

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 November 2015

India: Reserve Bank employees strike

Close to 17,000 employees of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) struck for 24 hours on November 19 to demand better pension benefits and oppose reforms that would reduce the RBI's regulatory powers. Four unions were involved in the action.

Workers want their pensions to be increased to reflect rising costs and payments to former employees increased by \$US75 a month so that they can afford healthcare. The unions have warned of longer strikes in the near future if the central bank does not meet its demands.

Tamil Nadu fishermen on hunger strike

Fishermen in Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu began a hunger strike on November 21 against the Colachel commercial port project. The project led to sea erosion and to numerous surrounding villages being submerged. Around 6,500 workers have lost their livelihoods due to the project. The strike was organised by Kanyakumari District Fishermen Federation.

West Bengal police attack protesting jute workers

At least 16 jute mill workers were hospitalised when cane-wielding police attacked their demonstration in West Bengal on November 20. The workers were protesting against the closure of jute mills that caused the suicide of a fellow worker.

Thousands of jute mill workers in West Bengal lost their jobs this year as jute mills closed or restricted production due to the ongoing drop in demand for their products. Jute is being replaced by synthetics.

Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa doctors strike

Doctors at the state-run Lady Reading Hospital in Peshawar walked out on November 16 to demand lodging facilities inside the hospital. They complained that the hostel facilities provided were inadequate. The strike forced the closure of the outpatient department and other services. Doctors called off the strike on the third day after the provincial government agreed to address their demands.

The strike was sparked after police intervened in their protests. A committee involving doctors from two other Peshawar hospitals warned

that the strike would be resumed if the government fails to meet their demands.

Train drivers in Balochistan walk out

Train drivers in Pakistan's south-west coastal province of Balochistan walked off the job and demonstrated in the province's capital Quetta on Sunday alleging that most trains were defective and unsafe. Thousands of passengers were stranded at Quetta railway station due to a lack of drivers.

Strikers said 10 of the 13 locomotives in Quetta were faulty. One driver said that workers were losing their lives in accidents on the Quetta-Sibi route caused by old and faulty locomotives. "We lost five colleagues, including an experienced driver, a foreman and three others, in last week's train accident which claimed about 20 lives," he said.

A representative from the All Pakistan Train Drivers' Association said drivers were blamed for all accidents, even derailments due to faulty tracks or wheels on rolling stock collapsing.

Daily wage workers in Islamabad schools on strike

Around 2,000 Federal Directorate of Education (FDE) daily wage teaching and non-teaching staff employed at over 400 schools and colleges in Islamabad have been on strike for a week to demand unpaid wages and job permanency. Most of the workers have not been paid for over a year. Their action follows representations to the government in February and July after the FDE failed to honour commitments to pay the overdue wages.

The FDE on Sunday threatened that if striking workers did not resume duties the next day it would take disciplinary action against them.

Karachi police attack protesting teachers

A protest march by several school teachers in Karachi on Wednesday was viciously attacked by police using water-cannon, tear-gas and batons. Around 200 teachers were arrested. The teachers were intending to march to the Chief Minister's House to demand unpaid salaries and removal of the Sindh province education secretary. Following the police attack they protested outside the Karachi Press Club.

A representative from the Sindh Education Employees Alliance said thousands of teachers were sacked while many teachers had been deprived

of their salaries for the past several months and for years in some cases. The education secretary responded to the protest by telling media that their wages would be docked for being absent from duty.

Aluminium seafarers defy court order and maintain protest

Nineteen crew members of the aluminium cargo ship MV Portland are ignoring a second court order to end their on-board strike and sail the vessel on its last voyage. The ship has been stranded at the Portland harbour side in western Victoria since November 16. At least 40 crew members face the sack after the ship is sailed to Singapore and replaced by a foreign-flagged vessel with an alternative crew.

The MV Portland has hauled alumina from Western Australia to Alcoa's aluminium smelting plant at Portland for 27 years. It is the fifth Australian-crewed ship to be decommissioned with the axing of over 100 jobs in the past 18 months.

Although seafarers on these vessels have taken "illegal" industrial action in an attempt to save their jobs, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) isolated the protesting workers and deflected workers' concerns into nationalist appeals to the government and encouraged animosity against foreign seafarers.

On November 20, the MUA organised a brief demonstration at Alcoa's Pinjarra refinery in Western Australia and blocked 100 shift workers from entering the site. They ended the protest immediately upon the arrival of police. No other action has been proposed.

South Australian family support workers implement work bans

At least 500 employees of Families SA, which is a part of the state's education and child development department, began industrial action on November 22 over growing concerns about staff shortages and mounting workloads. Action by members of the Public Service Association (PSA) includes a ban on overtime work unless caring for children, a ban on paperwork and attending training associated with the new case-work model. Families SA has 1,800 fulltime equivalent employees.

Workers are concerned that thousands of calls to the Child Abuse Report Line go unanswered each year due to under staffing. Over 85,000 emergency calls for help went unanswered in the four years up to June 30, 2015. Workers taking action said the administrative bans would allow them more time to spend caring for children.

South Australian water utility workers strike

About 100 workers of Allwater walked off the job for 24 hours on Tuesday to protest against proposed changes to work conditions. Allwater is an alliance of Transfield and SUEZ Environment and contracted to manage the state-owned SA Water's water supply, sewerage and waste disposal. Workers from the construction, maintenance and recycled-water areas marched through the state's capital Adelaide and rallied at SA Water headquarters in Victoria Square.

Following five months of failed negotiations with SA Water, members of United Voice, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) and

Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) rejected proposed changes to their enterprise agreement that could see them working 16-hour days with only two days' break in 19, and rostered days off reduced.

Changes proposed include the removal of more than 150 clauses from the current enterprise agreement that will give management unrestricted flexibility on rosters, reduce job security by making it easier to make a worker redundant and bring in part-time work. At least 1,500 workers are affected by the agreement.

Queensland rail workers get approval for strike action ballot

Australia's Fair Work Commission has given permission for controllers at the state-owned Queensland Rail (QR), which operates suburban and long-distance passenger services in Queensland, to hold a ballot to decide on "protected" strike action. The Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has now applied for station and maintenance staff to be included in the ballot.

The RTBU and QR are in dispute over a new enterprise agreement. The dispute is over job security, company demands for unlimited use of casual and contracted labour and recruitment selection rules. The union also wants a genuine career-path and the backdating of any proposed pay rise.

According to an RTBU spokesman, most rail workers have not had a pay rise since early to mid-2013. QR has offered a 12 percent wage increase over four years. The union wants this backdated to 2013. Strike action could begin in December.

New Zealand power utility workers to strike

Workers from PowerNet and Otago Power Services, which maintain electricity infrastructure throughout New Zealand's South Island, have voted to take industrial action beginning November 30 for a pay increase. The industrial action consists of a ban on overtime. The 113 workers, represented by New Zealand's largest private sector union the E t?, are demanding a 3 percent pay increase. The companies have offered just 1.5 percent.

New Caledonian nickel smelting workers on strike

Several hundred workers at the SLN nickel smelter in the South Pacific French territory of New Caledonia are on strike to protest the pending loss of 60 jobs. The smelter workers are picketing SLN's plant in Noumea, blocking entry to the site. Workers are also protesting the parent company's decision to delay building a new coal-fired power plant for the smelter.



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