

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 January 2016

Asia

Bangladeshi tea estate workers strike

Workers at the Brahmanbarhia, Habiganj, Sylhet and Moulvibazar tea gardens in Bangladesh's north-east struck on January 9 to demand the government scrap plans to establish five special economic zones on land attached to the estates. The land is currently cultivated by tea workers' families to provide food and supplement their meagre incomes. The latest walkout follows a one-week strike last month by thousands of plantation workers in the Moulvibazar and Habiganj districts over the issue.

Habiganj workers have threatened indefinite strike action and to block the Dhaka-Sylhet Highway if their demands are not met during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's planned visit to Sylhet on January 21. Tea estate workers in the north-eastern districts have been stopping work for two hours each day to oppose the government's plan.

India: Bank workers hold national strike

Over 600,000 public sector bank employees walked off job for the day throughout India on January 8. They were protesting State Bank of India (SBI) attempts to force unfair work practices on its five associate banks—the State Bank of Mysore, State Bank of Patiala, State Bank of Hyderabad, State Bank of Bikaner and Jaipur, and State Bank of Travancore.

Bank workers fear that the imposition of uniform service conditions between SBI and its associate banks is a further step towards a merger. The strike was called by the All India Bank Employees' Association.

India: New Delhi sanitation workers call indefinite strike

Following three months of limited strikes and protests over unpaid wages and other issues, sanitation workers from over 20 unions in New Delhi have called an indefinite strike for January 27.

The sanitation employees walked off the job in October and have been holding a protest hunger strike at the Jantar Mantar astronomical park in the city since December 1. They are demanding regular payment of wages and all outstanding salaries, permanency for daily wage workers, and promotions. Sanitation workers walked out three times last year, including a 12-day strike in June, over these issues.

Other workers, including teachers, nurses and engineers, from all three

municipal corporations of Delhi are facing the same issues. 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 lifeguards maintain strike

Some 600 lifeguards who patrol the 105-kilometre coastline of the western Indian state of Goa are continuing strike action begun on December 29 to demand permanency and a wage increase. They are employed by contractor Drishti Lifesaving Services Private Limited.

Over 360 strikers were arrested when they held a street demonstration against the government's use of the Essential Services Maintenance Act to ban the strike. The company sacked the striking workers and deployed employees from other states to maintain beach patrols. It has begun advertising for new recruits.

On January 8, the lifeguards rejected an offer from Goa's chief minister to lift salaries by 2,500 rupees, reinstate the sacked employees by February 15 and form a "high level committee" to investigate demands for job permanency and raising wages to 21,000 rupees (\$US314) per month. The lifeguards, who are being represented by the All India Trade Union Congress-CPI, decided to remain on strike after the chief minister refused to put the offer in writing.

Punjab water and sanitation contract workers protest

Water utility and sanitation services contract workers demonstrated in Jalandhar on January 10 as part of a state-wide campaign for job permanency. The demonstration was held after the government advertised new jobs in the local press. The Water Supply and Sanitation Contractual Workers Union wants long-term contract workers to be absorbed into the permanent workforce before anyone else is employed.

Uttarakhand health centre workers strike

Workers at four Community Health Centres (CHC) in Uttarakhand have been on strike since January 10 to demand all unpaid wages. The CHCs in Dehradun, Tehri and Uttarakhashi are private-public partnership enterprises managed by Rajbhra Medicare Private Limited. They service over 30,000 people. Rajbhra Medicare claims that the state health department owes it 29 million rupees (\$US43,300) and that this has

caused the delays in salary payments.

Health workers told the media that it was not the first time they had been forced to strike over unpaid wages. They want the government to take over management of the CHCs.

Tamil Nadu university workers maintain protests

Employees and students at the state-run Madurai Kamaraj University in Tamil Nadu have been protesting since January 4 over several demands. These include job permanency for temporary workers, cuts to their workload, the filling of all vacant positions and the creation of additional jobs, and basic amenities for students. The students do not have toilet facilities.

Chennai port lorry drivers strike

Lorry drivers and cleaners at the Chennai port facility in Tamil Nadu stopped work on January 8 to demand improved facilities at the gate and inside the premises to ease congestion. Up to 4,000 lorries wait everyday on the road leading to the port causing major traffic congestion. The strike was called by the Anna Labour Union.

Telangana bank workers on hunger strike

Andhra Pradesh Grameena (Rural) Vikas Bank employees have been on a protest hunger strike since December 29 in Warrangal. They want the same pay scales as other commercial banks, gradual increments for new employees, 15,000 rupees minimum pay for daily wage workers, low interest rates for employees and sabbatical leave for women workers. The protest is coordinated by the Andhra Pradesh Grameena Vikas Bank Officers Association and Andhra Pradesh Grameena Vikas Bank Employees Union.

The Indian government, following a Supreme Court Order, directed bank management to ensure that the wages and allowances of rural bank staff were the same as the commercial banks. Andhra Pradesh Grameena (Rural) Vikas Bank management has ignored the directive.

Australia and the Pacific

Tugboat engineers on Australia's east coast walk out

Shipping came to a standstill on Tuesday in the ports of Newcastle, Sydney and Geelong when tugboat engineers walked off the job for 12 hours in a dispute for a new enterprise agreement. Engineers in Brisbane and Melbourne struck the following day. The previous agreement expired on December 31.

The dispute between the Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers (AIMPE) and operator Svitzer Australia is over the company's attempts to bring engineers into the same agreement as deckhands and

tugboat skippers, who are represented by the Australian Maritime Officers Union and the Maritime Union of Australia. These unions have accepted the company's proposal for a four-year combined enterprise agreement.

The tugboat engineers are concerned that hard-won conditions and entitlements specific to their duties and qualifications will be traded away by the other unions. They want to remain in a separate agreement.

Protesting seafarers ejected from cargo ship in Victoria

Security guards mounted a midnight raid on Wednesday, forcibly removing seafarers occupying the Alcoa aluminium cargo ship MV Portland. The two-month occupation and strike began in November when 19 crew members took strike action and refused to leave the vessel. The ship was to be sailed from the western Victorian port to Singapore and replaced by a foreign-flagged vessel with an alternative crew.

After defying several court decisions declaring the strike "illegal" and ordering the workers to leave the ship, the ship owner Alcoa sacked the strikers on Wednesday. They were ejected by private security guards and replaced with a new crew which sailed the ship out of the harbour. 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 have demonstrated their determination to defend their jobs, the Maritime Union of Australia has consistently isolated protesting workers and deflected their concerns into nationalist appeals to the government whilst encouraging animosity against foreigner seafarers.

Queensland paint workers locked out

More than 100 workers at the Brisbane plant of paint manufacturer Dulux were locked out on Tuesday after they voted to go on strike following the company's refusal to remove a cap on redundancy entitlements in a proposed enterprise agreement. Dulux has installed temporary fencing outside the factory, which is located in the Brisbane suburb of Rocklea, in an attempt to stop workers forming a picket line.

The United Voice union and Dulux have been negotiating a new enterprise agreement for several months. The company claimed that its offer of 3 percent annual pay increases and "no adverse changes to conditions" was fair but workers want the 20-year service pay-out cap on redundancy removed. Most workers have been at the plant for more than 20 years.

Dulux is opening a new factory in Melbourne in 2017 and plans to axe at least 40 jobs at Rocklea as a result. United Voice, which has isolated the locked out employees, has made clear that it has no opposition to the job destruction.



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