

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 October 2016

Sri Lankan tea plantation workers on strike

Thousands of plantations workers—the most oppressed section of the working class—have been on strike since September 27, demanding their daily wages be increased from 620 rupees (\$US4.24) to 1,000 rupees. Workers held demonstrations and pickets in 17 cities and towns in the Central and Ura provinces.

In the collective agreement signed in 2013, daily minimum wages were set at 450 rupees. With attendance incentive and productivity targets, they reached 620 rupees. The due date for the next collective agreement was March 31, 2015 but plantation owners refused to negotiate a new agreement.

The plantation companies have since agreed to pay 700 rupees, while the unions said they would settle for 730 rupees, which workers rejected. Workers warned that if they do not receive a solution by October 10, they would resort to indefinite strike action.

Air traffic controllers end industrial action

Members of the Air Traffic Controllers Association suspended a work-to-rule action at three Sri Lankan airports following discussions with the government. Controllers at the Katunayake, Mattala and Rathmalana airports claimed that Airport and Aviation Services excluded them from a salary increase that was implemented in all other departments.

School principals protest

On October 3, acting principals at government schools picketed the Ministry of Education in Battaramulla, on the outskirts of Colombo, demanding permanency. They rejected a meeting with the Sri Lankan education secretary and marched towards parliament. Police set up barricades and deployed water cannon to stop them reaching parliament. Protesting principals maintained their picket near parliament until a government spokesman said the president would “look into the matter.”

India: Honda motorcycle workers’ hunger strike in third week

Five sacked workers from the Honda Motorcycle and Scooter India (HMSI) plant in Tapukara, Rajasthan are maintaining a hunger strike at

Jantar Mantar in New Delhi, begun on September 19. Supporters and work colleagues held a march from Dharuhera in Haryana on September 28, reaching Jantar Mantar on October 1.

The hunger strikers are facing several police charges following a strike at the factory by 4,000 workers in February to demand the reinstatement of over 400 workers and registration of their union, the HMSI 2F Kamgar Union Tapukara. The hunger strikers issued a statement listing three demands: that all suspended and terminated Honda workers be reinstated, all criminal charges be immediately withdrawn and all trade union rights be guaranteed.

HMSI workers have been trying to register their union, without success, since August 2015. Prior to the February strike, the company had systematically sacked over 800 workers accused of involvement in union activity.

Tamil Nadu state transport workers protest

Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) workers protested outside the bus depot in Thirucengodu on Tuesday over the death of a conductor, whom they said was overworked. Workers asked for compensation and action against the officials who did not admit him to hospital on time. Protesters demanded 2.5 million rupees (\$US37,500) compensation be paid to the worker’s family and a job for a family member on compassionate grounds.

Tamil Nadu conservancy workers protest

Conservancy workers (collectors of garbage and sewer cleaners) protested in Erode district on Tuesday to demand better working and living conditions. Their main demands were the filling of positions on par with population growth, job permanency, abolition of the system of appointing contract workers, implementation of the old pension scheme, a fixed minimum wage of 18,000 rupees per month and fixed daily wages for all staff. The conservancy workers’ daily wage is 375 rupees (\$US5.60).

The protest was organised by the Stalinist CPI-affiliated All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC).

MNREGS workers rally in Punjab

Workers employed in the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS) protested in Ludhiana on Monday, blocking the Ferozepur Road at Bharat Nagar Chowk. Workers demonstrated later in front of the deputy commissioner's office, before handing a memorandum to the district administration.

A union spokesman said the government made repeated false promises before each cabinet meeting that their jobs would be made permanent. He said that if the issue was not resolved at the next cabinet meeting, workers would launch a march to meet the rural development minister.

MNREGS workers' jobs are not permanent. They are usually employed for only 100 days, after which another worker is recruited to take their place.

New Delhi government school teachers demonstrate

A large number of government school guest teachers protested outside the Deputy Chief Minister's residence in Manish Sisodia on October 1. Their demands included job permanency, fixed wages and re-appointment of guest teachers who were removed due to transfers.

A teacher said they met with the deputy chief minister in July over their demands but have heard nothing since. Teachers are maintaining their protest at the chief minister's residence and have stopped attending classes.

Pakistan: Police arrest striking oil workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Police in the town of Banda Daud Shah were called to end an ongoing protest by striking workers of the Hungarian-based MOL Pakistan Oil & Gas Company, who were picketing the main gates of the Central Processing Facility Makori, in Karak on September 29. More than 100 workers were arrested. Local residents blocked the Kohat-Bannu Road with burning tyres demanding the workers' immediate release.

The workers have been on strike for several weeks, demanding a wage increase and job permanency. The company called for police intervention, complaining that workers sealed off the entrances, preventing the movement of goods in or out of the plant.

Islamabad teachers boycott classes

Hundreds of daily-wage teachers in Pakistan's capital Islamabad boycotted classes and demonstrated in front of the National Press Club on Wednesday to protest non-payment of their salaries for the past four months. Their action followed rolling four-hour class boycotts begun on Monday.

