

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 December 2016

Pakistan: Karachi police attack protesting steel workers

On Tuesday, police attacked a demonstration in Karachi by hundreds of workers from the Pakistan Steel Mills. Police used tear gas and batons when the demonstration spilled onto the National Highway. Workers were demanding that the government honour its previous commitment to distribute unpaid salaries.

Their action followed several demonstrations in Karachi this year over delayed wages. Protesters on Tuesday said their pay was four months in arrears. Steel Mills is one of the many state enterprises targeted for privatisation as demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

Karachi contract teachers protest

National Commission for Human Development (NCHD) teachers are continuing a demonstration they began on December 6 outside the Karachi Press Club to demand job permanency. NCHD employs over 8,000 people but has only permanently employed 3,000 workers since 2004 despite many of them having 12 years of service.

The Feeder Teachers' Association which called the demonstration charged the Sindh government of reneging on promises to make their jobs permanent. The association also pointed out that under a constitutional amendment in 2010, NCHD teachers were supposed to be given regular positions in the government service.

Rice mill workers' unions close down strike

Over 4,000 striking workers at 42 rice mills in Larkana, Sindh province returned to work on December 7 after their unions accepted a paltry 10 percent pay increase. The Rice Factories Labour Union and the Rice Mills Workers Union called the strike on December 3 accusing mill owners of reneging on 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 offered a limited pay rise. All production stopped during the strike.

The unions had convinced workers to strike on a reduced demand for a 20 percent pay rise but settled on 10 percent increase at talks between the rice millers and the unions mediated by the Larkana Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI).

India: Punjab government transport workers on strike

Punjab Roadways Punbus Contract Workers Union members have been on strike since December 8. They are demonstrating at the inter-state bus terminal in Jalandhar demanding better wages, job permanency and the upgrading of buses. Workers alleged that the government had deliberately failed to upgrade the public transport system in order to give credibility and benefits to private operators.

Punjab police attack protesting contract teachers in Bathinda

At least one teacher was hospitalised when police baton-charged demonstrating school teachers in Bathinda on December 10. Contract teachers employed under the Employment Guarantee Scheme were demanding job permanency and recruitment as Elementary Teacher Training primary teachers. The protest ended when district authorities agreed to take the issue to the chief minister.

Burmese plastic factory workers strike

About 300 workers from the Shwe Mi plastic factory in Hlaing Tharyar township, West-Yangoon, have been on strike for over a week to demand an increase in wages and better conditions. The strikers said that the company had reduced the workforce from 420 to 310 and kept the same production targets. The workers want their wages lifted in line with the increased workload.

Their other demands include compensation and pensions for retiring workers who have been exposed to dangerous chemicals and suffer medical issues. The factory union told the media that five out of seven demands had been resolved in mediation meetings.

Cambodian garment workers continue strike

About 1,700 workers from the Lu Thai garment factory in Cambodia's Svay Rieng province have been on strike since Monday after one of their representatives was allegedly assaulted for attempting to unionise the factory. Heun Lyda was beaten by unknown assailants while using the restroom. The garment workers maintain he was attacked by people specifically hired by the factory to quash Heun's attempt to form a union.

Factory management said it would pick who the union leader would be and that wages would not be paid until the strikers returned to work. A labour advocacy group spokesman said workers faced difficulties forming

unions since passage of the controversial Trade Union Law because of the increased documentation required and fear of reprisals from factory owners.

New South Wales mine workers protest

For the second time in a week, 300 workers from the South32 mine in the Illawarra region, south of Sydney, demonstrated on December 9 over cuts to contractors' wages. Workers were told at a rally in Wollongong that contract companies were renegotiating contracts in the lead-up to Christmas, putting pressure on families to sign up for less pay or potentially lose their jobs.

Workers have refused to sign contracts with DeltaSBD and Mastermyne, which they say are illegal. The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) said it was testing the contracts in court. A protesting contract worker said that his wages had dropped from \$36 an hour to \$30 an hour during the last four years.

The South32 mine was spun off from BHP Billiton in 2015. The mine company initially reported that it planned to cut costs and shed jobs and in February this year said it would cut 300 permanent and contract jobs in the Illawarra region by June.

CFMEU cancels planned strike at Victoria's Loy Yang A power generator

On Monday the CFMEU, representing over 500 workers at the Loy Yang A power generating plant in Victoria's Latrobe Valley, called a 24-hour strike for December 28. The union withdrew the threat on Thursday after AGL Power management said it would lockout 578 employees at the Loy Yang A generator and the associated coal mine if the strike went ahead. The Victorian Labor government also applied to the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to force a halt to any industrial action over the 15 month enterprise agreement dispute.

While the strike would have affected power generation at the Loy Yang A power plant, a company lockout would have forced the closure of Loy Yang A and B power plants and reduce 30 percent of Victoria's electricity supply.

The union claimed on Monday that it was close to a negotiated deal acceptable to AGL. It claimed management "back flipped" and demanded the dispute be heard in the FWC.

AGL has threatened to have the current expired enterprise agreement terminated by the FWC which, if successful, would see sharp cuts to pay and conditions.

In September almost 70 percent of the 530 workers balloted rejected a company offer recommended by the Fair Work Commission. Under the proposal, workers would receive four annual 5 percent wage rises and no changes to superannuation or long-service leave entitlements.

The power workers voted overwhelmingly in late November for protected industrial action that would involve a 24-hour stoppage between December 22 and December 30. They are concerned that AGL wants to remove minimum staffing levels, change restrictions on some work practices and introduce various cost-cutting measures that endanger health and safety. The union has told the media that the proposed agreement could result in 36 jobs being lost.

New Zealand: Hamilton bus drivers continue industrial action

Following a day-long strike on December 8 bus drivers employed by Pavlovich Coaches in Hamilton on New Zealand's North Island took further action this Thursday after negotiations for better working conditions and pay failed. The drivers refused to collect fares between 5 a.m. and 10.30 p.m. on Thursday.

A FIRST union spokesman said workers only wanted a 39 cents per hour increase on their current \$18.61 an hour in return for better bereavement leave and the removal of the 90-day-trial period for new recruits. 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.

Retail car parts workers in Auckland walk out

Some 20 employees of car parts supplier Brake and Transmission (BNT) walked off the job in Auckland on Wednesday following four months of failed negotiations for better wages. Members of FIRST union are only paid the minimum wage and want a pay rise that reflects New Zealand's rapidly rising housing and rent costs. BNT has refused to offer any increase.

TV Shop workers walk out again

Employees at the Avondale distribution centre of Brand Developers TV Shop in Auckland, walked off the job for nearly two hours Wednesday in a long running dispute for improved wages in a new work agreement. Their action follows walkouts and demonstrations at the retailers' Avondale centre and call centre in Takapuna in October. TV Shop retails a large range of household products through television infomercials.

The FIRST union has been in negotiations with the company since July last year. Workers want a pay rise, regular hours and a "no redundancy" package in their new work agreement. A union spokesman said the TV Shop workers are paid the minimum wage on rosters that vary from week to week according to management whim. Many workers have not had a pay rise for several years.

Auckland building material distribution workers strike

Around 50 workers from CV Compton, a Gib board (indoor wall-cladding) distributor in Auckland, walked off the job on Thursday and protested outside the company's head-office in Penrose. A FIRST union organiser said the CV Compton workers wanted a wage increase that reflects the rising cost of living in Auckland. Workers rejected the company's \$0.33 per hour pay increase.



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