

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 March 2015

Nepalese telecom workers remain on strike

Employees of the privately-owned United Telecom Ltd (UTL) in Kathmandu Valley have been on strike since February 18 over 14 demands. They are ignoring a return to work order while 198 towers and other services for about 600,000 customers in 44 districts have failed. The company tried to use scabs to restore services but workers prevented them entering the communications sites.

The All Nepal Organisation of Bank, Finance Workers' Union—UTL Chapter said its members would not return-to-work until suspension orders against 10 union leaders were first revoked. The company is demanding that workers end their strike immediately.

The telecom workers want increased wages, the issuing of appointment letters, as per Nepal labour law, to employees who have worked for more than 240 days and for management to withdraw plans to cut 65 jobs. Their action follows protests in January that affected the company's Kathmandu Valley telecom services, including the international gateway and internet.

Pakistan: Peshawar utility workers walkout

Administrative workers at the government-owned Peshawar Electric Supply Company (Pesco) walked off the job on February 27 and locked several Pesco's city offices to demand bonus salaries cancelled by the utilities' management. The strikers protested outside WAPDA House where Pesco administration is located. Protests were also held in Bannu, Hangu and Karak. WAPDA (Water and Power Development Authority) is the national body that maintains power and water across Pakistan.

Pesco administrative workers complained that employees in other WAPDA distribution companies were receiving the salary bonus. The All Pakistan Wapda Hydro Electric Workers Union called off the strike after Pesco management agreed to resolve their issues within a week. Workers reluctantly ended their

strike, complaining that Pesco had previously failed to keep promises to resolve the issue.

WAPDA workers hold more protests against privatisation

Following a one-day nationwide protest on February 28, Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) administrative workers across Pakistan held a three-day "pen-down" strike on Tuesday against government's plan to privatise the nation's power distribution companies. Union leaders told workers that industrial action would be escalated to include WAPDA's 150,000-strong workforce if the government did not halt the privatisation process.

While the All Pakistan WAPDA Hydro Electric Workers Union and the WAPDA Hydro Electric Central Union have conducted a three-year anti-privatisation campaign, the unions have restricted this to demonstrations and harmless protest strikes. In line with International Monetary Fund demands, the government insists that it will continue privatising state-run utilities.

Tamil Nadu film manufacturing workers protest

Over 300 employees at the state-owned Hindustan Photo Films factory at Aruvangadu, Tamil Nadu demonstrated outside the plant on March 2 to demand last month's salary. Around 270 employees of the company's almost 600-strong workforce have accepted termination packages following production slowdowns. The government said it was considering whether to subsidise the company's production under its "Make in India" program.

Karnataka heavy-machinery manufacturing workers walk out

Workers at the state-owned heavy machinery manufacturing company Bharat Earth Movers Limited (BEML) walked off the job on February 26. Hundreds of workers gathered near the factory in Bangalore and raised slogans calling for permanent employment for contract operators and technicians and other demands. The BEML Contract Workers' Federation, affiliated with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, want contract workers' pay and conditions to be on a par with all other company employees doing the same job.

Burmese police arrest striking garment workers

Police in Rangoon Division's Insein township arrested at least 20 striking workers on Wednesday afternoon. They were part of a group of 200 striking workers from the COSTEC and Ford Glory garment factories in Shwepyithar Industrial Zone who began a sit-in protest after a planned march to Rangoon City Hall was blocked by hundreds of police.

On February 2, about 2,000 COSTEC and Ford Glory employees walked out to demand 80,000 kyats (\$US78) per month, up from 50,000 kyat. The factories, which are owned by Chinese and South Korean firms respectively, rejected the demand and offered just 62,000 kyats. While some employees have since returned to work, about 600 remain on strike.

The strikers also want employers prosecuted who violate the law, compensation during negotiation periods and the release of arrested striking workers. The strikers said that they will not return to work until their demand for 80,000 kyat per month is granted.

Cambodian garment workers protest

About 200 garment workers from the Smart Shirt factory in Stung Meanchey district protested outside the Phnom Penh Municipal Court on February 27, after 20 colleagues were locked out of the factory. Management accused the workers of inciting other employees to strike and using violence.

On February 3, about 700 workers at the factory walked off the job demanding that management increase 300 senior employees' wages by \$28, after the government's decision to increase the monthly minimum wage to \$128 in January. While strikers ended the walkout on February 23, following a municipal court order, factory management violated the court order and prevented 20 workers from re-entering the plant.

Federal public sector workers apply for ballot to take industrial action

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), this week lodged two separate applications to the Fair Work Commission to hold a Protected Action Ballot for industrial action in a dispute over new enterprise agreements covering public servants in the 19,000-strong Defence Department and Geoscience Australia. According to CPSU polling of members in both sectors over 90 percent wanted a ballot for industrial action. The vote will ask members to consider industrial action, including work bans and strikes up to 24 hours.

Defence Department and Geoscience Australia workers rejected so-called pay rise increases of between 0 and 1.05 percent per year over three years in return for a longer working day, the loss of time-off and a slowdown in the rate of progression up the pay scales. Workplace agreements covering 160,000 public sector workers in over 70 departments are up for renewal, with the government making similar low pay offers and reduced conditions. Workers in all departments have rejected the offers.

CPSU members in Centrelink, Medicare and Child Support—part of the Department of Human Services (DHS)—have maintained “low level” industrial action since December in their pay dispute with the government.

Despite members' calls for strike action, the CPSU has limited action to co-ordinated lunchbreaks, reading messages of protest to call centre customers and not wearing the prescribed uniform to work. These harmless protests are aimed at dragging out the dispute and wearing down the resolve of members.



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