

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 April 2016

Asia

Vietnamese shoe factory workers strike over productivity demands

Close to 2,000 workers at the Taiwanese-owned KaiYang Shoes factory, in the northern city of Haiphong, walked off the job for two days on April 14 to protest heavy workloads. One employee said she decided to strike because workers were unable to meet company production targets even after working for 12 straight hours, from 7:00 am to 8:00 pm. Another employee said that workers had repeatedly complained to the company's trade union but the company failed to respond.

Cambodian garment workers protest

More than 400 workers from the Dae Kwang Garment factory in Phnom Penh's Por Senchey district are demonstrating outside the plant to demand unpaid salaries and benefits after the owner shut down operations on April 10. The workers have not received any wages since February.

The owner of the company cannot be located. The workers' union has appealed to the Cambodian labour minister to sell the plant's equipment and give the proceeds to the unpaid workers.

Philippines: Midwives and doctors locked out at Cebu maternity hospital

Midwives, doctors and other medical staff at the Cebu Maternity Hospital in Cebu City have been locked out since January 29. Management closed the hospital following the filing of a notice of strike with the National Conciliation and Mediation Board on January 4 by the Cebu Maternity Hospital Employees Union.

Workers decided to strike after management rejected their wage claim and offered to increase their daily wage by just one peso. The hospital employees, who have not had a pay rise in ten years, demanded a 20-peso (\$US0.43) daily wage increase in 2015 and another 25 pesos in 2016.

The health workers' union is affiliated with the Association of Democratic Labor Organization, which is associated with Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU). Locked out workers are maintaining a protest outside the Department of Labor and Employment in Cebu.

Filipino banana plantation workers gain permanency

Fifty-two sacked plantation workers from Kuwait-owned Musahamat Farms (Farm 2) at Pantukan in the Davao region, have returned to work after management agreed to re-hire them as "regular employees." The 52 workers, some of whom had worked at the plantation for seven years, were sacked after demanding permanency and improved wages and working conditions.

The company revoked all suspensions and promised to pay each suspended worker 1,500 pesos compensation in an agreement with the Musahamat Workers Labor Union and representatives from the National Federation of Labor Unions-Kilusang Mayo Uno.

Bangladeshi jute mill workers end protests

Thousands of workers from eight state-owned jute mills in Khulna returned to work on April 13 after a 10-day strike over wage and provident fund arrears and other issues. Their union, the Oikya Parishad, said that government representatives had promised to clear outstanding wage payments by April 25 and that provident fund and gratuity arrears would be cleared by the cabinet. Security forces were deployed in and around all the jute mills during the strike.

Several thousand workers from the jute mills walked out on April 4 over five demands. These include adequate allocation of funds for the jute industry, payment of arrears, formation of a wage board and an end to government moves to privatise state-owned jute mills. According to the Oiykko Parishad, nearly 80,000 jute workers are living in abject poverty.

Pakistan: FATA government school teachers protest

Government school teachers in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) demonstrated outside the Peshawar Press Club on Monday as part of an ongoing campaign for service upgrades. They are also demanding a risk allowance for working in war-affected areas.

FATA teachers protested in Islamabad and other parts of the country in December over these issues. Demonstrators said that while teachers in settled areas in Pakistan were upgraded four years ago, FATA teachers had been ignored.

A representative from the All Teachers Associations-Fata Mohmand Agency said that FATA teachers were not provided with the facilities and incentives other teachers received. The union has threatened to boycott classes and march to Islamabad if the government does not immediately

respond to teacher's demands.

India: Andhra Pradesh garment workers on strike

Thousands of women workers from ten different units of Brandix India Apparel City (BIAC) at Atchyuthapuram in the Visakhapatnam Special Economic Zone suddenly walked out on strike on April 15 to demand a more than 100 percent pay rise and continuation of the current Provident Fund. Factories affected included Quantum Clothing, Ocean India, Seeds Intimate Apparel, Pioneer Elastics and Shore to Shore. A large police contingency has been deployed in the SEZ.

