

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 January 2016

Cambodian garment workers take wildcat strikes

Thousands of garment workers are either on strike or have been locked out since last week in several special economic zones (SEZ) in the Svay Reing province border town of Bavet.

On December 17, about 30,000 garment workers walked out on a wildcat strike in the Manhattan SEZ over an insufficient increase in the national garment sector minimum wage.

The strike quickly spread to include thousands of workers in other SEZs who had demanded that the current monthly minimum wage of \$US128 be increased by \$20 in 2016. The union had agreed to a \$12 increase. On Tuesday management of plants not on strike locked out over 30,000 workers.

The main unions covering Cambodian garment workers, including the Collective Union Movement of Workers (CUMW), offered to assist police, declaring that the strike action was not endorsed by the union. The unions publicly declared that they were willing to work with police to “take measures to cool the situation.”

Phnom Penh garment workers walk out

About 500 garment workers at the Mastex Incam factory in Phnom Penh's Por Sen Chey district went on strike on December 24 to demand better working conditions and benefits.

The garment workers accused the company of violating their rights under Cambodia's labour law and that their representations to the ministry of labour had been ignored. They are demanding holiday eligibility, no forced overtime without pay, a 75-cent lunch allowance and free maternal health checks.

Hong Kong: Virgin airline cabin crew strike

Fifty-one cabin service supervisors and senior cabin crew from Virgin Atlantic in Hong Kong took strike action from December 21 until New Year's Day in protest against job cuts at the airline. The industrial action affected flights between Hong Kong and London.

A Virgin Atlantic Hong Kong Cabin Crew Union representative said the maximum redundancy payout offered to some staff was \$HK80,000 (\$US10,380) while 14 employees received no compensation after the company used the MPF (mandatory, privately managed, fully funded contribution scheme [superannuation]) offsetting mechanism. Many have worked for the company for between eight and twenty years. At least two-

thirds of Virgin's staff in Hong Kong are affected.

Virgin Atlantic stopped flights between Hong Kong and Sydney in May last year and dismissed half of its 158 Hong Kong cabin crew. In June, the British airline announced it would cut about 500 support and managerial jobs at its various global bases. The Hong Kong workers said that Virgin had not offered them the option of part-time work or reduced seniority as it did with their British staff.

Bangladeshi tea estate workers on strike

Several thousand workers at 24 tea estates in the Moulvibazar district have joined with 15,000 workers from the Habiganj district who have been on strike since December 14 to protest against a government plan to acquire hundreds of hectares of land leased by the British-owned Chandpore Tea Estate. The workers are demanding the government scrap plans for a special 207-hectare economic zone on agricultural land owned by the estate which tea workers' families cultivate for their own survival.

The government wants to develop five special economic zones to attract foreign and domestic investors. The Bangladesh Tea Labour Union has threatened to extend the strike to all 164 tea gardens nationally if the government did not withdraw its plan by December 28.

Punjab anganwadi workers protest

Several hundred anganwadi workers from the Amritsa district in Punjab rallied in Amritsa city on December 22 to demand a 15,000-rupee (\$US227) monthly minimum wage. A representative from the Anganwadi Employees Union said government funds for their work had been cut and their honorarium of just 5,000 rupees was rarely paid on time.

Their action was part of a state-wide campaign for higher wages launched in Sangrur district on December 11 when over 1,000 anganwadi workers demonstrated in Sangrur city. Workers are also demanding better amenities, permanency and payments similar to central government employees and a strengthening of the integrated child development scheme (ICDS).

A union official told the media that the central government is supposed to provide 60 percent of the funds for the ICDS and the state governments the remaining 40 percent. The Punjab government, however, claims that it does not have any money for the scheme.

Punjab public works employees protest

Public Works Department (PWD) workers protested outside the post office in Bathinda on December 31 to demand permanency for casual staff, a pension scheme, promotions and the payment of outstanding wages. The PWD Field and Workshop Workers Union said it will hold another protest on January 11 if workers' demands were not met. The action is part of a long-running campaign over these demands.

