

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 April 2016

Cambodia: Security forces disperse protest against labour laws

Government security forces attacked a demonstration by workers and union officials outside Cambodia's National Assembly building in Phnom Penh on April 4, dispersing participants and causing injuries. The protesters were opposing the introduction of new labour laws.

While the labour legislation still needed approval of the Senate its final passage was certain because the upper house is dominated by representatives of Prime Minister Hun Sen's Cambodian Peoples' Party.

The new laws are aimed at restricting industrial action against poor working conditions, particularly in Cambodia's garment industry, which employs around 700,000 people and is the country's largest export earner. The rules tightly restrict how unions are formed and operate, and increase state authorities' power to dissolve them.

Thugs shoot at striking Philippines banana workers

A group of thugs opened fire on a camp established by striking banana plantation workers on April 2, near Pantukan in the Philippines' Compostela Valley. Eight .45 calibre shell casings were found at the scene of the shooting. None of the union members manning the camp at the time were injured. The incident followed an earlier attempt to burn down the camp.

The banana workers began strike action on March 28 to demand reinstatement of 52 of their colleagues who they claim were illegally dismissed. The strikers are members of Musahamat (Farm 2) Workers Labor Union.

A union spokesman told the media that banana plantation management and the Army's 46th Infantry Battalion were conducting a vilification campaign against the union. He said that the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) had done nothing to prevent an "apparent campaign to silence the workers in Pantukan by any means possible, including murder."

Pakistan police assault protesting teachers

A teachers' demonstration in Karachi was violently attacked by the police using batons, tear gas and water cannon on March 30. The assault occurred as the teachers, who are members of the Sindh Professors and Lecturers Association, approached a police road block near the provincial government's chief minister's residence.

Three teachers, including a female, were badly injured and at least five

were arrested. The police assault was carried out on the orders of the Pakistan People's Party government.

The teachers want payment of long-outstanding salaries and changes to the current promotion system. Around 750 teachers appointed in 2014 under a government recruitment program have not been paid.

Bangladesh: Jute workers on indefinite strike

Striking workers from eight state-owned jute mills in Khulna, Bangladesh blocked the major Khulna-Jessore highway and Khulna-Jessore rail line in a three-day protest that began on Monday. Workers' families have also joined the protests.

Around 50,000 jute workers began an indefinite strike on April 3 for a five-point log of demands, including adequate government funding for the state-owned jute industry, payment of wage arrears, establishment of a separate wages board for the mills and an end to the privatisation of the mills. Security forces were deployed in and around all the mills.

The Oikya Parishad union, which covers workers at the eight mills, called the walkout after the government failed to meet an April 3 deadline on workers' demands. A union spokesman said late payment of wages meant that thousands of jute workers and their families were living "in subhuman conditions, and in abject poverty."

Bangladesh police assault workers fighting for outstanding wages

On Monday police attacked garment workers blocking the Dhaka-Sylhet highway in a protest to demand two months' outstanding salaries. The workers were from the Benetex (Harvest Rich) export factory in Rupganj, Narayanganj, which employs around 1,500 workers. The police used batons and tear gas against the protesters. At least 20 people, including police, were injured during the confrontation.

One of the injured protesters said that all Benetex workers faced serious financial hardship because of unpaid wages. The protesters dispersed after they were assured by a local official that all arrears would be paid by April 10.

India: Jharkhand rural health and child care workers end strike

Rural health and child care (Anganwadi) workers in Jharkhand ended a 27-day strike on April 5 after being assured by state authorities that a

number of their demands would be met.

The workers walked out on March 10 to demand an increase to their honorarium (payment), improved pensions and other retirement benefits on par with their counterparts in other states. They also wanted 135 days' maternity leave and 45 days' abortion leave.

The striking health and child-care workers were told a decision on an increase in the honorarium could not be made at the state level but that the request had been forwarded to the centre. The demand for maternity and abortion leave was granted.

