

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 March 2014

India: Strike by Bihar university non-teaching staff in third week

For the third time in two years, over 30,000 non-teaching staff at universities and colleges in India's north-eastern state of Bihar walked off the job over the Janata Dal (United) led state government's delay in implementing workers' demands. The strike, which has entered its third week, has paralysed all Bihar state universities and colleges and affected exams. Strikers have been demonstrating at various locations around the state.

According to the Bihar State University and College Employees' Federation, the government has ignored a January 2013 Supreme Court order directing it to implement all the accepted demands of the non-teaching staff of different constituent colleges in the state within three months. The federation claims that the government has also abrogated on agreements made in 2005, 2007 and 2010. The court had recommended a wage increase, backdated from January 1996.

Non-teaching staff walked out in June and August 2012 over their claims. These included fixing of pay anomalies and anomalies as per the Fifth and Sixth Pay Commissions, the retirement age increased to 65, equal pay for equal work for university and college staffs, and the pay scale of university engineers, assistant engineering and junior engineers to be on par with state government staff.

Karnataka rural postal workers on strike

Udupi division postal workers in Karnataka state have been on strike since February 18 to demand better working conditions. They also want the government to implement the Talwar Committee's recommendations that rural postal workers be made government employees.

The strike was organised by the All India Grameen Dak Sevak Union (AIGDSU) and a protest rally held outside the Head Post Office in Udupi. An AIGDSU official told media that nearly 300,000 rural postal workers worked under grueling conditions in different parts of the country with hardly any facilities.

Tamil Nadu power-loom workers walk out

Over 200,000 power-loom operators in Coimbatore and Tirupur districts of Tamil Nadu have been on strike since February 21 to

demand an 80 percent pay rise. The strike followed the failure of eight rounds of talks with the labour department and textile manufacturers.

The Coimbatore and Tirupur Districts' Job Work Weavers Association, which consists of thousands of small power-loom owners who employ hundreds of thousands of workers, had issued a strike notice to textile manufacturers in Tirupur, Avinashi, Somanur and Palladam. A weavers' association spokesman said an 80 percent pay rise was necessary because inflation had increased "exponentially" since the last pay agreement two and a half years ago.

The textile manufacturers had offered a 100 percent pay increase which was rejected by workers because the manufacturers refused to sign an agreement in front of labour department officials.

Pakistani health workers protest

On February 19, health workers for the National HIV/AIDs Control Programme demonstrated outside the Peshawar press club over the non-payment of salaries for the last eight months. In December the provincial health secretary told workers that he would release salaries but it never happened.

Delays or non-payment of government sector workers' salaries are increasing as the Pakistan government slashes budget allocations.

In December, when 40 employees of the Pakistan Medical and Research Council in Peshawar complained that they had not received salaries for over two months they were told by management that other officers were also working without salaries. In September, 22 health workers in Punjab province resigned over five months of unpaid salaries. Non-payment of salaries has impacted on 53,000 health workers in Punjab province alone.

South Korean workers strike against privatisation

On February 25, around 100,000 workers responded to the call for a one-day general strike by the Korea Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and walked off their jobs in 12 major cities, to protest against the privatisation of government services. The KCTU has a total of 700,000 affiliated members.

On the previous day, unionised workers of the state-run Korea Railroads Corporation in Seoul walked off the job for one day to demand a pay rise and extension of the retirement age. Rail services were not affected. In December, Korean Railway Workers' Union

members struck for 22 days over the government's privatisation plans. The strike was shut down by the union after a backroom deal between the union, KORAIL and the ruling Saenuri Party and main opposition Democrat Party.

This week's one-day general strike was a charade. Its purpose was to block an independent political struggle of the working class against the government, and to cover up the betrayal of last December's rail strike and other recent union sell-outs. The token character of the one-day walkout only opens the door for President Park to continue privatisation and impose repressive measures against workers.

Heinz food processing workers on strike in Victoria

Workers at the Heinz Golden Circle plant in Mill Park, in Melbourne's northern suburbs, who are set to lose their jobs when the factory closes later this year have been on strike since February 20 to demand a better redundancy payment. Their enterprise agreement expired on January 10 and workers want a pay rise that would flow through to redundancy provisions, which for most workers are capped at 52 weeks' pay.

Talks between Heinz and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union broke down when Heinz continued to refuse to negotiate and some members, including a union delegate, have been told they would be made redundant on March 28.

While the company has told growers that there will be no change to their contracts when the factory closes and relocates to Brisbane, the farmers are also concerned about their future prospects. The union has no intention of defending any of the Heinz workers' jobs or to organise united action with growers against the plant closure.

Maritime workers in Western Australia issue strike notice

A planned 48-hour strike in February by Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members in the offshore oil and gas industry and employed by contractor Tidewater was called off on Thursday night, following a federal court injunction. The court claimed that the union had made a technical error in its strike notice.

The strike was over a long-running dispute for a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). Workers' previous EBA expired in June 2013 and they have not received a pay rise since July 2012.

The MUA dropped its previous pay increase claim to 16.6 percent, in line with previous company offers but no agreement has been reached over demands for a modified roster. Workers currently work a five-week on, five-week off roster but want it reduced to a four-week on, four-week off roster. In line with its nationalist, divide-and-rule policies, the MUA is also demanding that Tidewater hire "local crews" ahead of foreign workers.

The union told the media that it would apply for another ballot so members can vote again on whether to take industrial action.

Adelaide bus drivers continue industrial action

Several hundred bus drivers for public transport provider SouthLink in South Australia's capital Adelaide held a four-hour stop work meeting on February 21 in a dispute over a new work agreement. Their action is part of a campaign begun in January by 600 members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) employed by SouthLink and Transfield to demand a 5 percent pay rise, a work rosters review to reduce fatigue, and for improved driver security.

The companies claim that the South Australian Labor government's contract only allows for a 2.8 percent wage increase. Adelaide's third bus company, Torrens Transit, however, recently agreed to a 4.5 percent wage rise. The TWU has limited its members' action to four-hour stop work meetings and boycotted collecting fares or validating tickets.

New South Wales coal train drivers threaten strike action

Around 200 train drivers transporting coal from the Hunter Valley coal fields to the Port of Newcastle, 140km north of Sydney, have imposed overtime bans and threatened to hold 24-hour rolling stoppages if their employer Aurizon does not resume negotiations for a new work agreement. The Rail, Tram and Bus Industry Union claimed that the company had refused to budge in their negotiations since May last year.

Drivers have rejected Aurizon's proposal that included a reduction in working hours for train drivers, increases in long service leave, a 12 percent wage increase over three years and a \$2,000 one-off cash payment upon approval of the agreement.

New Zealand polytechnic workers to resume strike action

Around 220 academic and support staff at the Universal College of Learning (UCOL) on New Zealand's North Island, have voted to resume strike action following several months of failed negotiations between UCOL and the Tertiary Education Union (TEU). The dispute is over a new work agreement.

Workers want an across-the-board 2.5 percent pay rise, but UCOL said there would be no across-the-board increase for staff this year and that separate negotiations will be held on each campus.

The TEU has tightly restricted the campaign, limiting polytechnic workers' actions to harmless protests, including picketing a UCOL chief executive's speech, and urging union members to wear red clothes to work.

The union said that the polytechnic has still not offered a pay rise or even agreed to talk about a pay rise. Strike action is planned to commence on May 4.



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