

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 December 2016

Korean rail workers' union closes down strike

On Wednesday the union representing 7,500 workers at the state-owned Korean Rail Corporation (Korail) shut down a 70-day strike by its members after reaching a tentative wage agreement with management. The union deal, which betrays Korail workers' demands, will negotiate wages "within the boundary" of government guidelines. Details of the agreement were not made public.

At least 40 percent of Korail workers walked off the job on September 27, reducing about half the nation's freight train capacity. Passenger services in Seoul were reduced by 10 percent.

The workers demanded President Park Geun-hye's government drop plans to expand a merit-based salary system for government employees. Salaries have previously been set by seniority. Although Korail strikers have returned to work they have yet to vote on the sell-out deal. In an attempt to get workers to accept the deal, the union claims it will "continue with their fight against the merit-based pay system."

Bangladesh: Dhaka police attack sacked garment workers

Ten workers were injured when police used teargas and baton-charged a demonstration by over 1,600 garment workers outside their closed factory in Mirpur on Monday. Rezaul Apparels workers were demanding wages and severance pay. Police intervened when the demonstration spilled onto the main road leading to the Mirpur Zoo after workers from neighbouring factories joined the protest.

Workers alleged that factory authorities previously said that the plant would be relocated to Gazipur on February 28. In response workers demanded four-month's basic salary and gratuities as compensation.

On Sunday management promised to pay two-months' basic salary and one gratuity for each working year but when workers turned up on Monday morning there was a closure notice on the locked factory gate and all machinery had been removed.

Later that day the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association organised a meeting with garment workers' leaders and the company, in which the latter said it would pay compensation according to the law.

Bangladeshi port workers end walkout

Burimari land port workers on the Indian border resumed work on Tuesday after striking on Saturday and Monday. They were demanding a

wage increase from the current 31 taka per tonne of goods loaded to 45 taka (\$US0.57). The port workers decided to end the walkout after the labour contractor offered them 39 taka.

Workers claimed that the contractor, who is a Patgram sub-district council official, employs 1,600 workers and is paid 55.64 taka for each tonne of goods loaded. Burimari is the third largest land port in Bangladesh.

India: Andhra Pradesh college contract lecturers on strike

Contract lecturers at government degree and junior colleges and polytechnics walked out indefinitely on Monday to demand permanent jobs. The strike was organised by the Andhra Pradesh Government College Contract Lecturers' Joint Action Committee.

The action committee said that over 260 people had worked as contract lecturers for the past 16 years but that successive state governments had ignored their demands for permanency.

Indian municipal workers protest

Vijayawada Municipal Corporation (VMC) workers in Andhra Pradesh began a relay-hunger strike on December 5 to oppose corporation plans to privatise maintenance work. According to the VMC Employees Union, municipal authorities passed a resolution at a recent council meeting for open tendering of the city's sanitation maintenance.

Workers fear that they could lose their jobs. A union spokesman told the hunger strikers that when Mumbai city privatised sanitation work hundreds of jobs were axed and wages cut or went unpaid.

In Uttarakhand state more than 200 Dehradun city contract sanitation workers responsible for door-to-door garbage collections walked off the job on Tuesday to demand two months' unpaid wages and a pay rise. One worker told the media that after seven years on the job his monthly pay had only increased by 500 rupees (\$US7.4).

Uttarakhand government hospital contract workers strike

Over 1,000 contract workers from the job agency Uttarakhand Purva Sainik Kalyan Nigam Limited (UPNL) walked out indefinitely on December 1 at government hospitals across Uttarakhand in their long-running fight for job permanency. The strike, which follows a week of

two-hour daily stoppages, has affected all major hospitals and regional medical centres.

The striking workers were from all departments, including registration, billing, consultancy, x-ray, ultrasound and pathology. Hospital managements are using medical trainees to maintain minimal services. The strikers hoped that a planned meeting with the state's chief minister on Tuesday would resolve the issue.

Sri Lankan port workers demonstrate

About 500 Magampura Port workers in Hambantota walked out on Wednesday and picketed the port entrance to demand permanent jobs. Workers told the media that they had been employed on a temporary basis for several years. They launched a hunger strike, vowing to continue until their demand is met.

The Sri Lankan government plans to sell the port to the Chinese government. Workers fear that their jobs are threatened if they remain as temporary employees.

