

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 February 2016

Chinese construction workers protest

On February 2, over 100 migrant construction workers from a new residential complex surrounded a government building and blocked highways in Qianjiang, in central China's Hubei province, to protest unpaid wages. Riot police deployed to the site broke up the demonstration after three days.

According to Radio Free Asia (RFA), hundreds, possibly thousands of migrant workers were being left stranded and penniless, unable to travel home to spend the Lunar New Year with their families because employers failed to pay their wages. Workers told RFA that protests had broken out at struggling factories around the country as workers tried to put pressure on bosses to pay salaries often several months in arrears.

Hong Kong building workers strike over unpaid wages

Some 60 construction workers staged a spontaneous walkout and occupied an intersection in North Point in Hong Kong's Eastern District on February 4. Workers alleged that they were owed 1.5 months of wages by project contractor Tak Cheong Civil Engineering, amounting to a total of \$HK3 million (\$US390,000).

The building workers said they had expected payment before the Lunar New Year, as usual, so they could return home for the festival. In the afternoon, the workers negotiated with the main contractor and the incident ended when the firm promised to pay the wages in full.

Cambodian shoe factory closed after mass fainting

In what has become a regular occurrence in garment factories across Cambodia, over 30 female workers at a footwear factory in Kandal province collapsed on the job on Monday and Tuesday. Authorities blamed poor ventilation combined with chemical residue from pesticides sprayed to protect the shoes they were making for export. Workers were wearing surgical masks at the time of the incident. The factory owner stopped production and sent the remaining workers home for an unspecified period.

The Or Sambath Trading garment factory in eastern Prey Veng province was closed for four days in November following the hospitalisation of 22 workers from suspected work-related causes. All

22 fainted at their work stations and one later died in hospital. In December, workers at a garment factory in Kampong Speu province refused to re-enter their plant after 100 workers collapsed from chemical fumes.

Mass fainting at Cambodian garment and shoe factories is common and usually caused by poor health, unsafe working conditions and bad ventilation, combined with exposure to dangerous chemicals used in production and to protect materials from vermin and insects. At least 600 garment factory workers fainted in the first six months of 2015 with about 900 collapsing over the same period in 2014.

India: Delhi municipal workers suspend strike

Union leaders of thousands of striking workers in the three municipalities of Delhi suspended their two-week long strike on Monday after they were assured in the New Delhi Court that pending salaries had been released and would reach them before the end of the week. A court hearing was due to begin on February 10 to discuss other outstanding issues.

Over 150,000 workers from New Delhi, East Delhi and South Delhi municipal corporations, including teachers, para-medical staff, administrative staff, engineers and sanitation workers, struck on January 27. They were demanding immediate payment of three months of outstanding wages, salary increases, permanency for contract-based employees and unification of the three corporations in the city.

Some of the 40 unions involved in the strike refused to order their members back to work, saying that they should wait for a satisfactory outcome from the pending court hearing.

Tamil Nadu government workers strike

Over 200,000 Tamil Nadu government workers launched an indefinite strike on Wednesday with a 20-point charter of demands. The walkout was called after talks with the state-government and the Tamil Nadu Government Employees Association failed. Workers wanted a new pension scheme scrapped, pay-scale parity with central government employees and the filling of vacant positions.

Chennai garbage collectors protest

A group of temporary garbage workers in Tamil Nadu's capital Chennai stopped work for the day on February 5 to demand full wages and housing facilities. Around 4,000 daily-waged workers are employed in the city to collect refuse. They complained that they were not paid their full daily rate of 297 rupees (\$US4.34).

Other demands included repairs to compactors and trucks, permanency for 900 muster-roll workers and payment of wages on time.

Pakistan: Sindh health workers continue opposition to privatisation

On Tuesday, scores of paramedics from different parts of Sindh province demonstrated outside the Karachi Press Club against the proposed privatisation of over 200 health facilities in the province. Members of the Pakistan Paramedical Staff Association (PPSA) demonstrated in January over the issue after doctors and paramedical staff at the Dadu Civil Hospital walked out on January 5.

The PPSA alleged that the Sindh government is privatising the operations of 219 government hospitals in 24 districts throughout the province in an attempt to reduce staff and force patients to pay for treatment. Workers demanded that the government stop the privatisation and meet the chronic shortage of staff and medicines.

South Australian disability care workers protest

About 150 workers from Minda Inc., South Australia's largest non-government disability services provider, demonstrated outside the company's North Brighton facility in Adelaide on February 6 in a dispute over a proposed new enterprise agreement. The United Voice (UV) union has been in negotiations for a new agreement with Minda since April.

Workers want 2.5 percent annual pay increases with no loss of conditions. A union spokesman said Minda offered increases as low as 1.5 percent and significant reductions to conditions and take-home pay.

A Minda representative declared that the company had to become more competitive with other service providers, following the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Under the former Labor federal government's NDIS, state government-run disability care centres are being closed and private operators invited to build and run new facilities.

New Zealand: Auckland bus drivers work to rule

Following a half-day strike last week, Auckland bus drivers began an indefinite work-to-rule campaign on Thursday in their long-running

dispute over pay and conditions with NZ Bus. Metrolink, North Star, Go West, Waka Pacific, City Link and Outer Link services are affected. Drivers claimed that NZ Bus has been increasing working hours without providing toilet breaks.

The industrial action involves drivers strictly following the company rules instead of taking time-saving shortcuts, as is the norm. This includes drivers taking a 10-minute break at the end of each trip and asking passengers to leave the bus while the driver takes a toilet break.

NZ Bus is currently in wage negotiations with Tramways and First Union but no agreement has been reached. The company offered drivers a 1.7 percent wage increase. Meanwhile, at least 240 jobs are at risk after the company lost its contract to operate in south Auckland.

New Zealand meat processing workers refuse to work on public holiday

Affco meat workers defied a management order and took Waitangi Day, the national holiday, off work this week despite threats of disciplinary action. Affco, the country's fourth largest meat processor, sent a letter to staff at its Rangiora, North Island meat plant informing them that a refusal to work on the Monday holiday could amount to an unlawful strike. Not turning up could also amount to serious misconduct and workers being sued for damages, the letter stated.

All but two of the 35 staff covered by the old NZ Meat Workers Union agreement decided to ignore the order and stayed away from work. A union spokesperson said the workers could face "vicious consequences" from the employer for the action.

Industrial law changes contained in the Employment Relations Act Amendment Bill, brought in by the National Party government in 2013, make it harder for workers to take industrial action, allow employers to reduce meal and rest breaks, and remove safeguards on low-paid contract workers when the employer's contract changes.

However, under the new law, if Waitangi Day falls on a Saturday, the holiday is observed on a Monday for workers who do not normally work weekends. Waitangi Day marks the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 between the Crown and various Maori chiefs from the North Island.



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