

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 March 2014

India: Toyota workers remain locked out

Over 4,200 permanent workers at Toyota Motors' majority-owned car assembly plants in Bidadi, near Bangalore, remain locked out since March 16 in a dispute for improved wages and benefits. The company suspended 17 workers to "discipline" them. Employees have refused to return to work until the company drops its demand that they sign a "good conduct" bond. The Toyota Kirloskar Motor (TKM) plants employ 6,000 permanent workers, 1,300 contract workers and 800 apprentices.

The Toyota Motors Employees Union (TMEU), which is not formally affiliated with any of India's existing union federations, wants a small wage rise of 4,000 rupees (\$US65) per month. Workers rejected TKM's offer of a 3,050-rupee monthly increase and want resolution of other demands, including improved safety, limitations on the use of contract labour, housing facilities, medical benefits and other service benefits.

TKM has not been able to maintain production with its contract employees and apprentices not on strike and on March 25 hired 1,000 scab contract workers in an attempt to restart production.

Tamil Nadu power-loom owners end to strike

On March 25, the Job Work Weavers Association, representing small and medium power loom owner-operators in the Coimbatore and Tirupur Districts, in India's south-east state of Tamil Nadu, ended their four-week strike, after accepting a reduced wage deal. Over 200,000 power-loom operators and owners at 15,000 units stopped work on February 21 to demand an 80 percent pay rise. The strike began after eight rounds of fruitless talks with the labour department and textile manufacturers. The association settled for wage increases as low as 27 and 30 percent, depending on the fabric being produced.

Workers employed by the loom owners had, in addition, demanded the establishment of a retirement saving fund scheme, medical benefits known as ESI, and paid festival holidays. Loom workers often work twelve hours per day, six days a week in cramped, dusty and unsafe conditions.

Ford auto workers in Tamil Nadu protest

Nearly 1,800 permanent workers at Ford auto plants in Maramalai Nagar, near Chennai the capital of Tamil Nadu, began limited protests on March 24 over cuts in performance pay. Workers refused to have their lunch served at the company canteen and boycotted company transport. They have complained management has cut their incentives by about 10 percent despite increased production at the plant.

Ford employs nearly 6,000 workers, including those on contract. It manufactures various models—the Fiesta, Endeavour, Figo and EcoSport—which are sold in India and 40 other countries.

Sri Lankan port workers demonstrate in Colombo

On March 26, Colombo Port workers held a lunch-time demonstration outside the Khan clock tower in central Colombo to demand their annual bonus be lifted to 150,000 rupees (\$US1,150) and their monthly wages increased by 12,000 rupees (\$92).

An All Ceylon Port Workers General Union spokesman said workers met targets every year but were not receiving any benefits. He also claimed that the Port Authority was only paying workers half the allowance that shipping agents paid to the authority for container handling. The Combined Trade Union Alliance of the Sri Lanka Ports Authority organised the demonstration.

China: Police attack protesting Walmart workers

On March 19, police in three Chinese cities—Changde, Maanshan and Anhui—violently dispersed protesting Walmart employees picketing their closed, or soon to be closed, stores. Several workers were injured. Walmart has shut down 13 stores in China over the last 15 months, including five this month. In most cases workers were given just two weeks' notice. They are demanding improved severance payments.

In Changde, the predominately women workers, many of whom were long-serving employees, were offered just two options: relocate to another Walmart store in China or accept substandard severance packages. Workers complained that neither the two-week notice period nor the amount of compensation was in accordance with China's labour laws. They want Walmart's severance pay doubled and rental and other subsidies for workers transferring to stores in other cities.

Bangladeshi garment workers injured in protest

At least 15 employees from a Biswas Group garment factory in Mirjanagar, on Dhaka's outskirts, were injured when management, assisted by Ashulia Industrial Police, tried to break up a demonstration on factory premises on March 19. Workers clashed with management after discussions failed in a dispute over non-payment of February's wages. Management called the police to disperse the workers' demonstration.

Cambodian shoe factory workers end strike

Striking Wing Star Shoes employees in Kampong Speu province returned to work on March 25, ending a weeklong strike. Around 7,000 workers had walked off the job over a charter of 11 demands, including an increase in the monthly bonus, from \$US10 to \$15, and meal and lunch allowances lifted to \$15.

Strikers decided to return after the company said they would not cut their monthly wage during the strike and would increase the bonus and allowance by \$1 each. Talks are to continue on the remaining issues, including an end to compulsory overtime and the removal of male security guards from outside the factory's female restrooms.

Super A-Mart warehouse workers in Victoria locked out

Thirty-five of the 40 permanent workers at the Super A-Mart distribution centre at Somerton, in Melbourne's north, have been locked out since March 7, following strike action on February 28 over their first enterprise bargaining agreement. The furniture retailing company is using casual labour to replace them.

National Union of Workers (NUW) members established a picket outside the warehouse but the company obtained Supreme Court injunctions to prevent them from returning to work and banning them or their supporters protesting outside the building. The NUW has isolated the strike and workers have resorted to campaigning outside Super A-Mart discount furniture shops to inform customers about the lockout.

Workers have not had a wage rise in four years, and are only paid \$20 an hour, \$4 less than other warehouses. They want an immediate pay increase to \$22 an hour, then to \$26 by the end of three years, rostered days off, and conversion to permanent work for casuals who have worked at the site for three months. Workers are also concerned is that the workplace is dangerous. They are expected to individually lift loads of up to 100 kg onto pallets. This was previously the task of two-person teams. Fluid leaks from forklifts have also created hazardous floor surfaces. The company has refused to establish a health and safety committee at the warehouse.

Queensland government doctors protest

Over 1,000 senior doctors in Queensland's public health system met in Brisbane on March 19 and unanimously opposed the state Liberal National government's attempt to force 2,000 senior medical officers (SMOs) onto individual contracts. According to the Senior Medical Staff Association (SMSA), some doctors have already resigned over the issue and many more said they will leave the public health system if disputed issues in the proposed contracts are not resolved. Doctors have until April 30 to sign individual work agreements which will take effect on July 1.

Doctors are concerned about the director general's role in contract alterations, dismissal processes, no disadvantage provisions, linking key performance indicators with income, transfers, dispute arbitration, rostering and work fatigue. They also fear the measure is a deliberate attempt to force them into private practice, as a step toward increasing privatising of medical services. An SMSA spokesman told the media that doctors who were unhappy with their contracts would resign on March 31.

New Zealand steel retail workers strike

Forty employees of Steel and Tube picketed the company's Christchurch retail outlet in New Zealand's South Island on March 19, declaring that they would continue industrial action until there was progress in negotiations for a new work agreement. Steel and Tube employs around 700 people at 40 sites across New Zealand. The action by members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) and FIRST Union was in response to Steel and Tube removing days and hours of work provisions from their current agreement, and paying a flat rate for all hours worked. Strikes are planned for Auckland branches of Steel and Tube next week.

French Polynesia public sector workers protest

Around 500 striking public sector workers in Papeete, the capital of France's Pacific island territory of French Polynesia, clashed with police on March 21. The workers were protesting planned public sector reforms and job cuts. After the French high commissioner refused to meet the workers, unions said they would extend the strike to include 4,800 municipal workers. The government outlined plans in its 2013 budget to slash 1,000 public sector jobs within two years. At least 200 were to go in 2013, 400 this year and 400 in 2015.



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