

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 December 2015

## India government hospital nurses protest in Dehli

Around 20,000 nurses from central government hospitals across Delhi demonstrated at Jantar Mantar in the national capital on Tuesday over low wages and poor working conditions. The All India Government Nurses Federation submitted a memorandum to the prime minister.

Nurses were opposing the “retrograde” recommendations of the 7th Pay Commission which they said withdrew major allowances and effectively reduced take home pay. They also called for improved facilities.

## Indian construction workers protest in Orissa

Thousands of construction workers demonstrated outside labour commission offices in Bhubaneswar, the Orissa state capital on Tuesday. They were demanding an immediate pension for all eligible workers, a 5,000-rupee tool allowance every three years, identity cards and speedy processing of pending registration applications. The workers were organised by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

## Retired Andhra Pradesh bank workers protest

Retired bank workers in Andhra Pradesh demonstrated at the Hyderabad head office of the State Bank on Monday over alleged discrimination in pension payments. A representative from the Confederation of Bank Pensioners and Retirees’ Organisations told the media that India’s basic pension is increased in line with Pay Revision Commission rulings.

Retired bank workers’ pensions, however, he said remained the same during their lifetime, and he also alleged that State Bank management had ignored bank regulations. These state that retired bank workers’ basic pension should increase whenever the wages of serving employees are lifted.

## Pakistan: Tribal area teachers demonstrate

Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Fata) teachers protested in Ghalanai in northern Pakistan on Monday to demand a pay increase and promotions. A rally was also held outside the National Press Club in Islamabad while teachers in Kurrem Agency threatened to strike and shut down schools.

The protesters said that while teachers in settled areas in Pakistan were upgraded four years ago, Fata teachers had been ignored. An All Teachers Associations-Fata Mohmand Agency representative said that Fata teachers were not provided with the facilities and incentives other teachers received.

Government authorities have threatened to take disciplinary action against all teachers who are absent from duties. The teachers said the campaign would be extended until the demands are met.

## Pakistan International Airline workers stop work

Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) employees held two-hour stop-work demonstrations in Karachi, Lahore and other cities on Monday and Tuesday in protest against the PIA Corporation Conversion Ordinance which allows partial privatisation of the airline. In Peshawar, PIA employees marched through the streets to the Press Club, blocking traffic on the Sher Shah Suri Road.

The planned privatisation is part of an agreement with the International Monetary Fund for loans to the Pakistani government. The government has restricted funding to PIA for years, forcing the airline to seek funds from the private sector. The joint action committee of the PIA Employees Air League said the privatisation will affect 18,000 employees.

Under the IMF loan deal, Pakistan has agreed to privatise 26 percent of PIA. Media advertising will start before the end of the year and the sale completed by June 2016.

## Daily wage workers in Islamabad education institutions maintain strike

Around 2,000 Federal Directorate of Education (FDE) daily wage teaching and non-teaching staff at over 400 schools and colleges in Islamabad remain on strike after walking out on November 16 to demand unpaid wages and job permanency. Some workers have not been paid for over a year.

Over 600 teachers, which make up the majority in some schools, have not been paid since April. They are only paid 400 rupees (\$US3.85) a day despite their duties and qualifications of master’s degree or above.

The strike follows representations to the government in February and July after the FDE failed to honour commitments to pay the overdue wages.

## **Punjab government clerks walk out**

Government clerks in several Punjab provincial districts walked off the job on Monday and locked their offices before demonstrating outside their respective District Coordination Offices in protest over the provincial government's failure to resolve longstanding grievances.

The government held talks held in March with the Punjab Chapter of the All Pakistan Clerks Association (APCA) and agreed to settle five of the union's claims. This included a time scale for promotion for all staff from grade 5 to 16, a 50 percent salary rise for special education staff, an increase in salary scales on a par with clerks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and an upgrade for superintendents' positions.

Clerks have been holding ad-hoc demonstrations in several cities since August. An association spokesman said the government had failed to act on their agreement and then failed to honour another commitment to resolve workers' demands by mid-July. The government also promised to increase salaries by an additional 5 percent in line with the salaries of clerical staff in other provinces, lift the minimum salary of the Zakat and Ushr department staff from 9,000 rupees (\$US88) a month to 12,000 rupees and revise pay scales after merging the ad-hoc allowances with the basic salary.