In June, thousands of workers of the Casual Labourers and Need Based Workers Union from all state departments, including the PWD, demonstrated in Rajouri to demand job permanency, a special position created to ensure the regular payment of wages and release of all outstanding wages in all departments.

A Punjab Government Contract Employees Joint Action Committee spokesman accused the SAD-BJP government of not keeping election promises contract workers would be made permanent. The spokesman said many contract employees have been working for meagre salaries for the past twenty years.

New Delhi municipal workers protest

North Delhi Municipal Corporation workers protested on December 21 to demand payment of months of outstanding wages. Workers of various departments decided to demonstrate for two hours each day until December 28 when they would hold a 24-hour strike if their demands were not met.

Workers from two other municipal corporations in Delhi are facing the same wage issue and also threatened to strike on December 28. They have been holding strikes and protests since October over the issue. East Delhi owes its 14,000 workers \$US30 million or more than \$2,000 each. Municipal sanitation workers earn between \$5 and \$10 a day.

Goa state lifeguards on strike

Some 600 lifeguards who patrol the 105-kilometre coastline of the west-coast Indian state of Goa walked out indefinitely on December 29 to demand permanency. The workers are employed by contractor Drishti Lifesaving Services Private Limited.

Over 360 strikers were arrested when they held a street demonstration to protest against the government invoking the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) that makes the lifeguards' strike action illegal. The company has deployed employees from other states to Goa to maintain beach patrols.

Uber and Ola cab drivers in Kerala end strike

Uber and Ola cab drivers affiliated to the All Kerala Online Taxi Drivers Union called off a planned three-day strike on January 1 after the companies' management agreed to consider their demands in a meeting to be held with the government on January 4. The drivers were protesting against cuts to weekly wages and the withdrawal of various incentives.

One driver told the media that while the companies initially offered a package of 12,500-rupee weekly, this had been unilaterally revised several times. The union claimed that 2,756 of the total 3,107 registered online taxi drivers working for Ola and Uber cabs participated in the strike.

Pakistan International Airline workers continue protests

Pakistan International Airline (PIA) workers are continuing demonstrations begun on December 7 to oppose the government's plan to restructure the airline under the PIA Corporation Conversion Ordinance which allows private ownership of the state-owned airline. Protests at Karachi airport delayed several flights last Monday and shut down work at the company's head office. Similar protests were held at Faisalabad airport. Demonstrations and work bans occurred at other airports and PIA offices. Pilots, cabin crew, engineers, ground staff and other employees were involved in the action.

Despite the wide participation by PIA employees, the unions have minimised all action and issued appeals to the government to repeal the ordinance.

Pakistani tribal region teachers strike

Government school teachers from Kohat in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are continuing a partial boycott of duties begun two weeks ago to demand pay increase and promotions that are applicable in other areas. The teachers said that although teachers in settled areas throughout Pakistan were upgraded four years ago, the FATA teachers had been ignored.

They also accused the government of not providing security or remote district allowances. Similar protests are taking place in other FATA districts.

Karachi school teachers protest over unpaid wages

Over 100 appointed Junior School Teachers in government schools in Karachi blocked a road leading to Sindh Secretariat on December 22 in protest over non-payment of salaries. They were among 750 teachers who were appointed in October and December 2014.

While teachers protested in November the government has continued to ignore their demands. Authorities have attempted to justify the delay, claiming each of their records have to be verified before the wages can be paid.

Sri Lankan water utility workers stop work

Following a two-day work-to-rule campaign and ban on overtime duties, National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB) workers struck for three hours nationally on December 28. A demonstration was held outside the utility's main office in Ratmalana, on the outskirts of Colombo. Workers were protesting against cuts to the annual bonus, from 37,000 rupees to 25,000 rupees this year.

The Water Supply Trade Union Joint Alliance called off all industrial action the following day after claiming they were told that the workers' demands for full restoration of the bonus would be met.

New Zealand: Auckland bus drivers stop work

Close to 500 bus drivers and service staff in Auckland stopped work for two hours on December 22 to discuss a company pay offer that they say falls short of their claims on both wages and working hours. Workers voted overwhelmingly to give the Auckland Tramway Union and First Union negotiators the power to call a strike in February.

