

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 November 2014

Bangladeshi ports and river vessel workers end strike

Around 200,000 ports and river vessel workers at Chittagong and Mongla ended a three-day strike on November 10 after the government supposedly assured the Bangladesh Water Vessel Workers Federation that their demands would be implemented. The strikers demanded safer waterways and that river routes be freed from extortions, intimidations and robberies. At least 20,000 vessels were made idle.

The workers downed tools after hearing of a robbery on a Baghabari-bound lighter vessel in the Meghna River. One crew member was killed and six were abducted. The government pledged to financially aid the dead worker's family and secure the abducted workers' release within seven days.

This was not the first time these workers have struck over river safety. They ended strikes in 2010, 2011 and 2013 after vessel owners and the government agreed to meagre wage increases and falsely pledged to improve safety and put an end to river robberies and extortion.

India: One million bank workers strike over pay

For the third time in eleven months, the United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU), representing over one million government and private bank workers across India, called a strike on Wednesday against planned restructuring and for a pay rise. Over 75,000 branches of 27 public sector banks, and 25,000 branches of 18 private sector and 8 foreign banks participated fully in the one-day strike. The action followed a two-day strike in February and a one-day strike last December.

The UFBU is demanding a 23 percent pay rise (reduced from the union's 40 percent claim last December) and a revision of pay scales. The Indian Banks Association has offered just 11 percent. Government bank employees, who have not received a wage increase for almost six years, were due to receive a rise in November 2012. They are also demanding improved pensions, better healthcare benefits and five-day banking.

The bank workers are also opposed to plans to merge several nationalised banks and allow foreign institutions to compete with the State Bank of India.

Non-medical hospital workers in Mumbai on strike

Close to 100 outsourced non-medical workers at South Mumbai's Bhatia Hospital have been on strike since November 8, demanding that hospital authorities recognise their union, a branch of the Maharashtra

Navnirman Kamgar Sena (MNKS). Scheduled surgery has been affected, while 30 non-union members, ward staff and cleaners have been told to cover the staff shortfall. One worker told the media he worked non-stop for 32 hours. "They are not allowing us to leave, saying if we go, we won't be allowed back," he said.

MNKS members said the hospital terminated the services of 13 employees on October 25 for forming a union. The employees, who were working on a contractual basis, approached the Labour Court and got a stay order on the decision.

The striking workers are among 160 hospital workers outsourced to V2 Health Care Services. The hospital said it will accept the sacked workers back but will not negotiate with the MNKS. Police have been called in to prevent striking workers from holding a picket within 100 metres of the hospital.

West Bengal tea workers strike again for pay increase

Close to 400,000 workers from 300 tea gardens at Darjeeling and Dooars Hills in India's northern state of West Bengal walked off their plantations for a one-day strike on November 11 to press a long-standing demand for a wage rise. The walkout, which followed limited strikes and protests in August and October, was called by a joint forum of 23 unions led by the United Trade Union Congress.

Every three years, tea unions, the state government and planters hold talks to decide the minimum wage for the next three years. Tea garden workers were due for a wage increase in April.

While the state minimum daily wage for unskilled agricultural workers is 206 rupees (\$US3.40), tea estate workers are only paid 95 rupees. The United Tea Workers Forum wants the minimum daily wage set at 322 rupees. While the government has offered a 40-rupee rise, phased in over three years, estate owners want it limited to 21 rupees, phased in over three years.

Karnataka village panchayat workers protest

Village panchayat (local government) workers in Mangalore held a protest in the Kottara district panchayat building on November 10 to demand job security, provident fund, pay increases and an end to the outsourcing of their jobs. The protest was convened by the Karnataka State Gram Panchayat Workers Association, affiliated with the Stalinist Centre for Indian Trade Unions.

Telangana university employees protest budget shortfall

Fearing cuts to salaries, the Joint Action Committee at Kakatiya University, a state-owned university at Warangal in India's newly formed state of Telangana, have begun a campaign to oppose a 60 percent shortfall in the university's salary budget. Workers, including teachers, are wearing black badges and demonstrated on campus on Thursday.

According to the Association of Kakatiya University Teachers, at least 1,240 million rupees (\$US20.24 million) was required to pay salaries annually whereas the budget allocated just \$7.78 million. Since the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh in June, state officials of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh have argued over who is responsible for the funding of state enterprises in Telangana.

