

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 February 2014

India: Bank workers hold national strike

Over a million bank employees and officers working in 27 public sector banks, 12 private and eight foreign banks and regional rural banks walked out for two days on February 10 to demand higher salaries and to oppose the government's policy of allowing private companies in banking. All banks closed and many ATMs (automatic teller machines) ran out of cash on the first day of the strike.

Their action follows a one-day walkout in December over the same issues. The United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU), an umbrella union of 47 banks, called the December strike after rejecting the Indian Banks' Association's offer of a 5 percent salary increase. Workers wanted a 40 percent wage rise. Government bank employees, who have not had a wage increase for almost six years, were due to receive a rise 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. Reserve Bank of India 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.

Talks in January reached deadlock when the UFBU reduced its wage demand to 20 percent but the banks' association limited its offer to just 10 percent.

Hyderabad sanitary workers suspend strike

Outsourced sanitary workers in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh temporarily suspended strike action on February 12 and resumed garbage collection and sweeping operations following government assurances that it would increase wages. Members of the Greater Hyderabad Municipal

Employees' Union began rolling stoppages on February 2 to demand that the current monthly wage be increased from 6,700 rupees (\$106.93) to 16,500 rupees. The Greater Hyderabad Municipality Corporation agreed to increase sanitary workers' wages to nearly 11,000 rupees and other entitlements.

Other demands, including purchase of new garbage vehicles, regularisation of contracts, providing houses to outsourced employees and issuing of health cards, are still being negotiated.

Over 25,000 contract and outsourced employees, including 20,000 sweepers, 1,500 transportation employees and 2,200 entomology employees, participated in the strike. The decision will impact on the wages of over 200,000 outsourced and contract sanitary workers across Andhra Pradesh.

Pakistani paramedics protest

As part of a two-year ongoing campaign that has included walkouts and protests over pay and job security, Punjab government hospital paramedics demonstrated outside the Directorate General of Health offices in Lahore on February 7. The Punjab Paramedics Alliance (PPA) called the protest. It followed a walkout in December by Lahore government hospital paramedics, including technicians, ward attendants, dispensers and sweepers.

The paramedics' alliance 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 in negotiations last year. Paramedics threatened to begin a week of demonstrations from February 13 if the government failed to grant their demands.

Pakistani utility workers continue anti-privatisation campaign

On February 10, Pakistan's Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) workers demonstrated in Lahore and other major cities over the government's planned privatisation of electricity distribution utilities.

The protest, called by the All Pakistan Wapda Hydro Electric Workers Union, was part of a long-running national campaign against ongoing government attempts to privatise the sector. Under the International Monetary Fund's directive, the newly-elected Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz government has made privatisation of public sector utilities a priority.

Despite the overwhelming support of power workers, union officials have restricted the anti-privatisation campaign to protests, limited strike action, government appeals and other techniques aimed at wearing workers down. After a year of limited action there has been no attempt by union bureaucrats to mobilise other public sector workers in united industrial action against privatisation and the International Monetary Fund's demands.

Islamabad college teachers threaten strike

About 1,600 teaching and non-teaching contractual staff of 20 Model (tertiary) Colleges in Pakistan's capital Islamabad have threatened to strike complaining that they have not received their salaries for January. According to the media, after the Capital Administration and Development Division (CADD) abolished student fees, no alternative plan has been devised to generate revenue to pay contractual staff salaries. CADD claimed it does not have funding to pay contractual or daily wage employees.

Indonesian car components workers strike

Workers from car component producer PT Putra Bangun Reberindo in the Cikupa Industrial Estate in Tangerang, 25km west of Jakarta, walked off the job for the day on February 10 to protest outsourcing and low wages. An official of the All-Indonesian Workers Union (KSPSI) said that 200 workers had been recruited and employed on the basis of a contract that had to be renewed annually and only

40 have been made permanent. Workers called for an end to the outsourcing system and demanded that management pay workers in accordance with the minimum wage.

About two million workers in 20 of Indonesia's 34 provinces walked off the job for 48 hours on October 31 to demand improved benefits, a 40-percent minimum pay increase and an end to the hiring of temporary contract workers. Although the government agreed to raise the average minimum wage by 19 percent it ignored workers demands on outsourcing.

According to government data, Indonesia has 16 million outsourced workers, or roughly 40 percent of the country's formal labor force of 41 million. Under the 2003 labor law, companies are not allowed to outsource core jobs and can only outsource five types of peripheral work, namely cleaning services, security, driving, catering and work related to support mining. However, the government admitted that many companies outsourced most of their workers, including for their core business.

Queensland Mater hospital nurses to vote on industrial action

Nurses and midwives employed at the Mater Public Hospital in Brisbane, the Queensland state capital, have been granted permission by the Fair Work Commission to vote for protected industrial action in a dispute with the Mater Misericordiae Health Services Brisbane (MMHSB) for a wage rise. Voting for action that could include strike action will close in early March.

According to the Queensland Nurses' Union (QNU), which has been negotiating for a new work agreement since December 2012, the Mater's 2,300 nurses and midwives had not received a pay rise for almost three years, and are currently paid 6 percent less than their 32,000 counterparts in state government hospitals.



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