The workers, who only receive 4,200 rupees per month, want a 10,000-rupee minimum wage.

BIAC is run by Sri Lanka's Brandix apparel group. Management told strikers that the corporate head office in Sri Lanka would decide on their demands by April 30. Workers said they would remain on strike until they are satisfied with the decision.

Police attack garment workers' protest in Bangalore

The Indian government, led by the Hindu supremacist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Congress-led Karnataka state government have mobilised hundreds of state and government riot police to suppress demonstrations by thousands of garment workers.

Nearly 10,000 garment workers demonstrated on Monday at Bommanahalli and Maddur against the government amendment to the Employees Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952, which prevents workers withdrawing employers' Provident Fund contributions until they reach retirement age of 58.

Most workers are unemployed, or do not have permanent work prior to reaching 58 years of age, and rely on withdrawals from the PF to support their families. Police attacked protesters with tear-gas and batons, and carried out multiple arrests after protesters blocked main roads.

The angry demonstrations forced India's labour minister, Bandaru Dattatreya, to withdraw the amendment, telling the media that the "old system will continue." Last month India's Modi government was also forced to revoke its plan to tax withdrawals from the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) following widespread protests.

Karnataka pre-university lecturers and principals forced back to work

Department of Pre-University Education (DPUE) lecturers and principals ended a 17-day strike on Wednesday, after the government issued "show-cause notices" and demanded they immediately report for evaluation duty or face disciplinary action. Up to 15,000 were involved in the strike action to demand higher wages. Under the Karnataka Education Act 1983, lecturers or principals can be charged and face imprisonment for up to one year, fined or both for taking industrial action.

The lecturers and principals walked out on April 5 in a dispute over wages. Karnataka State PU Lecturers' Association members want a basic pay increase from the current 22,800 rupees (\$US344) per month to 25,300 rupees. The DPUE has only offered a 500-rupee increase.

Jammu and Kashmir water utility workers on strike

Several hundred daily wage workers at the Jammu & Kashmir state-run water utility Public Health Engineering (PHE) department have been on strike since March 14 to demand unpaid wages and permanency. Although regular delivery of water to rural areas has been severely affected the government has refused to meet with strikers' representatives.

Many workers have not been paid for 35 months. The PHE Workers' Union want immediate payment of 50 percent of outstanding wages and a written assurance from the chief minister that there will be job permanency. Workers are maintaining a protest outside the PHE head office in Jammu.

Sri Lankan teachers protest

Teachers and education administrators protested outside the Ministry of Higher Education in Battaramulla, on the outskirts of Colombo, on April 20 to oppose alleged political appointments to the Sri Lanka Education Administrative Service and other demands.

Teachers demonstrated outside the Zonal Education Office in Colombo earlier this month to demand an immediate salary increase and promotions to be streamlined. There were also protests against forced transfers and poor facilities at schools by parents and teachers in several parts of Sri Lanka.

Australia and the Pacific

Port workers in Brisbane and Melbourne strike

Waterside workers at the Asciano-owned Patrick Stevedores container terminals in Brisbane and Melbourne stopped work for 48 hours on Wednesday and Thursday respectively as part of a national dispute over a new enterprise bargaining agreement. The stoppages follow a 48-hour strike at the company's Botany terminal in Sydney last week and two 72-hour strikes at the company's Fremantle terminal in Western Australia earlier this month.

Year-long negotiations between the company and the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) have failed to resolve differences over a new rostering system and extended working hours and job security. Patrick has announced it will put a proposed workplace agreement to a vote of employees and threatened it could move to lock out its 850-strong workforce if the ballot does not succeed.

Patrick's proposed four-year pay deal would provide a 1 percent pay rise in the first year, 2.5 percent in the second and 2.75 percent annually for the remaining two years. The vote is expected to run from May 4 to May 9.