Indian ammunition workers protest for pay and conditions

Ammunition factory workers in Maharashtra, western India, went on strike and held protests from March 30 to April 1 to demand increased numbers of workers at the plant. Management attempted to intimidate the strikers by suspending three workers who played a leading role in the dispute. The strike was called off after management said workers' demands would be met.

In a separate dispute, Hindustan Organic Chemicals Limited employees walked out and protested outside the plant in Kochi on April 2. The chemical workers have not been paid for the past 11 months. Kochi is in the southwest Indian coastal state of Kerala.

Kannur bus workers on indefinite strike

Private bus workers in Kannur, Kerala have been on strike since April 6. They want a 20 percent bonus and a 5 percent ex-gratia payment. The bus operators are refusing workers' demands, claiming that only establishments employing more than 20 workers are required to pay the bonus under a new amendment to the Indian Bonus Act.

The district collector has scheduled talks between the representatives of the bus operators' association and the trade unions at the Collectorate in Kannur. The strike was called by the joint action council of private bus workers' unions which is affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

Karnataka miners demand compensation

Mine workers from the Ballari mine in the Indian state of Karnataka held a 48-hour protest outside the Regional Labor Commissioner's office on April 4. The miners were demanding compensation after being illegally locked out by mine management. The workers are members of the Ballari Zilla Gani Karmika Sangha.

Sri Lankan electricity meter readers demand permanency

Contract workers employed as meter readers by the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) are on strike to demand permanent jobs as promised by President Maithripala Sirisena during last year's election. The meter readers service around 5.5 million households in Sri Lanka. Many of them have been employed by the CEB for more than ten years.

A fasting protest opposite the Power and Renewable Energy Ministry by about 800 workers entered its eighth day on April 6. The workers have been joined by family members. The ministry has blocked protesters from using any of its facilities, including access to drinking water. One protester fell ill and was admitted to hospital.

Sri Lankan port workers demand improved conditions

Hundreds of Colombo Port workers demonstrated outside the facility on April 5 over a slate of demands. These include payment of a festival season bonus, the same pay incentives with workers at the Jaya Terminal and changes to the current recruitment process. The demonstration was organised by the 18 different unions that cover Colombo Port employees.

Teachers in Sri Lanka protest for pay rises

Ceylon Teachers Union members demonstrated outside the Zonal Education Office in Colombo on April 6. They were demanding that promotions be streamlined, as required under the Teachers' Constitution established in 2014, an immediate salary increase and the payment of pensions.

In a separate dispute, teachers, parents and students held demonstrations outside a number of Sri Lankan schools late last month in protest against the forced transfer of school principals.

Australia: Essential Energy workers protest job cuts

On March 31, workers at Essential Energy's call centre in Queanbeyan in south-eastern New South Wales (NSW) rallied outside a state government MP's electorate office to protest the axing of 20 jobs.

The demonstration was organised after management suddenly told employees that they no longer had jobs with the regional electricity distribution company. The call centre workers were also informed that if they wanted to continue employment with Essential Energy they would have to move to Port Macquarie, more than 650 kilometres away.

Essential Energy is a NSW government-owned regional electricity distribution company. Its cuts are part of the state Liberal government's drive to drastically reduce operating costs. Including the Queanbeyan call centre job cuts, Essential Energy has axed over 530 positions since June last year.

New Zealand: Union cancels Auckland health workers' strike

The Public Service Association (PSA) this week called off a four-hour strike planned for April 8 by allied health workers at the Auckland District Health Board (DHB) after claiming to have reached a suitable settlement.

The strike was organised to demand a pay rise and in opposition to staff shortages and management plans to extend five-day services to seven days at regional DHBs. According to the PSU, there were supposed to be an extra 642 staff hired at Auckland's three DHB facilities this year but this

has not happened.

The union has accepted a pay increase of just 2 percent with a further 1 percent from April 2017. The inflation rate in New Zealand is expected to be 1.30 percent by the end of this quarter. There was no settlement, however, on staffing numbers. A PSA bulletin said the union would continue to have discussions with the DHB “around workload management.”



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