Pakistan: Rice mill workers in Larkana strike

Over 4,000 workers at 42 rice mills in Larkana, Sindh province began an indefinite strike on December 3 after wage negotiations broke down the night before. All Larkana rice mills have been closed by the walkout.

The Rice Factories Labour Union and the Rice Mills Workers Union have accused mill owners of reneging a 2014 agreement to increase pay by 40 percent at the end of the wage-contract period. A new contract offered in August by the owners only offers a limited pay rise.

The unions have called for a 20 percent overall salary increase. This amount, however, will not compensate for the drastic cuts in real pay and higher living costs produced by substantial currency devaluations in the past four years.

Punjab college educators strike

Lecturers and professors from government colleges in Punjab province demonstrated in Rawalpindi on Tuesday to oppose the government's attempt to remove salary and increment protections under new contracts and for the repayment of increments paid over several years. The teachers were recruited between 2002 and 2012 and awarded permanent posts at various intervals up until 2015.

The Punjab Professors and Lecturers Association has demanded the government cancels its demand for repayment of paid increments and that it reinstate pay protection, award one-grade promotions to all college teachers and provide decent educational and research facilities.

Rawalpindi government clerks stop work

Over 200 Punjab Education Department clerks in Rawalpindi district stopped work on Monday, locked down the offices and held a sit-in

demonstration to protest delays in promotions. Over 50 clerks are affected by the promotion delays.

Instead of offering to discuss and resolve the issue, an education department official threatened to call the police if another protest was held. The All Pakistan Clerks Association called the strike.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa salt mine workers strike

Karak area salt mine workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province struck work on Monday to demand payment of death and casualty grants and for the provision of safety equipment. They also demanded payment of marriage grants.

A United Workers Welfare Association representative told the media that mine leaseholders were not paying compensation to families whose close relatives had died on the job. He said that ambulance facilities were non-existent and that roads leading to the mines were in disrepair, causing delays in getting injured workers to hospital.

Australian public sector workers begin rolling stoppages

Over 30,000 federal public servants from the Department of Human Services (DHS), which runs Centrelink, Medicare, the Child Support Agency and administers veterans payments, began rolling stoppages this week. The walkouts are part of protected industrial action in a three-year dispute with the Liberal-National federal government over a new enterprise agreement (EA).

DHS staff, including at call centres and customer service centres, struck at various times on Monday and on Friday, and will hold further stoppages on those days next week.

The industrial action follows DHS workers' overwhelming rejection in November, for the third time in 14 months, of the Turnbull government's proposed enterprise agreement. Nearly 75 percent of the 160,000-strong federal public sector workforce have rejected the government's pay offers over the past three years.

On Wednesday workers at the 18,500-strong Department of Defence rejected the most recent pay offer for a third time, this time by 58.4 percent—an increased margin on the previous vote.

The government has ordered that all federal public sector EAs' annual wage increases be capped at 2 percent and that these be combined with cuts in benefits or working conditions. It has also declared that there will be no back-pay from the last agreement, in effect a three-year pay freeze.

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and other public service unions, which have opposed calling unified strike action or mass meetings of their federal public sector members, have reduced their original pay demands from 4 percent annual increases for three years to between 2.5 and 3 percent. As with previous enterprise agreements the unions have offered to assist the government devise new cost-cutting methods.

Victoria: Industrial court outlaws Esso workers' strike

The Fair Work Commission (FWC) on Wednesday issued an order preventing more than 600 Esso workers in Victoria from striking

indefinitely from Friday. The order was in response to an appeal by the state Labor government to the commission to terminate a bargaining agreement between Esso and its workers to stop the industrial action. The government claimed that the strike would cause a gas shortage in Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and New South Wales.

The closing down of industrial action was eagerly accepted by the Australian Workers Union (AWU), the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Electrical Trade Union. An AWU representative told media that the unions wanted to negotiate but failing that they “welcomed” arbitration. Outstanding agreements and issues will involve 21 days conciliation with the FWC, followed, if necessary, by arbitration.

Workers at Esso’s Longford gas plant, the Long Island Point processing and storage plant, and Esso’s Bass Strait gas platforms are in dispute with Esso, the brand name for ExxonMobil in Australia, and partner BHP Billiton, over its plan to replace the current offshore roster of seven-days-on, seven-days-off, which was established when the facilities were first set up, to 14-days-on, 14-days-off in a new enterprise agreement. Negotiations began two years ago.

