

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 January 2015

Asia

Nepal health workers maintain strike

Hundreds of Nepal health workers have been on strike since January 11 and are currently holding a relay hunger strike outside the Department of Health Services (DoHS) in Kathmandu. Their action follows protests over several weeks in the Nepal capital and other areas. Several hunger strikers have been injured by health trainees and students who attacked their protest. Health union leaders accused the DoHS of inciting the attacks.

The strikers are demanding immediate appointment of recently-promoted officials, overtime incentives, a non-practising allowance, food and lodging facilities, an increase in rural allowances, amendments to the Health Service Act, implementation of the Health Service Regulation and provision of an academic course and training for the health officials.

While the Nepal government has agreed to begin negotiations, striking workers have pledged to continue industrial action until all their demands are met.

Bangladeshi tea estate workers strike

Around 15,000 workers from four tea estates in Bangladesh's Habiganj district struck on January 17 to demand withdrawal of a government decision to establish a special economic zone (SEZ) in the area. Some 200 acres of agricultural land has been requisitioned for the SEZ.

The poorly paid tea workers are concerned that they will face serious economic hardship because requisition of the land will impact on their jobs and cultivation of the land. The government plans to develop five SEZs in Bangladesh in an attempt to attract foreign and domestic investments.

India: Gujarat fishermen strike

Hundreds of fishermen refused to sail from major Gujarat harbours on January 19 as part of a national one-day protest against Indian government plans to allow larger vessels to fish in Indian waters.

A spokesman for the National Fish Workers Forum's Gujarat branch said that about 50 percent of smaller boats in the industry were being

affected by declining fish stocks. "If large vessels are allowed," one fisherman told the media, "they will catch the majority and traditional fishermen will be out of business."

India's National Democratic Alliance government has announced that it will implement a decision by the former United Progressive Alliance administration to allow much larger fishing boats in Indian waters. The government claims that traditional fishermen will be protected because the larger vessels will be restricted to more distant waters.

Traditional fishermen, however, have pointed that they are being restricted to no further than 12 nautical miles from the coast but that pollution has reduced fish numbers, forcing the smaller boats to trawl as far as 70 nautical miles off shore. Over 200,000 traditional fishermen are affected by the government's plan.

Puducherry textile mill workers strike

Workers from the government-owned Swadeshi and Bharathi textile mills in Puducherry, a Union Territory on India's south-east coast, stopped work on Monday demanding immediate payment of a festival advance and for immediate reemployment of five suspended union members. Management suspended the unionists, alleging that they had organised a sit-in protest on January 14.

Workers complained that the Pongal festival advance, ranging between 5,000 and 10,000 rupees (\$US162), was paid at other textile mills in the Union Territory. Swadeshi and Bharathi textile mill management claimed that it was unable to pay the festival advance this year because of financial constraints. Workers are maintaining a picket outside the mills' front gates.

New Delhi ambulance workers strike

Over 600 contract ambulance workers, including paramedics and drivers, from the Centralised Accidents and Trauma Services (CATS) in New Delhi, struck for the day on January 19 in protest against the outsourcing of ambulance operations in the capital. While regular staff supported the protest they did not join the strike. Many ambulances were taken off the road and in some cases patients had to arrange their own transport to hospital.

The contract workers do not accept government assurances that their jobs are safe and have demanded the CATS outsourcing tender be withdrawn.

Pakistani salt miners strike

Karak district salt miners in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province walked off the job on January 15 to demand injury and casualty compensation, medical facilities and better working conditions. They demonstrated in various parts of the district.

A spokesman from the United Workers Welfare Association (UWWA) said salt mine leaseholders did not provide any work accident compensation. Workers also complained that safety equipment was not supplied and that ambulance services were not available for miners.

The UWWA issued a harmless call on the government to investigate salt miners' working conditions and force leaseholders to respond to their demands.

