

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 February 2016

Mumbai auto-rickshaw drivers walk out over fee increase

About 90,000 auto-rickshaw drivers in Mumbai stopped work for one day on February 15 to protest a massive increase in permit fees. Taxi drivers, who also face fee increases, refused to run short routes in support of the striking rickshaw drivers. The auto-rickshaw permit has increased from 200 rupees to 15,000 rupees while taxi permits were increased from 200 rupees to 25,000 rupees.

Auto and taxi drivers have called for all app-based taxi operators like Uber, Meru and Ola to be banned from Mumbai.

New Delhi university teachers strike

Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) teachers in New Delhi have boycotted classes since February 16 in support of students striking against the arrest of JNU student leader Kanhaiya Kumar on trumped up sedition charges. The teachers are holding day-long protests on the campus. Teachers from 40 central universities have been participating in the demonstrations.

Kumar was arrested last week, after being charged with sedition and criminal conspiracy over holding an “event” at the university during which anti-India slogans are alleged to have been raised. He is being held in custody.

Honda motorcycle factory workers on wildcat strike

Around 4,000 workers at Honda Motorcycle and Scooter India’s (HMSI) Tapukara plant in Alwar, Rajasthan, walked out indefinitely on Tuesday afternoon, shutting down all production. The strikers are demanding re-instatement of 10 permanent workers and the re-employment of 400 contract workers whose term had ended. Management refuses to recognise unions at the plant.

The factory produces around 5,000 two-wheelers per day including the popular Activa scooter and Shine motorcycles. HMSI is a major manufacturer in India with plants in Manesar, Haryana, Bangaluru and Gujarat. It has a 26 percent share of the domestic two-wheeler market.

Bangladeshi garment workers demand minimum wage rise

Garment workers organised by the Garments Sramik Front demonstrated in Dhaka on February 11 demanding the Awami League-led government increase the minimum wage for garment workers to 15,000 taka (US\$200) a month. Workers marched to the Minimum Wages Board where they handed a memorandum to the board chairman. They demanded the introduction of dearness allowances until implementation of the next wage board recommendations are implemented.

Garment workers are currently paid a poverty-level minimum wage of 5,300 taka, which the union claims is far below what is required to maintain a family in the city.

The protest erupted after the government raised the salaries of the Bangladesh president, prime minister and other senior politicians, as well as government bureaucrats and public officials.

Bangladeshi jute mill workers resume protests

Alim Jute Mill workers at the Atara industrial area in Khulna demonstrated along the Khulna-Jessore highway on February 10. They were protesting the government’s move to privatise the public sector entity. Their action followed a similar protest in November over the issue.

Production ceased at the plant and 2,000 mill workers were locked out without pay last July after the mill administration was privatised. Workers want production resumed, payment of wage arrears and the private management contract revoked.

Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa paramedics suspend strike

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Paramedics Association has postponed a scheduled February 15 province-wide strike in all medical and health institutions after the government invoked the Essential Services Act. In talks last weekend the government agreed to resolve long-standing issues over a service restructure, approve the Health Professional Allowance and other issues related to the People’s Primary Health Initiative.

The service restructure and transfers of health employees to remote areas, however, was not resolved, including the dropping of action against 140 striking workers. The health secretary declared that there would not be any “back-peddalling on enforcement” of the Medical Teaching Institutions Reforms Act 2015 Act and the transfers.

Health workers, who have formed an 11-member committee to negotiate talks with the government, have threatened to strike if all outstanding issues are not resolved by February 22.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa ad-hoc lecturers end strike

Ad-hoc lecturers in government colleges in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province ended a week-long strike on Monday after the government agreed to meet their demand for permanency. The federal government appointed ad hoc lecturers in 37 colleges in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in 2011. The lecturers said they only received their salaries after three to four months and that their services were extended on a year-to-year basis.

Queensland Catholic school teachers to strike

More than 8,500 teachers in 242 Catholic schools in Queensland plan to take protected strike action on February 25 over a proposed new work agreement. The 24-hour strike will be the eighth stop-work action since the middle of last year. Rallies will be held in 11 cities across the state.

The Independent Education Union (IEU) and the Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) have been in negotiations over a new enterprise agreement since April last year. The QCEC has offered a 2.5 percent pay increase but the union wants a 3.25 percent rise and for the commission to address long-standing pay disparities between Catholic schools in New South Wales and Queensland.

A union representative told the media that some teachers in Queensland's Catholic schools are paid \$6,792 a year less than their New South Wales colleagues. Other issues include workload, preparation time and multimedia work.

Victorian firefighters in mediation for pay equality

After more than a year of failed enterprise agreement negotiations for hundreds of specialised forest firefighters, the Fair Work Commission agreed to mediate the dispute on February 18. The firefighters are employed by Victoria's Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. If mediation fails the dispute will be referred to arbitration.

The Victorian Labor government is refusing to budge on the forest firefighters' long-running claim to be recognised as emergency service workers. A United Firefighters Union (UFU) representative told the media that the firefighters want terms and conditions that reflect the dangerous work they do.

The Victorian government is also locked in a separate dispute over the pay and conditions of workers employed by other fire agencies.

New Zealand: Lockout ends for AFFCO Talley's meat workers

New Zealand's employment court has ruled that AFFCO Talley's lockout of 170 meat workers was unlawful. Workers at the Wairoa plant, on the East coast of New Zealand's North Island, have been locked out without pay for five months, suffering significant financial hardship.

The workers were due to return to the plant in early December, two years after their collective agreement with the company expired. On return they discovered that they had been offered only night work, rather than their original contracts. The court indicated workers should be reinstated on previous terms and conditions.

While the Meat Workers Union hailed the end of the lockout as a victory, the union steered the dispute into the court in order to prevent the outbreak of industrial action across all AFFCO plants.

Auckland bus drivers strike

Bus drivers working for two separate employers in the city of Auckland, on New Zealand's North Island, planned to strike for 24 hours at 4 a.m. yesterday. The drivers are employed by NZ Bus and Howick & Eastern under contract to the government authority Auckland Transport. They make up about 70 percent of the city's bus services.

NZ Bus is currently in wage negotiations with Tramways and FIRST Unions but no agreement has been reached. The company offered drivers a 1.7 percent wage rise, taking hourly rates to \$20.75. The unions want \$21 an hour. NZ Bus drivers began work-to-rule action last week.

Howick & Eastern drivers have accused the company of trying to reduce wages in their new agreement. A FIRST Union spokesman accused the company of attempting to reduce pay for weekend work and overtime in order to maintain its contract with Auckland Transport.

NZ Bus and Howick & Eastern Buses recently lost their contracts in South Auckland after Auckland Transport selected Ritchies and Go Bus as the preferred tenders. Both companies pay poorer wages to their drivers than NZ Bus and Howick & Eastern Buses.



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