Over 1,500 teaching and non-teaching staff at various schools and colleges of the capital, employed by the Federal Directorate of Education (FDE) under the ministry of Capital Administration and Development Division (CADD) on daily wages, are demanding regularisation of their services and the release of salaries withheld since June.

Indonesian mine workers on strike

Around 1,200 workers at PT Freeport Indonesia's (PFTI) Grasberg open pit gold and copper mine in Tembagapura, Papua have been on strike since September 28, demanding equal bonus distribution for workers in all departments at the facility. The strikers include heavy equipment operators and truck drivers, causing production at the pit to stop.

A representative from the All Indonesia Labor Union-PFTI unit said workers are opposed to the company's policy for bonus distribution. Open pit workers only get a 17 percent bonus, while other employees receive higher bonuses, up to 45 percent of their salaries. The strike was called after a meeting with management, in which workers demanded a 50 percent bonus, which failed to resolve the issue.

South Korean rail workers walk out

Thousands of unionised workers at the Korean Rail Corporation (Korail) have been on strike since September 27 to oppose the central government's plan to expand a merit-based salary system. Salaries have been set by seniority in the past. Some 7,470 Korail workers, or 40.8 percent of 18,300 employees, are participating in the strike. Rail passenger services in Seoul have been reduced by 10 percent.

Thousands of government employees have been demonstrating in Seoul since September 22 in opposition to the government's proposal. Around 2,000 members of the Federation of Korean Public Industry Trade Unions demonstrated in Seoul last week, while members of the 100,000-strong Korean Financial Industry Union (KFIU) walked out the next day and rallied at the Seoul World Cup Stadium in protest against the expansion of the merit-based pay system in the financial sector.

The walkouts and protests are part of a campaign by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and the Federation of Korean Trade Unions over the pay system.

Cambodian teachers protest

About 200 teachers from across Cambodia gathered at Freedom Park in Phnom Penh on Wednesday to celebrate World Teachers' Day and request that their base monthly salary be increased to 1.5 million riel (\$US375) to keep up with the cost of living. The Cambodian Independent Teachers' Association presented a petition of demands to government officials at the rally. Teachers on the lowest pay scale are currently paid \$200 a month.

Court orders Australian Border Force workers to end strike

For the third time this year, Australian Border Force workers at Australia's international airports, cruise ship terminals and cargo facilities have been ordered by the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to suspend industrial action. On Monday they were forced to end two weeks of 30-minute rolling strike action commenced on September 26, while the FWC tribunal "considers" the matter.

The order was in response to an application from the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) for the suspension of the protected strike action by members of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU).

The strike was part of a long-running dispute with the federal Liberal-National government for a new work agreement. The CPSU called off strike action at international airports in early March following the terrorist bombings at Brussels airport.

On March 28, DIBP staff held rolling stoppages at international airports in Cairns, Townsville, Perth, Darwin and Adelaide. On April 3, the FWC, acting on an application from the government, issued an interim order stopping further action.

More than 80 percent of DIBP staff voted in March against a proposed agreement that would have seen rights and conditions stripped away in exchange for a pay rise of just 1 percent per year. These workers are among the nearly 75 percent of the 160,000-strong federal public sector workforce who still have no new enterprise agreement (EA) after nearly three years of union negotiations. At least 100,000 government employees have had no pay increase for three years.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's government ordered that all federal public sector EAs must cap annual wage increases at 2 percent and be combined with cuts in conditions. There will be no back-pay from when the last EA ended—the equivalent of a three-year pay freeze.



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Queensland bus drivers strike

Sunbus drivers in Cairns, on Queensland's far north coast, walked off the job for 24 hours from midnight on Thursday. Members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) want a 6.25 percent pay increase in a new enterprise agreement but Sunbus has offered just 3.4 percent, in return for productivity increases.

A TWU spokesman said a 3.4 percent increase would mean Cairns Sunbus workers would still be paid well below their colleagues in Townsville and on the Sunshine Coast. Sunbus claimed that the state government authority TransLink does not provide enough funding to meet the drivers' pay demand.

New Zealand government hospital doctors issue strike notice

The New Zealand Resident Doctors Association (NZRDA), representing 3,200 doctors, this week issued strike notices to 20 District Health Boards (DHBs) in a dispute for "safer rosters and safer hours." Junior doctors will strike for 48 hours on October 18, while senior doctors will remain on duty to provide emergency services and operations in life-threatening cases.

Doctors claimed that patients were at risk of misdiagnosis if they continued to work strenuous hours. One doctor complained that at the end of her 12-day shift she was "tired and tearful." She added: "I don't enjoy my job. I stop caring about my patients and just try to get through the day with minimal interactions."

The association wants major changes to rosters. It wants the seven nights in a row roster changed to a maximum of four nights in a row, followed by three days off, and a move from 12 days in a row, followed by two days off, to rosters with a maximum of 10 days in a row and four days off.

Negotiations over hours of work by resident doctors have been under way since January. A previous mediation meeting collapsed on September 13 when DHBs offered minimal changes that would take two years to implement.