

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 December 2015

India: Dismissed Maruti Suzuki workers protest

Hundreds of workers sacked in 2012 from Maruti Suzuki's Manesar plant in Haryana, met in Gurgaon on November 27, to demand the acquittal of their colleagues who have been in jail for over two years. They also called for the withdrawal of arrest warrants against 66 colleagues.

Workers at Maruti's Manesar factory struck work three times in 2011-12 to demand their right to be represented by the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union and for better wages and working conditions. A senior manager, who supported the workers, was killed and several others injured during one of the strikes. Haryana police, using lists supplied by company management, arrested almost 150 workers, including the entire leadership of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union.

Last month's protest in Gurgaon was attended by union representatives from Hyundai, Ford, Toyota and Hindustan Motors working in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, West Bengal and Uttarakhand. The union representatives made no call for united action by Indian autoworkers to defend the victimised Maruti Suzuki workers.

Andhra Pradesh rural health workers demonstrate

Thousands of anganwadi (rural health) workers and helpers from across the Visakhapatnam district staged a sit-down protest outside the Andhra Pradesh Collectorate in Visakhapatnam on November 27 as part of state-wide action demanding the government fulfil promises to raise wages. The A.P. Anganwadi Workers and Helpers Union, which is affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, organised the protest.

The Andhra Pradesh government in August announced it had approved the increase of salaries for its 104,300 anganwadi workers and helpers. As per the enhanced honorarium, anganwadi workers were supposed to receive 7,100 rupees per month, up from 4,200 rupees, and anganwadi helpers 4,600 rupees, up from 2,200 rupees per month. The increases have not been paid.

Indian bank workers issue national strike notice

The All-India Bank Officers' Confederation (AIBOC), representing over 200,000 supervising staff in banks throughout India, is threatening national strike action on December 7. The one-day walkout will be preceded by staff wearing black badges whilst on duty and demonstrations at the headquarters of all banks.

Workers are in dispute over an agreement signed in May by the Indian Banks' Association to immediately resolve long-pending issues, including anomalies in salary increments, Sunday and holiday work and issues related to disciplinary matters and retirees.

An AIBOC representative said that previously settled issues of medical aid and reimbursement of medical expenses for retired employees through insurance had not been implemented.

The AIBOC called the strike after the IBA ignored repeated requests to meet with the union.

Tamil Nadu port workers protest against proposed labour law

On November 27, Tuticorin port workers protested against the Indian government's proposed Major Port Authorities Act. Various unions involved in the protest were led by the Congress-affiliated Indian Trade Union Congress (INTUC). Around 45,000 ports would be affected by this law, which workers claim will lead to privatisation of ports and the elimination of union rights.

Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government employees demand wages

District council employees of Lakki Marwat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which is part of the local government system, have been on strike since November 26 for three months' unpaid wages. On Tuesday, strikers locked all the offices of management and staged a sit-in at the district headquarters complex in Tajazai.

According to the Local Government Employees Federation, workers in other districts throughout Pakistan have not been paid.

Following International Monetary Fund orders, the Pakistan government is implementing various measures to slash the budget deficit. As a result, funds for state-run institutes have been drastically cut and employees are frequently denied monthly wages.

Burmese shoe factory workers on strike

Close to 1,000 workers at the Chinese-owned Tai Yi shoe factory in Rangoon Division's Hlaing Tharyar Industrial Zone have been on strike since November 20 on several issues, including the right to have their union recognised. Workers are protesting outside the factory.

Around 100 strikers travelled to Naypyidaw on Monday to file a complaint at the labour ministry and President's Office. They returned to the factory in the afternoon after a labour ministry official organised a meeting for Wednesday between the workers, employer and government representatives.

About 1,300 workers are currently employed at the factory and nearly 1,000 are members of the Tai Yi Labour Organisation, which formed in 2012 after the 2011 labor law was enacted. Workers at the factory have staged various protests over issues such as unfair dismissal, low daily wages and other issues since 2010. In February the entire factory was shut down when employees walked out to demand a wage increase.

Cambodian tourist industry workers on strike

More than 70 workers from a Korean-owned massage centre in Siem Reap protested outside their workplace on Sunday, after walking off the job on November 27 to demand a basic monthly wage of \$US177 and an annual \$100 health bonus.

A Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation (CFSWF) representative said the workers had been seeking a pay increase from the Alaska Massage Centre since February. They are only paid between \$50 and \$70 per month. A company representative told media that the workers' demand was "illegal" because there was no minimum wage in the service industry under Cambodian Labour Law.

Australian border force workers resume industrial action

More than 500 Australian Border Force (ABF) workers will begin another round of work bans on December 7 in a dispute with the federal Liberal-National government over a new enterprise agreement.

Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members will impose bans affecting cargo and freight at ports, air terminals and international mail centres. The planned industrial action is part of a 19-month pay dispute between 160,000 federal public servants and the government. Many ABF employees were stood down without pay when they applied similar bans in October.

