police to patrol factories and the town. Police have been ordered to remain at their posts until the ministry of labour makes a decision on the minimum wage on December 26.

Plants affected included those in the Manhattan Special Economic Zone, where former Bavet governor Chhouk Bandith shot and injured three workers on strike in February last year. The shooting occurred while 6,000 workers at the Taiwanese-owned Kaoway Sports factory were protesting for a monthly wage rise.

National strike by Indian bank workers

Banking services across India came to a standstill on December 18 when

100,000 bank employees and officers from 27 public sector banks, including the State Bank of India (SBI), Reserve Bank of India (RBI), 12 private sector and eight foreign banks, walked out for the day to demand a better wage offer and to protest against banking sector reform.

The United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU), affiliated with the All-India Trade Union Congress, called for the strike after rejecting the Indian Banks' Association's offer of a 5 percent salary increase. Workers want a 40 percent wage rise. Government bank employees, who have not had a wage rise for almost six years, were due to receive an increase in November 2012.

The striking workers also opposed planned banking reforms that will merge several nationalised banks and allow foreign institutions to compete with the State Bank of India. RBI employees have rejected the Financial Sector Legislative Reforms Commission's recommendations that would remove important powers from the country's central bank and vest them with the government and/or separate agencies.

The UFBU, the umbrella body for nine major unions of the state-run banks, will meet in Hyderabad on December 23 to discuss further action.

Unorganised workers protest in Tamil Nadu

More than 500 protesters were arrested when over 1,000 unorganised workers in Tamil Nadu demonstrated outside Labour and Welfare Board offices in Coimbatore, Tiripur, Erode, Salem and Dharmapuri on December 17 over a series of grievances. Over 100 unions affiliated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) participated in the protest.

Workers' demands included timely benefit payments, a 3,000-rupee monthly pension for male workers over 60 years and women above 50 years, a 200,000 -rupee (\$US3,200) relief payment for the families of accident victims, and periodic increases in benefits in accordance with inflation.

A major concern of workers is the operation of welfare boards. Protesters demanded that the government reform various labour welfare boards and reverse new procedures that make it difficult for workers to renew their enrolment certificates with the various boards. Workers have also called for a return to enrolments through the unions.

Tamil Nadu fishermen on strike

Fishermen in Tamil Nadu's Nagapattinam district began an indefinite strike on December 15 to demand the release of fishermen arrested by the Sri Lankan Navy. Around 700 boats are participating in the strike. At least

210 Indian fishermen and 47 boats are being held by the Sri Lankan Navy for allegedly fishing in Sri Lankan waters. Likewise, there are 171 Sri Lankan fishermen and 31 boats being held by the Indian navy for allegedly entering Indian waters.

The striking fishermen said that the detentions were affecting their livelihood and have called for the Tamil Nadu and federal Indian governments to negotiate a resolution of the border issue and for the release of both Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen and boats.

Karnataka telecommunications workers protest

Casual and contract workers of state-owned telecommunications giant Bharatiya Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) protested outside the company's divisional office in Raichur, Karnataka on December 16 to demand the reinstatement of eight union leaders who had been employed on casual contracts for over a decade.

Other long standing demands included payment of almost five million rupees in pending provident funds, the issuance of pay-slips, the provision of Employee State Insurance (ESI) and identity cards as per legal requirements and payment of wages on or before the seventh of every month. Workers also want labourers to not work more than eight hours a day, the regularisation of contract labourers and the minimum pay increased to 10,000 rupees (\$US160) per month.

The protest was organised by the Contract/Casual Workers union affiliated with the Centre for Indian Trade Unions. Casual and contract workers protested at the BSNL Karnataka divisional office in July over the same long standing issues.

Philippines TV5 employees issue strike notice

Around 600 workers at Manila's TV5 television station filed a notice of strike before the Department of Labor and Employment (DoLE) on December 13 after negotiations for a new collective bargaining agreement (CBA) reached deadlock. The Associated Broadcasting Company Employees Union said workers were concerned about job security after the broadcaster renames some of its departments and positions. Workers fear that management could use the restructure to declare existing positions redundant, force workers to resign and outsource its manpower needs from third-party service providers.

According to the union, TV5 has flatly refused to discuss any "non-economic" provisions or have them included in the CBA. Conciliation and mediation talks are being held by the DoLE.

Queensland beer brewery workers protest

Some 65 workers and United Voice members picketed the XXXX beer brewery in Brisbane's inner suburb of Milton on December 18 to demand the reinstatement of a maintenance mechanic who was sacked after an accident at the plant in October. Scott Campbell was fired after Lion Nathan, XXXX's parent company, accused him of breaching safety protocol.

According to media reports a pallet fell about five metres after it was placed over a well shaft while Campbell was removing a gearbox from a

piece of machinery known as a depalletiser. A United Voice official said that brewery management had denied requests for scaffolding to be fitted on the depalletiser and was fully aware that workers had used pallets to cover shafts four times this year.

Picketing workers held placards saying "Train don't blame" and "Unfair, Unreasonable, Unjust." The union has not called for any concrete industrial action. Campbell, who had worked for Lion Nathan for 15 years, has filed an unfair dismissal application with the Fair Work Commission.

Auckland Airport taxi drivers end protest

Around 200 taxi drivers servicing Auckland airport in New Zealand's largest city, ended a four-day hunger strike and picket at the airport headquarters after the Auckland Taxi Association and airport management negotiated a deal on drivers' demands. The drivers struck on December 9 after the airport notified 50 drivers working for President Taxis that it planned to cut their company's contract. Drivers were also concerned about large fees for taxi ranks and management's failure to provide promised shade, drinking water and toilet facilities.

While the agreement included a six-point plan, to be reviewed in one year's time, the drivers, all from smaller taxi companies unable to secure "premium" contracts with the airport, are still required to pay \$190 per week to operate at the airport. They will also still be charged \$2 each time they re-enter the main airport taxi ranks but can enter the main ranks sooner if their previous trip was a short one. The airport has also agreed to upgrade the shelter, drinking water and toilet facilities.

Vanuatu nurses suspended

Around a quarter of the 400 nurses on the small Pacific Ocean island of Vanuatu were suspended on half pay for six months on December 10 after they signed a petition calling for the sacking of the health minister, Serge Vohor. Although the suspensions were rescinded after 48 hours many nurses failed to return to work because their grievances remained unresolved.

The Vanuatu Nurses Association (VNA) members are opposed to the minister's revamping of the health sector which has led to the suspension of three senior doctors. According to the VNA, nurses are concerned that they don't have any voice in the new structure.



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