Pakistani government database employees to strike

National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) workers are threatening a week-long hunger strike on February 2 at all regional offices. Organised by the All Pakistan Nadra Employees Union, the workers want service-structure changes, pay-scale upgrades and other benefits, including medical allowances in line with other government employees.

NADRA workers plan to organise a protest procession by train from Karachi to Islamabad and demonstrate outside the national headquarters, followed in April by a national strike. Their action follows demonstrations over their demands in several provinces. In every case, the government falsely agreed to resolve workers' claims.

Azad Jammu and Kashmir health workers call off strike

Lady Health Workers (LHW) program workers in Azad Jammu and Kashmir called-off their January 15 boycott of the vaccination campaign, after being assured by the government that their jobs will be made permanent.

While over 3,000 people are employed by the program, which provides vital health services, especially in rural areas, the majority of workers are temporary, despite a steady rise in their numbers.

LHW program workers have been campaigning nationally over several years for job permanency and timely wage payments.

Cambodian garment workers walk out

On January 19, 200 Manhattan Textile and Garment Corporation workers marched seven kilometres from their Kampong Cham province factory to the provincial labour department to demand reinstatement of three fired union representatives. Labour department officials refused to accept a petition from the workers and so they moved to the provincial government headquarters, where an official took the document.

The workers have been on strike since December 22 after the factory defied an arbitration council ruling ordering management to reemploy three leaders of the Cambodia Alliance Trade Union. Garment workers said they would continue protesting outside the government headquarters

until their demand was met.

Indonesian government school teachers protest

Hundreds of contract teachers at government schools rallied outside the State Palace in Central Jakarta on January 16 to demand President Joko Widodo raise their status to that of civil servants. A teachers' representative said the teachers met civil servant requirements but were not given this status because they were not permanent. Many contract teachers only receive 300,000 rupiah (US\$24) per month.

Australia and the Pacific

New South Wales medical warehouse workers strike

NSW Health medical warehouse workers in Orange downed tools for 24 hours on Thursday to protest closure of the facility. A skeleton staff maintained deliveries to hospitals. Over 130 workers at Concord, Sutherland, Cardiff, Orange and Wagga Wagga face an uncertain future following the state Liberal government's decision to centralise medical warehousing in western Sydney.

The state government signed a contract with Symbion Pty Ltd to take over delivery of hospital supplies and equipment from NSW Health. Warehouses in Wagga Wagga, Orange and Newcastle will close.

Jetstar pilots apply for strike ballot over wage freeze

Following a breakdown in pay talks with Jetstar management, the Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP) filed papers with the Fair Work Commission last week for a strike ballot of its members. Last month almost 95 percent of AFAP members at the airline rejected a proposed four-year employment agreement that included an 18-month pay freeze.

The AFAP said Jetstar pilots had not received a pay rise for three years and were paid significantly less than their counterparts at Tigerair, Virgin and Qantas.

Jetstar's wage freeze demand is part of management plans to axe 5,000 airline jobs and cut \$2 billion from operating costs over the next three years. Most of the targeted jobs will be eliminated by the middle of this year.

The Australian and International Pilots Association, which represents about 35 percent of Jetstar pilots, said it was still considering its options. Australia's airline unions have assisted management to axe thousands of jobs and slash hard-won working conditions across the industry during the past decade.

Papua New Guinea hospital staff resign

More than 400 staff at the Goroka Base Hospital in the Eastern Highlands resigned and walked off the job on January 19 to protest the

dismissal of five senior staff members, including the hospital manager. Essential services were being maintained by a skeleton staff.

The sackings by the Eastern Highlands Provincial Health Authority (PHA) followed a series of demands by staff for improved facilities and equipment at the Goroka hospital.

The mass resignations were submitted a week earlier, after PHA imposed a restraining order preventing the health workers from holding any further meetings. Workers have threatened to remain on strike until the PHA satisfied their demands. They are calling for immediate withdrawal of the restraining order, reinstatement of the sacked officers and removal of the health authority's CEO and other board members.



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