

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 December 2013

Strike by South Korean rail workers in third week

Almost 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. The Park government has declared the strike illegal and denounced workers for "taking the nation's economic arteries hostage."

KORAIL has begun hiring scab workers and called 280 train attendants and 380 drivers. Hundreds of police continue to surround the Jogye Temple in central Seoul where four union leaders are taking refuge. Police have arrested two union officials and have warrants for 25 union leaders. Last week police raided the two Seoul offices of the Railway Workers' Union and on Sunday teargas was fired into the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) offices in central Seoul as 500 heavily-armed special police officers invaded the building.

The strike was sparked by the company's decision to use a separate operator to run the planned Suseo KTX (bullet train) line linking the south of Seoul with the port city of Busan. 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 reject pay offer

The Cambodian government's latest minimum pay proposal for garment and footwear employees triggered a wave of protests this week by workers in several industrial estates. Workers had demanded that the Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia (GMAC) increase the minimum wage by nearly double to \$US160 per month in 2014, but on December 24 the Labor Advisory Council (LAC)—which consists of government, union and factory representatives—decided that the minimum wage would be raised from the current \$80 to just \$95 for full-time workers and \$90 for temporary workers.

Workers flatly rejected the offer with union representatives declaring that the striking employees would not budge from their demands for an immediate wage increase to \$160 per month.

Three thousand workers from Medtecs Cambodia Co Ltd in Kampong Cham protested against the council's decision, setting road blocks in the province. About 5,000 workers in the Manhattan Special Economic Zone in Svay Rieng province demonstrated and at least 500 workers from the Pak Sun Knitting Factory surrounded the ministry of labor in Phnom Penh to protest the council's decision.

Last week, 30,000 garment workers from 40 factories in Bavet town on

Cambodia's eastern border with Vietnam were locked out for 48 hours 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.

India: Tamil Nadu fishermen end strike

Fishermen in Tamil Nadu's Nagapattinam district ended their nine-day strike on December 23 following assurances from the state government that it was attempting to resolve their grievances. Fishermen from about 700 boats struck on December 15 to demand the release of fellow workers arrested by the Sri Lankan Navy. At least 210 Indian fishermen and 47 boats are being held by the Sri Lankan Navy for allegedly entering Sri Lankan waters. Likewise, there are 171 Sri Lankan fishermen and 31 boats being held by the Indian navy for allegedly entering Indian waters.

Karnataka garbage collectors protest

Close to 2,000 contract pourakarmikas (garbage collectors and sorters) in Mysore city demonstrated on December 24 to protest over delays in the disbursement of their wages. They demanded abrogation of the contract system and for the Mysore City Corporation (MCC) to make direct payments due to workers instead of through contractors.

There are an estimated 1.2 million pourakarmikas across India with 45,000 in Karnataka. Last year the Karnataka state government set the minimum wage for pourakarmikas at 5,054 rupees (\$US82) per month.

Andhra Pradesh transport union serves strike notice

The National Mazdoor Union (NMU) has issued a strike notice on the State Road Transport Corporation (RTC) that its members will begin state-wide strike action on January 8 for regularisation of 24,000 conductors and drivers. All eight unions representing over 100,000 RTC employees will be involved.

According to a NMU official, workers ended strike action in May after the corporation agreed to secure a government order to regularise the contract employees. The order, however, was never issued.

Nepalese construction workers walk out

Around 600 construction workers (400 Chinese and 200 Nepalese) at the Upper Marsyangdi 'A' Hydropower Project on the Marsyangdi River in Nepal have been on strike since December 19 after management terminated a truck driver for alleged drunkenness.

Although management, after three days of strike action, agreed to reinstate the worker and transfer him to other duties, employees refused to return to work because the All Nepal Energy and Mine Workers' Union were continuing talks with management over additional demands. The Sino Hydro Power Company and Sagarmatha Power Company are jointly constructing the \$195 million, 50-megawatt project.

Sri Lankan volunteer hospital workers on strike

Around 240 volunteer health workers at the Jaffna Teaching Hospital, on the Jaffna Peninsula, have been on strike since December 12 to demand regular employment. They have been working at the hospital for five years in positions that the government had refused to fill. They are paid just \$US1 a day by charity organisations.

The strike erupted when the government, through the Jaffna Hospital Development Society (JHDS), began filling vacancies of porters and other assisting employees with supporters of the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP). Only 40 jobs were offered to the volunteers.

The JHDS justified its actions by claiming that only those who had passed the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) would be recruited. Educational qualifications previously required for the positions were a Grade 8 pass in the school system.

The Sri Lanka Independent Trade Union, controlled by the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), has not called for a broader campaign to support the volunteer workers and has instead offered to arrange a discussion with the health minister.

National strike by Sri Lankan hospital workers

On December 19, 20,000 minor staff attached to 23 government hospitals throughout the country went on strike for four hours to protest the failure of the government to pay arrears pending since 2006. According to the All Ceylon Health Services Union (ACHSU), minor staff at hospitals should have been paid their arrears from January 1, 2006. The ACHSU said that it became clear after several discussions with the Rajapakse government that it had no intention of making the payments.

Pakistan: Punjab paramedics continue protests

Paramedics in Lahore government hospitals protested on December 19 over long-standing demands. Earlier this month, hundreds of paramedics, including technicians, ward attendants, dispensers and sweepers, demonstrated in Lahore to demand the Pakistan government honour previous commitments.

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 for more than 90,000 paramedics and other government employees. It also failed to regularise the services of contract and daily wage employees, as promised.

The PPSA told the media that there would be further protests by paramedics if the union's demands were not met by January 2.

Chubb armoured vehicle drivers strike in the ACT

Twelve Chubb Security armoured vehicle guards and drivers in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) stopped work on December 24 and plan to remain on strike for a week, after rejecting the company's latest pay offer. Deliveries of cash to automatic teller machine (ATM) facilities and banks have ceased.

The Transport Workers Union has been in negotiations during the past three months over a new enterprise agreement with Chubb. Workers want a 3.9 percent increase, equal to the rise offered to armoured vehicle crews in Sydney, New South Wales.

Northern Territory teachers reject pay offer

Over 80 percent of Northern Territory teachers voted to reject a Liberal Country government's enterprise agreement on December 20. The vote followed a directive from Australia's Fair Work Commission (FWC) that teachers end all industrial action until March 3 and reconsider the government's wage offer.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) began limited industrial action in November, including short strikes, after teachers rejected the government's offer of 3 percent annual pay increases over four years—the current inflation rate for the territory is 3.9 percent.

Teachers also want clauses in the new agreement to protect jobs. The territory government plans to cut at least 420 teaching positions from the current 2,500 within three years and axe about 1,000 contract teaching and ancillary positions from the existing 4,000-strong workforce.

An AEU spokesman told the media that industrial action could resume next year if the government failed to reconsider its proposed education staffing cuts.



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