Union officials agreed to keep enough drivers at work to minimise disruption and signalled they were hopeful of a return to the bargaining table before Christmas.

Negotiations between the unions and NZ Bus began in April. The unions want a 2.95 percent pay rise but NZ Bus has offered just 0.75 percent. Drivers are also opposed to major roster changes the company introduced in July that put 80 percent of drivers on rotating shifts; the unions want that limited to 40 percent.

NZ Bus had earlier refused a request to keep paying those who attended the stop-work meeting, after failing to reach agreement with the unions on rostering enough drivers to maintain normal services. Although a section of drivers wanted to strike for the day the union leadership ensured that most buses were off the road from 11 a.m., and normal operations resumed at 3 p.m.

The unions have stopped any further action until the Employment Relations Authority makes a ruling on a legal challenge to the new rosters. NZ Bus has refused to resume negotiations until late January.

Municipal waste workers strike over health and safety

Five rubbish and recycling collection workers in Greymouth on the west coast of New Zealand's South Island walked off the job on December 21 over stalled collective agreement negotiations. First Union alleged that their employer, Australian contractor Subloos, which has an eight-year contract with the district council, has refused to negotiate on safety issues. Workers claimed that their collection trucks are not road worthy. One said he had refused to drive a rubbish truck because it had no certificate of fitness.

A union spokesman said there are "a range of concerns," including the company's lack of good health and safety policies and procedures and lack of protective equipment. Workers complained that they have to purchase their own protective equipment.

Fresh produce supply workers on strike

Thirty employees of Freshmax, the fresh produce provider for the Countdown supermarket chain, walked off the job on December 23 over poor pay and working conditions. Employees alleged that the subcontractor refuses to let them work standard eight-hour days and often demanded 16 hours a day.

They complained that other workers in the same company, but not involved in Countdown's supply chain, are paid higher wages and have secure hours of work. Striking workers said they would not return until they can improve their conditions.

Allied health workers at three District Health Boards (DHBs) in the Auckland region plan to continue strike action in the New Year after prolonged negotiations failed over under-staffing and a proposed new work roster. The Public Service Association (PSA) said strike action would resume if an improved offer was not made by February.

Over 3,000 health workers, including social workers, physiotherapists and occupational therapists, ended two-hour rolling stoppages over a two-week period in November after the DHBs agreed to reopen negotiations.

Health workers are opposed to the Waitemata, Auckland and Counties-Manukau DHBs' joint plan to run clinic and elective services on a seven-day work cycle to compensate for under-staffing caused by funding cuts. They want to fund the extra hours worked by forcing new recruits to sign inferior contracts. The health workers are currently paid double time for weekend work after midday Saturday. The DHBs want to establish "sector-standard" time-and-a-half weekend rates for new employees. Some 97 percent of workers have opposed the DHBs' plan.

Auckland logistics workers strike

Approximately 20 workers from Toll Logistics Nike distribution centre in Auckland walked out on December 22 over poor pay and to protest the company's excessive use of labour hire employees. The company uses approximately 70 labour hire employees who receive minimum wages and no secure hours. A spokesman from the First union said that Toll workers were paid below the industry standard and that the company had failed to honour a previous agreement to minimise the use of labour hire workers.

The workers ended a one-day strike in October after Toll agreed to reopen negotiations on the new collective agreement which included an 8 percent pay increase over three years and back pay.

NZ Bus operates the city's largest bus fleet. Pay talks involving several other city bus fleets are also up in the air, as operators prepare competing bids for Auckland Transport's proposed new route network, in what could see a race to cut costs at the expense of wages.

Vanuatu resort workers walk out

Around 100 workers at the Warwick Le Lagon holiday resort in Port Vila, Vanuatu walked off the job for six hours on December 24 over various unresolved claims following their strike notice issued in July. A Vanuatu National Workers Union (VNWU) representative accused management of not implementing the measures set out in the Collective Bargaining Agreement or Collective Employment Agreement. He said the main issues were severance pay, end of year bonus and the sacking of a work colleague.

The Department of Labour has called a meeting between workers and management for January 6.



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