## **Faisalabad power-loom workers protest again**

Power-loom workers in Faisalabad held another protest march on December 11 because the district government committee formed in September to resolve outstanding demands had failed to convene a single meeting.

Some 5,000 operators of 25,000 textile power-looms held the march on September 17 and demonstrated outside the chief minister's house after members of the Council of Loom Owners Association shut down their factories in August. The loom owners accused the operators' union, the National Workers Movement (LQM), of "extortion" by organising strike action.

The LQM has been running a campaign over wages, safety and the provision of social security cards. Workers also want the owners to employ additional workers to oil, clean and load the machines, which they claim is mandated in a legal agreement.

## **Cambodian garment workers strike**

Hundreds of garment workers from factories in Phnom Penh and Kandal province are on strike over fixed contracts and working conditions.

One hundred Winnie Fashion workers in Kandal burned car tyres outside their factory on Monday during a demonstration. They had been on strike since December 3, in protest over poor working conditions and the company's hostile attitude towards unions.

Some 150 workers from Congress Holdings (Cambodia) Garment Factory in Phnom Penh's Meanchey district on Monday demanded that their company provide unlimited duration contracts, as opposed to fixed contracts, provide 3,000 riel (\$0.75) daily lunch allowance and adherence to the labour law.

## **Seafarers on the MV Portland continue defying court orders**

Nineteen crew members of the aluminium cargo ship MV Portland continue to ignore Fair Work Australia court orders to end an on-board strike and to sail the vessel on its last voyage. The strike has been declared "illegal" and workers' pay has been stopped.

The ship has remained at Portland harbour in western Victoria since November 16. At least 40 crew members face the sack when 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 in the past 18 months, involving the destruction of more than 100 jobs.

Just as it did with the Hutchison Port dispute, the Maritime Union of Australia has isolated the MV Portland strike and offered to negotiate the job cuts. The union has directed the workers' determination to defend the jobs into animosity against foreign seafarers and appealed to the federal government to tell Alcoa to revoke its decision to have a foreign-crewed ship move its cargo.

## **Western Australian public hospital staff strike**

Nurses, cleaners, orderlies, physiotherapists and occupational therapists at two major public hospitals in Western Australia stopped work on December 2 to protest budget cuts by Premier Colin Barnett's state Liberal government that could see the loss of 70 hospital jobs.

United Voice members from the Royal Perth Hospital and Fremantle Hospital, 19km south-west of Perth, said the job destruction follows those cut earlier this year when the Fremantle emergency department was shut down. Health workers accused the state government of deliberately under-utilising the Fremantle Hospital while the new Fiona Stanley Hospital in Perth was at capacity.

In October the Western Australian government declared that the state's health system would face significant job cuts over the next eight months as the Health Department slashes costs in line with national funding cutbacks. Up to 1,000 health jobs are expected to be eliminated.

## **South Australian family support workers lift work bans**

Some 500 Public Service Association (PSA) members at Families SA, which is a part of the state's education and child development department, lifted work bans this week and called off planned strike action after meetings between the PSA and the state government. The bans which were imposed on November 22 were over concerns about staff shortages and mounting workloads. The Department for Education and Child Development has agreed to set up workload tools and assess contract employees for permanent positions.

Families SA employees have been under intense scrutiny over a series of child protection failures. Workers are concerned staff shortages have meant that thousands of calls to the Child Abuse Report Line go unanswered each year. Over 85,000 emergency calls for help were not answered in the past four years. Families SA only has 1,800 fulltime equivalent employees.

## Victorian firefighters protest

More than 1,000 firefighters marched through Melbourne to the Victorian state parliament on Monday to demand that the Labor government finalise a new pay agreement. A United Firefighters Union spokesman said members were angry because Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews promised firefighters before the last election that their pay claim would be resolved if he was elected.

The union has been negotiating with Labor and the former Coalition Government for over two-and-a-half years. The most recent pay increase offer of 14 percent over three years was knocked back by firefighters because they have not had a pay rise in six years.



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