ABF workers have rejected the Department of Immigration's pay offer which effectively cuts their current wages and entitlements and leaves some workers \$8,000 a year worse off.

Australian foreign affairs and trade workers accept inferior agreement

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) employees have narrowly voted 'yes' to the government's last pay offer. Worn down by the CPSU's limited and drawn-out industrial campaign, 58 percent of DFAT employees voted to accept the agreement.

The DFAT offer contains 2 percent annual pay increases over three years but cuts long-standing rights and conditions.

Meanwhile the Department of Human Services (DHS) has cancelled a staff vote on a proposed new enterprise agreement. The department moved the ballot from December 22 to February after "consultations" with staff. In September, 83 percent of DHS staff voted 'no' to their agreement on

offer, which contained annual pay increases of just 1.5 percent in return for reduced entitlements.

Enterprise agreement negotiations covering 118 federal public servants' agreements have been underway since March 2014. Only 4 percent of workers have accepted proposed agreements, leaving close to 150,000 without agreements and their wages frozen. The CPSU and other unions have reduced their original pay demand from 4 percent annual pay increases for three years to between 2.5 and 3 percent with no loss of conditions.

Alcatel communications engineers take action

After three years of failed negotiations, 120 engineers and technical specialist employees at Alcatel-Lucent, which has a \$1.5 billion contract from the federal government to construct parts of Australia's National Broadband Network (NBN), began industrial action for a pay rise on November 30. Action includes rolling stoppages, bans on overtime, callouts, out of office work and some paperwork.

The engineers want between 2 and 3 percent annual pay rises over the next four years, which is slightly higher than the consumer price index rate of 1.08 percent. Professionals Australia said its Alcatel members have not had a pay rise for six years, despite the company signing lucrative contracts with NBN.

Australian parliament cleaners walk out again

Following strike action in June and again in August, contract cleaners at Australia's federal parliament in Canberra walked off the job for a week on Monday over a year-long pay dispute.

The 40 cleaners, who work for Limro Cleaning Services, want their current \$21.10 hourly rate increased to \$22.90. According to the United Voice union, the rise would bring workers into line with the Commonwealth Cleaning Guidelines, which were scrapped in 2014 as part of the Liberal-National coalition government's "war on red tape." As a result, the cleaners' pay has been frozen since 2013.

The government claimed that abolishing the "guidelines" would not reduce workers' pay but cleaners at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade building in Canberra have had their wages slashed by 15 percent or \$6,000 a year. Department of Immigration and Border Protection cleaners have also had their hourly rate cut by \$2. United Voice opposes any unified industrial campaign by its membership.

Queensland coal miners down tools over safety

Miners at Anglo American's Grasstree coal mine, north of Emerald in Queensland's Central Highlands Region, walked off the job on Wednesday over health concerns. The strike erupted after it was revealed that three cases of Black Lung had been detected in three months at Queensland coal mines, a disease thought to have been eradicated in Australia.

A Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) spokesman said resurgence of the disease had sent shock waves through the mining community and workers at other mines would be walking out

in protest.

A report from the Queensland government's Health Improvement and Awareness Committee, shows that local authorities do not have the required qualifications to read and interpret x-rays of coal mine workers, leading to a backlog of 100,000 x-rays to be reviewed. According to the CFMEU, American specialists were used by the recently diagnosed miners because local expertise did not exist.

The CFMEU has not called for immediate air pollution checks at mines or organised further industrial action over the issue. The union has called for a public enquiry and presented nine recommendations to the government, including mandatory regular chest x-rays for miners.

New South Wales transport workers protest against privatisation

Around 300 members from several unions, including the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), among others, demonstrated in Newcastle (140km north of Sydney) on Tuesday to oppose the planned privatisation of the city's public transport. They rallied in Civic Park to protest to New South Wales Liberal Premier Mike Baird ahead of a business luncheon.

The government wants a single operator managing the regional city's buses, ferries, planned light rail system and interchanges. While the unions claim to oppose privatisation, their real concern is that the government uses them to assist in an orderly transfer of workers to their new employers and negotiate redundancy payouts.

New Zealand hardware workers continue strike action

In a long-running dispute with the Australian-owned hardware retailer Bunnings over a new work agreement, 12 Unite union members at the company's Mount Maunganui store on the East coast of New Zealand's North Island walked off the job for two hours on November 28.

The FIRST Union claims that under the current collective agreement Bunnings can only alter start and finish times under mutual agreement with workers. The firm wants to insert a clause that will allow individual store management to modify workers' start and finish times at will.

An overwhelming majority of the Bunnings workforce has voted against the proposed collective agreement, which includes a 4 percent pay rise this year with a further two percent next year. FIRST Union, which represents 850 Bunnings workers throughout New Zealand, has kept industrial action regionalised and limited to ineffective two-hour walkouts and roadside demonstrations.



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