Pakistan: Lady Health Workers take industrial action

Lady Health Workers (LHWs) in Karachi, the capital of Sindh province, have refused to conduct a door-to-door polio vaccination campaign in parts of the city, to protest unpaid wages. A supervisor told the media that the World Health Organisation pays salaries for the program but the state government has not released funds for the past five salary payments.

LHWs have also demanded that security be improved where police have previously refused to accompany them in "high risk" areas.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa vocational training employees oppose privatisation

Directorate of Technical Education and Manpower Training employees in Pakistan's northwest province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa demonstrated on November 10 against the government's plan to privatise at least 107 manpower training institutions. Several dozen employees held placards and banners in front of the Press Club in Peshawar.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government is increasingly under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to privatise public assets and slash the government's budget deficit. The IMF has been delaying loan tranches for extended periods due to the government's failure to meet its performance criteria.

Cambodia: Grand Twins garment factory sacks 650 workers

Just one week after 5,000 Grand Twins International garment factory workers in Phnom Penh's Pur Senchey district were forced by court order to end their three-week strike, factory management fired 650 for failing to report for work last Saturday. According to a Trade Union Cambodia Support Workers (TUCSW) representative, Saturday fell between two national holidays, the Water Festival and Independence Day, and workers returned to their home provinces for the celebrations.

The workers walked out on October 20 over 16 demands, including 5,000 riel (\$US1.25) per day for lunch, \$15 per month for travel and accommodation, and an end to forced overtime. They have been in dispute with the company since 2006 when it changed its name from QMI to Grand Twins without providing any guarantee that workers would not lose

seniority, related benefits and potential severance pay.

A TUCSW spokesman said the workers were "unhappy" and likely to walk out in solidarity if management proceeds with the sackings.

Tasmanian public sector unions accept pay freeze

The Tasmanian branches of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and the Australian Education Union (AEU) have called two-hour stopwork meetings across the state for November 27 in what they call a "campaign to stop further job cuts" by the Liberal state government. In April, the government warned it may cut 1,500 public sector jobs to balance the budget unless workers accepted an 18-month wage freeze.

The government then offered unions a 12-month pay freeze in exchange for a promise to limit job cuts this financial year to 561. In a sell-out proposal, the unions indicated they would accept the pay freeze but want to negotiate on the job losses and "work with the government" to find other budget savings. The government has refused to negotiate.

The unions have told members there is no way to save jobs except to sacrifice wages. They have "taken the fight" to the state's Industrial Commission where they lodged an amended Public Sector Awards and Agreements to defer public sector pay rises from this financial year until the next.

Industrial court stops Western Australian tugboat engineers' strike

A planned four-hour strike for November 12 by tugboat engineers at Port Hedland in Western Australia's northwest Pilbara region was put on hold after an eleventh-hour intervention by the federal Fair Work Commission. Tugboat company Teekay Shipping sought an intervention on the grounds that it had sent a proposed workplace agreement to the tugboat engineers, which was due to be voted upon within a week.

However, the engineers' union, the Australian Institute of Marine Power Engineers, had not ratified the proposed agreement, which the union said did not meet the engineers' demand for daily hours of work to be capped at 12 hours. The workers are concerned about fatigue and safety conditions. Many engineers are working longer than the scheduled 12-hour shifts, with some reportedly working shifts of up to 20 hours.

The interim order effectively postpones the strike for one week, to allow Teekay's proposal to be voted on by the engineers. Then the engineers must provide three days' notice of any new strike, meaning the earliest a stoppage could now take place would be November 22.

Maritime union accepts pay cut for tugboat deckhands

In another dispute involving Teekay Shipping, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) has signed a deal for a wage freeze for deckhands at Port Hedland. Teekay Shipping agreed to demands for four weeks' annual paid leave, while the MUA convinced its members to accept a pay cut in return. Workers will not receive any pay increase for the first year and a minimal 2 per cent annually for the following three years of the enterprise agreement.

The tugboat workers initially demanded a 20 percent increase over four years, which the MUA then reduced in May to 11.9 percent. The projected

inflation rate for the next three years in Western Australia is an annual average of 2.5 percent.



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