

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 April 2014

India: Toyota lockout in third week

Over 4,200 permanent workers at Toyota Motors' majority-owned car assembly plants in Bidadi, near Bangalore, have been locked out since March 16 in a dispute for improved wages and benefits. The company initially suspended 30 workers to "discipline" them. On Wednesday ten leaders of the Toyota Kirloskar Motor Employees Union (TKMEU) began a hunger strike to demand that TKM unconditionally reinstate all workers.

Employees have refused to return to work until the company drops its demand that they sign a "good conduct" bond. The TKM twin plants employ 6,000 permanent workers, 1,300 contract workers and 800 apprentices.

The TKMEU, 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.

Nokia workers in India protest

As many as 4,000 protesting workers, mostly women, from Nokia's Sriperumbudur handset manufacturing plant in Tamil Nadu, began a hunger strike on March 31 to demand guarantees that they will not lose their jobs if Nokia proceeds with plans to sell the factory to Microsoft. The sale has been rejected by the courts and

Nokia's Indian assets frozen due to an alleged tax liability that the company refuses to pay.

Adding to workers' fears, Nokia has cut shifts from three to two and begun transferring orders to its new factory in Vietnam. Workers are concerned that Nokia might walk away from the alleged tax debt and shut the plant. Nokia's Sriperumbudur factory employs nearly 8,000 workers directly and around 30,000 indirectly.

A tripartite meeting between the Nokia employees union, the company and government on Monday failed to resolve the issue.

Mumbai public transport workers strike

On April 2, the Maharashtra state government invoked the essential services act (MESMA) against 26,000 Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport (BEST) employees, who have ignored a court order and maintained strike action following an unannounced walkout the day before.

BEST is the only mass public transport provider in Mumbai and surrounding areas. At least 4,200 BEST buses are off the road. Under MESMA, the government declared the industrial action illegal and strikers face heavy fines if they do not resume work.

BEST bus drivers and conductors are protesting against a new computerised scheduling system. According to the unions, the company is attempting to drive up productivity by introducing a "Canadian schedule" roster. The system is expected to save 320 million rupees a year. Employees have opposed the new rosters, saying that they will have to work for over 12 hours a shift.

Garment workers in Thailand strike

Nearly a thousand Burmese migrant workers at the Thai-owned Yuan Jiou Garment factory in Thailand's border town Mae Sot walked off the job on March 26 and demonstrated outside the factory over unpaid wages and long working hours. The daily minimum wage in Thailand is 300 baht (\$US9) but workers said they are not receiving this amount and are forced to lie during official inspections of the factory.

One worker told media: "We have to work from 8 a.m. until 10 o'clock at night and make 120 garments. If we cannot make them we are all scolded. If we can make 120 garments, they ask for 140 garments the next day."

The striking workers want the minimum wage, overtime pay, adequate sick leave, financial assistance for those injured at work, and shorter working hours. They have received no response to their complaints from the Thai Department of Labour Protection and Welfare but said they would continue protesting until their demands are met.

Western Australian public school teachers strike

Tens of thousands of public school teachers, education assistants, clerical workers, students and supporters attended protest rallies across Western Australia on April 1 over education job and budget cuts by the Barnett state Liberal government. At least 102 schools were closed throughout the state during the 24-hour walkout by education staff. At least 20,000 protesters marched through downtown Perth, the state capital, and rallied at Parliament House.

In August last year the government announced that it would slash 350 education assistant jobs, 150 administrative jobs, freeze the hiring of new teachers and cut funding to specialised literacy and numeracy programs. Education sector unions—the State School Teachers Union, the Community and Public Sector Union and United Voice—said the state government was slashing \$180 million from the education budget.

The latest action follows last September's rally of

20,000 people in Perth and a half-day strike by education workers which affected over 800 schools.

Western Australia's public servants walk out

In the first of limited rolling state-wide stoppages, around 250 public servants walked off the job for an hour on April 2 over a new work agreement affecting over 40,000 public sector employees. The strike included staff from the Department for Child Protection, Department of Transport, Disability Services and Department of Minerals and Energy.

The Community and Public Service Workers Union (CPSU) has been negotiating since September with the Barnett government for annual 3.5 percent pay increases over three years. The existing agreement expired on April 1. Workers have rejected the government's offer of 2.5 percent annual increases, saying that it constituted a pay cut. The current inflation rate in Perth, where most public servants work and live, is 3 percent.

French Polynesian public sector workers end strike

Around 500 public sector workers in Papeete, the capital of French Polynesia, ended a five-day strike on March 26 after the French high commission agreed to discuss their grievances. Unions, representing 4,800 public sector workers, called the walkout after the commissioner refused to meet with them over planned public sector reforms and job cuts. 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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