

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 January 2014

Korea: Railway union shuts down strike

On December 30, the Korean Railway Workers' Union (KRWU) ended a 22-day strike of over 8,000 of its members at KORAIL. The union deal came after a vague government commitment not to privatise the state-rail network.

The sell-out arrangement was reached in behind-the-scenes negotiations between the union, which is affiliated to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), and the government. It involves establishment of a seven-member committee "to ensure KORAIL is not privatised." The committee has three representatives from the ruling Saenuri Party and the opposition Democratic Party, with ruling party lawmaker Kang Seok-ho leading the group. No union representatives were invited to the committee's first meeting on Tuesday although KORAIL's president was in attendance.

The strike began on December 9 and 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.

Nothing has been resolved by the KRWU-KCTU led walkout. KORAIL has not backed down on its plan to allow a newly-formed subsidiary to run the Suseo KTX line. Arrest warrants for 25 union leaders remain and hundreds of police continue to surround the Jogye Temple in central Seoul where four union leaders are taking refuge. KORAIL has vowed to push ahead with its plan to punish 490 workers and file an estimated 15 billion won (\$US14.2 million) law suit for company losses incurred during the strike.

India: Maharashtra junior college teachers protest

Junior college teachers from Maharashtra's Nasik district demonstrated outside the District Collector's office on December 30 over long-standing grievances. The protest, which was led by the Nasik District Junior College Teachers' Association, followed a 42-day strike in March 2013 over the same issues. Teachers ended that walkout after the government agreed to grant their demands. The promise was never fulfilled.

Junior teachers' demands include a three-stage pay-scale revision, pay increases for temporary teachers, and reinstatement of leave cut after the March 2013 walkout.

Tamil Nadu government transport workers demonstrate

About 800 workers, representing 16,000 employees in the Madurai division of the Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC), protested at the Madurai campus on December 28 to demand immediate payment of outstanding Dearness Allowances (DAs).

Last year the Tamil state government announced an 8 percent DA for April to June and 10 percent from July to December. While DAs were granted for one million employees of various government departments, the transport corporation has not implemented the payments.

Kerala quarry workers strike

On December 27, workers at the Kavumkal granite quarry, near Vadasserikkara in Kerala, downed tools and occupied their workplace to demand the immediate arrest of quarry-owner Sabu Kuriakose for allegedly shooting at two Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) officials trying to enter the site the previous day.

According to an INTUC official, the shooting was in response to a labour dispute. The quarry workers' union had filed a case with the Central Labour Commission demanding the payment of wages and bonuses as per the Minimum Wages Act and the Bonus Act. The union wanted the amounts granted before Christmas but the quarry owner responded by refusing to pay any wages.

Pakistani women health workers protest

Lady Health Workers (LHW) program employees in various parts of Pakistan are campaigning for job regularisation and outstanding wages. On December 30, several dozen women workers blocked a main road in the provincial capital Peshawar demanding salaries outstanding for the last four months.

There are over 100,000 employed in the LHW program across Pakistan, providing a range of crucial health services, including vaccinations. According to the protestors, there are 14,000 LHWs yet to be regularised in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa alone.

About 150 LHW workers also held a sit-in protest outside the Prime Minister Secretariat last Saturday over their demands. About 25,000 LHW employees in Sindh province have threatened to boycott the

child vaccination campaign because they have not been paid for the last three months.

LWH employees, who are among the most exploited sections of the Pakistan working class, receive just 7,000 rupees (\$US77) per month. Many are denied job regularisation despite years of service.

More Tamil Nadu fishermen strike over detentions

About 3,000 fishermen from 300 boats at Pamban, Tamil Nadu launched an indefinite strike on December 31 to demand the immediate release of 18 fishermen arrested the previous day by the Sri Lankan Navy.

Last week, fishermen from 700 boats in the Nagapattinam district ended a nine-day strike following assurances from the state government that it was attempting to resolve their grievances over a similar issue. The fishermen struck on December 15 to demand the release of 210 Indian fishermen and 47 boats being held by the Sri Lankan Navy for allegedly entering Sri Lankan waters. An estimated 171 Sri Lankan fishermen and 31 boats are being held by the Indian navy for allegedly entering Indian waters.

Sri Lankan milk workers suspend strike

On December 30, Sri Lanka Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya officials representing workers at four Milco factories, the state-owned milk processor, called off a three-week strike. Union officials said that the strike would remain suspended while an arbitration board mediated workers' demands.

Milco employees walked out on December 9 to demand a bonus, permanency, job security and the removal of factory management for alleged corruption. The company claimed it had agreed to partially pay bonuses and offered permanency after five years' service. Union officials said the government had one month to resolve the issues or strike action would resume.

Sri Lankan volunteer hospital workers end strike without resolution

Sri Lanka Independent Trade Union officials convinced 240 volunteer workers at the Jaffna Teaching Hospital to end a two-week strike on December 27 without resolving any of their grievances. The union, which is controlled by the ruling government's Sri Lanka Freedom Party, claimed to have negotiated a deal with the Minister of Traditional Industries and Small Enterprise Development. The minister claimed that he would take "immediate" steps to resolve workers' grievances by sending a memorandum to the Cabinet.

The volunteer employees have been working at the hospital for five years in positions that the government refused to fill. They are paid just \$US1 a day by charity organisations. The strike erupted on December 12 when the government, through the Jaffna Hospital

Development Society (JHDS), began filling the vacancies of porters and other assisting-employees with Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) supporters. Only 40 jobs were offered to the volunteers.

More Bangladeshi garment workers strike over low pay

Quader Synthetic employees in the Gazipur Industrial Zone, on the outskirts of Dhaka, walked out on January 1 and protested outside the factory to demand higher wages.

The strike erupted after the company broke a promise to increase pay by 1,000 taka (\$US14) from December. On Wednesday, however, factory management announced a different wage structure. The monthly wage for males is \$46 and for females just \$US40.

The walkout follows mass strikes and demonstrations throughout 2013 by Bangladeshi garment workers demanding the current minimum monthly wage be nearly tripled to \$US100.

Fiji hotel resort workers on wildcat strike

Around 400 workers from the Sheraton Fiji Resort and the Westin Denarau Resort and Spa in Nadi walked off the job on December 31 to oppose cuts to staff benefits, such as maternity leave and overtime pay. The strike ended after four hours when Starwood Hotels' management agreed to meet all workers' grievances within fourteen days.

A spokesman for the landowning committee (LOC), which initiated the industrial action, said that temporary staff entitled to permanency should all be made permanent and all entitlements paid within the fourteen days.

The government declared the strike illegal, claiming it breached Section 175 of the Employment Relations Promulgation (ERP) 2007. The draconian ERP requires workers to provide notice of a secret ballot to the Registrar of Trade Unions 21 days prior to any strike action. The National Union of Catering and Hospitality and Tourism Industries Employees Union backed the government, said that the strike was illegal, and declared that it would attempt to hold talks with the LOC over the dispute.



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