A Patrick representative claimed that the MUA's demands for workers at Sydney's Port Botany, including for 32-hour weeks to be paid at a full-time rate, were the main cause of the deadlock.

Australian agriculture security officers walk out

Federal Department of Agriculture and Water Resources workers, including quarantine and biosecurity officers at international airports, sea ports and freight facilities, walked out for 24 hours on Monday in their long-running dispute with the federal Liberal government for a new work agreement.

After two years of negotiations, almost 85 percent of the total federal public sector workforce of 160,000 still do not have a new enterprise agreement. Workers have rejected government enterprise agreement offers that would eliminate existing rights, including family-friendly conditions, in return for a two-year wage freeze and 2 percent annual pay increases over three years.

The Community and Public Sector Union and other unions have reduced their original pay demand from 4 percent annual pay increases for three years to between 2.5 and 3 percent with no loss of conditions.

Essential Energy workers strike

Workers at the New South Wales state-owned power distribution company Essential Energy struck for four hours at over 100 depots and control sites on Wednesday in their dispute for a new enterprise agreement. Workers have also imposed various bans following a four-hour stoppage on April 14 over the issue.

Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members have rejected management's enterprise "offer" that includes the axing of 800 jobs over the next two years and unlimited job cuts after 2018. Last year the company claimed that it needed to shed 2,500 jobs to remain financially viable.

The company also wants to maintain the current ban on re-employing redundant workers within two years except for casual or temporary positions; halve the amount workers are paid when called in for emergencies from a minimum four hours' pay to two; and cuts to the wages and conditions of outsourced contractors.

While the ETU claims to oppose the enterprise deal it has assisted Essential Energy to destroy over 1,000 jobs since 2013. The ETU claimed that Essential Energy also wants to impose a two-year wage freeze.

New Zealand bus unions accepts company deal

Unions representing around 1,000 bus drivers in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, are pushing for members to accept a new contract with NZ Bus. The agreement offers a two percent pay rise backdated to November 2015.

Drivers have been struggling against their employers' proposal to remove overtime and weekend rates for six months, striking both in February and again in March. An Auckland Tramways union spokesman claimed that the new agreement provided "good concessions" from employers but provided no details.

The media reported improvements in work rosters, consultation, sick leave and back pay. The unions will hold stop work meetings to vote on the agreement over the next two weeks.

Carl's Jr fast food workers sacked after rejecting new contract

Seven workers have been picketing a Carl's Jr fast food restaurant in Gisborne, on the east coast of New Zealand's North Island after they were given only one week's notice that they would be sacked. Restaurant Brands New Zealand Limited (RBL), which manages a wide range of fast food chains, recently sold the Gisborne store as a franchise. The new business owner said five of seven existing staff could maintain their present jobs but reduced terms of employment. When workers rejected these terms the company fired them.

Nickel workers protest in New Caledonia

Hundreds of nickel industry workers, accompanied by supporters, marched to key government buildings in Noumea, capital of the French Pacific island colony of New Caledonia, on April 15. It followed a week of protests throughout the country. The workers were demanding increased subsidies for the nickel industry. Nickel is New Caledonia's principal export earner.

In February, SLN nickel smelter workers went on strike after management announced possible job losses, which they claimed were due to a slump in the price of nickel. The Federation of New Caledonian Workers Union (CSTNC) said that while no dismissals had been announced, about \$US6 million would be cut from salary allocations, which could mean the loss of 150 jobs.

Last month the government decided to release \$5.5 million from a special Nickel Fund to maintain exporters' and contractors' profits. It also authorised the export of low grade nickel ore to China to offset exports to Australia following the closure of the Queensland Nickel refinery in Townsville. The refinery used to take all of New Caledonia's nickel ore.

There is also renewed uncertainty over the commitment of the mining conglomerate Glencore to the Koniambo plant in the north of New Caledonia, after the company's head announced a June deadline to decide its future. Glencore has a 49 percent stake in the \$7 billion nickel plant.



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