Esso has been trying to change the rosters for 14 years. An AWU representative made clear that the unions were prepared to negotiate other cost-cutting measures.

CUB workers re-employed after unions back new productivity demands

Unions representing 55 sacked maintenance workers from the Carlton United Breweries’ (CUB) plant in Abbotsford, Melbourne announced on Wednesday that they had struck a deal with CUB and that the workers would be offered their jobs back on “fair and decent union terms and conditions.”

While the CUB maintenance workers have voted to accept the deal, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) have released little information about the return-to-work conditions, which include increased new productivity targets to be enforced by the unions. This was made clear in a statement from CUB which said: “All parties agreed to productivity and efficiency improvements that will be implemented at the brewery.”

In June CUB outsourced its factory maintenance work at its Abbotsford plant to a new contractor Programmed Skilled, effectively sacking its entire maintenance workforce of 32 fitters and 23 electricians. Programmed Skilled offered to reemploy the workers, on a reduced pay rate slightly above the minimum wage. The impact on these 24 hours a day, 7 days a week maintenance workers amounted to a 65 percent reduction in real wages.

The sacked maintenance workers maintained an ongoing picket of the Abbotsford plant and won widespread national support. The AMWU and the Electrical Trades Union opposed a unified national industrial campaign to defeat the attack and initiated a “boycott CUB” campaign. The boycott was to divert attention from the unions’ political isolation of the sacked maintenance workers and thousands of other workers facing similar employer attacks nationally.

Queensland aged care workers protest

Hundreds of aged care workers from Blue Care/Wesley Mission Brisbane, and their supporters, demonstrated outside the Blue Care office

in Brisbane on December 2 in a dispute over a proposed enterprise agreement. Protesters shouted “Blue Care Be Fair” and “Blue Care it’s not too late. It’s time for you to negotiate.”

United Voice union members rejected management’s last proposed agreement which included one-hour and split shifts and contracting of cleaning services. The union has accused Blue Care of refusing to hold further negotiations in an attempt to force the dispute into arbitration.

Blue Care support workers covered by the Australian Workers Union were due to recommence negotiations on December 1.

Canberra childcare workers protest over budget funding

Ten protesting childcare workers chained and padlocked themselves to the entrance of the federal government treasurer’s office on Wednesday demanding that the government increase spending on early childhood education by 1 percent of GDP (gross domestic product). They want their pay rates increased to the level of similar professions.

The United Voice members said they were acting on behalf of the 80,000-strong childcare education workforce, 97 percent of which is female and 70 percent of which has wages set by awards. They pointed out that some qualified educators are paid as little as \$20 per hour—around half the average wage and slightly above the minimum wage of \$17.70 an hour.

New Zealand ambulance workers threaten strike

Some 800 paramedics employed by the government-subsidised ambulance service St John New Zealand have given notice that they will not provide cover for summer events on New Zealand’s North Island leading up to Christmas, in their dispute with St John over a proposed new work agreement. Workers last month rejected a pay rise offer of one percent in return for the elimination of time-and-a-half for extra work which is used to cover under-staffing.

Members of the Ambulance Professionals First, a network within the First Union for ambulance officers in parts of the upper and central North Island, also want other issues, such as single-crewing, prolonged work periods without tea breaks and a lack of skilled paramedics, resolved.

St John’s latest offer includes a 1.25 percent pay increase. The union wants a 2 percent pay rise and the benefits of 11 official public holidays, saying that on average its members are restricted to just seven because of St John’s rostering practices. St John has offered an increase to eight public holidays.

Bus drivers on New Zealand’s North Island strike

Thirty bus drivers employed by Pavlovich Coaches in Hamilton on New Zealand’s North Island struck on Thursday after ongoing negotiations for better working conditions and pay failed. The unscheduled walkout also involved a demonstration outside the city’s Transport Centre with drivers waving placards saying “Stand up and fight” and “Toot 4 support.”

A spokesman from the FIRST union said workers only wanted a 39 cents per hour increase on their current \$18.61 an hour in return for improved entitlements and job security. The spokesman claimed that the

company wanted to maintain the ability to hire and fire drivers at will. Drivers have not had a pay increase for two years.

Pavlovich Coachlines is contracted by the Waikato Regional Council and operates a fleet of 25 buses, including the city's Orbiter service, in Hamilton.



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