

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 March 2014

Pakistan: Punjab brick workers demonstrate

Over 1,500 brick kiln workers and supporters demonstrated in Multan and Shaiwal on March 3 to demand a pay rise in accordance with Punjab law. Two days earlier hundreds of Faisalabad kiln workers held street protests over the same demand.

Kiln workers, some of the poorest workers in Asia, are only paid between 300 and 500 rupees for 1,000 bricks, which usually take 16 hours to produce. Under current Punjabi legislation they should be paid 750 rupees (\$US7).

The brick kiln industry in Pakistan is infamous for its brutal exploitation and continues to use bonded labour. As well as extremely low wages, kiln workers' families are denied access to education, health and other basic needs. Backed by authorities and the police, kiln owners regularly use physical violence and trumped up charges to suppress the kiln workers' demands for better conditions.

This month's demonstrations follow protests in previous years, including a 10,000-strong demonstration in Faisalabad last December. Pakistan has over 4.5 million brick kiln workers, including 1.7 million children.

Bangladeshi jute workers protest

Workers of nine state-owned jute mills in the Khulna-Jessore industrial belt, in southwest Bangladesh, have been holding daily demonstrations since March 2 for 11 demands. The demonstrations, which are along the Khulna-Jessore Highway, have disrupted traffic. A 24-hour strike scheduled for Wednesday was cancelled by the unions after talks with the government. No reason for the postponement was reported by media.

Workers are demanding the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation make cash payments of the latest salary rise announced by the National Wages Commission. They also want the dearness allowance increased by 20 percent and enactment of a jute-packaging law making it mandatory that rice produced in Bangladesh be packaged in locally-made jute bags.

The latest action follows a demonstration last September over the same demand by workers from 12 Jute Mill Corporation plants in Chittagong, Khulna. The protest ended after police dispersed

workers blocking several city roads. Jute production has declined by over 50 percent in recent years due to declining exports and sluggish local demand.

Cambodian garment workers locked inside factory by police

Hundreds of garment workers from Complete Honour Footwear factories in Kampong Speu province and Dai Yi Fashion in Phnom Penh's Russey Keo district were locked inside their respective plants and forced to work overtime at the end of their normal eight-hour shift on February 24 and 25. Police threatened to arrest any worker who attempted to leave the factories.

The garment workers planned to participate in a week-long overtime boycott called by a coalition of 18 unions and union federations. The action is part of an ongoing campaign for a \$160 monthly industry minimum wage and six other demands, including release of 21 workers arrested at demonstrations backing last January's nationwide garment strike.

The overtime boycott followed protests and walkouts which began in December at over 400 factories. Union officials ended last year's strike action after a violent crackdown by the Hun Sen government. Four workers were killed, over 20 seriously injured and at least 23 detained on serious criminal charges. The government brutally suppressed protests in January and February and has banned all public gatherings of workers.

South Korean doctors vote for national stoppage

About 30,000 Korean Medical Association members at government hospitals have voted to begin strike action on March 10 over plans by the Park Geun-hye government to introduce telemedicine and allow hospitals to operate for-profit subsidiaries. The industrial action is the first of its kind by the union since 2000.

The KMA said all doctors—apart from those in emergency rooms and intensive care units—would strike for 24 hours on March 10, followed by a work-to-rule from March 11-23. Under the work-to-rule doctors will only treat each patient for 15 minutes and medical residents will only work an eight-hour day, 40 hours a week. On

March 24 doctors will begin a six-day general strike.

The Korean government has declared the doctors' industrial action illegal, filed a report against the KMA with the Fair Trade Commission and lodged a complaint with the courts.

New South Wales coal train drivers ordered back to work

Around 200 train drivers involved in the transport of coal from the Hunter Valley to the Port of Newcastle, 140km north of Sydney, were ordered back to work by the Fair Work Commission (FWC) on March 1, ending four days of strike action over a dispute for a new work agreement with Aurizon. The commission has also called a four-day moratorium on further action.

Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) members began a two-day walkout on February 25. The Queensland-based Aurizon responded by locking out the drivers on the 27th and 28th of February, after which the drivers called a 24-hour stoppage.

Along with increased wages, the coal train drivers want improved rostering so they have more certainty about upcoming shifts in order to plan time with their families. They are also demanding a 38-hour week and the same long-service conditions as their colleagues in Queensland. The RTBU claimed that the company had refused to budge in negotiations since May last year.

Queensland nurses vote for strike

Nurses and midwives from the Mater Public Hospital in Brisbane have voted to take protected industrial action in a wage dispute with the Mater Misericordiae Health Services Brisbane (MMHSB). According to the Queensland Nurses' Union (QNU), which has been negotiating for a new work agreement since late 2012, the Mater's 2,300 nurses and midwives had not received a wage rise for almost three years and are paid 6 percent less than their 32,000 counterparts in state government hospitals.

A QNU official said that state government funds have been paid to Mater management to meet annual pay rises but not passed on to nurses and midwives—some of whom are now owed up to \$6,000 each. Queensland's public health nurses and midwives have all received the increases.

University teaching staff in Victoria stop work

As part of a long-running dispute for a new enterprise agreement Monash University teaching staff in Melbourne walked off the job for four hours on March 4. Numbers of students joined teachers' picket lines at several university entrances and participated in a protest outside the vice-chancellor's office.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has been negotiating with Monash University for over 18 months for increased staffing levels and a pay rise. The university has refused to increase its 2.5 percent offer, which teachers claim is below inflation and an effective pay cut. Teachers have also pointed out that they face heavier workloads and increased staff-to-student ratios in lectures.

NTEU members, including academics and support staff, at universities across Victoria took industrial action last July for an above-inflation pay rise, reduced workloads, smaller class sizes and restrictions on the use of contract labour.

New Zealand university workers protest

At least 100 staff at New Zealand's Universal College of Learning (UCOL) polytechnic held protests on campuses in Palmerston North, Wanganui and Masterton on New Zealand's North Island on March 5.

The Tertiary Education Union, representing 220 UCOL teaching and support staff, wants an across-the-board 2.5 percent pay rise. UCOL has rejected across-the-board increases and declared that separate negotiations would be held on each campus.

Teachers rejected a last-minute offer from UCOL management in negotiations earlier this week which was aimed at trying to stall planned strike action. Management offered an additional two days' paid leave per year and a non-committal, possible 2 percent salary increase later in the year, contingent on UCOL receiving new government funding.



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