

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 December 2016

South Korean airline pilots on strike

Unionised pilots at Korean Air Lines (KAL) began 10-day strike action on Thursday. The walkout, which is for higher pay, followed a one-day walkout on December 17.

The dispute began last year and involved the Korean Pilots Union and the New Korean Pilots Union representing about 1,900 pilots. The unions initially demanded a 37 percent pay rise, later reducing this to 29 percent. KAL, South Korea's largest carrier, insisted that the pilots could not demand more than 1.9 percent, previously agreed by the company and the general employees' union.

The unions told the media that the pilots' pay demand was "symbolic" and they were mainly concerned about improving working conditions. They have repeatedly expressed the willingness to call off the strike if the company agreed to any pay increase.

The average annual salary of KAL local pilots is about 100 million won (\$US81,000), far lower than at Chinese airlines, which pay 200–300 million won. According to the unions, 140 pilots quit last year to join other companies in China and the Middle East on salaries up to three times higher. A union spokesman said that the pilots have not had a pay increase for several years.

The South Korean government, which designated the airline an essential service in 2010, has established an emergency control committee. It has threatened to use planes not yet commissioned for regular flights to circumvent the strike. KAL pilots walked out for four days in 2005 over inadequate rest breaks on long-haul cargo flights.

Taiwan railway workers protest again

About 3,000 Taiwan Railways Administration (TRA) employees demonstrated in Taipei on December 14 over long-standing issues involving staff numbers, long working hours and forced overtime. Protesters complained that new amendments to the Labor Standards Act will worsen working conditions.

The amendments include one fixed day off and one flexible rest day a week which rail employees said will force them to work an extra 46 hours per month. A Taiwan Railway Labor Union representative claimed that the TRA would need to hire 2,500 more employees to operate its current schedule without extending current work hours.

TRA workers demonstrated in September demanding that staffing levels be increased or the number of passenger and cargo services reduced. They presented a petition to the government calling for increased overtime pay and a higher allowance for those forced to work overnight away from home. Other demands included higher bonuses, subsidies for employees exposed to vocational hazards, and pensions and benefits on par with civil

servants.

The union has threatened to call strike action if the government does not address workers' demands before the end of December.

Mass lockout by Bangladeshi garment factories

Over 50 garment factories in the Ashulia industrial belt, on the outskirts of Dhaka, locked out thousands of workers on Tuesday, in an attempt to prevent escalating strike action throughout the area. On December 11, workers from the Windy Group plant walked out to demand an increase in the minimum wage. The strike rapidly spread to 30 factories in the industrial belt.

At least ten workers were injured on Monday when police, supported by the notorious Rapid Action Battalion, used teargas and batons in an attempt to disperse the protesting workers. The garment workers want the monthly minimum wage increased from the current 5,300 taka to 16,000 taka (\$US200).

In 2013, the Bangladesh government, in an attempt to dissipate mass strikes over low wages by garment workers, set the minimum wage at 5,300 taka. Garment workers allege many factories have not yet implemented the new minimum.

Pakistan: Punjab government hospital doctors end strike

The Young Doctors Association (YDA) in Punjab last Sunday called off a nine-day boycott of outdoor duties in government hospitals after negotiations with authorities.

The YDA is opposed to the introduction of the government's Central Induction Policy (CIP) of postgraduate trainees. The union wants inductions prioritised on a merit-based system and positions filled on a needs basis.

Announcing an end to the boycott, the YDA claimed the government had agreed to its demands. According to media reports, the government has promised to double the postgraduate positions and provide housing facilities and allowances for doctors working in remote areas. The YDA called off a planned strike in July over the CIP after the government falsely claimed it would modify the policy.

India: Call centre workers' strike in fourth month

State government employees at Suwidha Call Centres throughout Punjab have been on strike since September 7 to protest the outsourcing of their jobs to a private company. Employees were given until October 3 to transfer to BSL Placement Limited or lose their jobs. The Punjab government has mobilised BSL Placement workers as strike-breakers.

Punjab State Suwidha Employees Union members demonstrated outside the District Administrative Office in Bathinda on Monday to demand permanency and an end to the outsourcing. There are almost 1,200 employees working in Punjab's Suwidha Call Centres who have been employed on contract basis since 2003.

India: Punjab government contract workers continue protests

Contract workers from various government departments protested in Bathinda on Sunday to demand permanency. They presented their demands to government ministers. Their action, which is a part of their ongoing campaign to become permanent government employees and with the same wages and entitlements as state civil servants, is coordinated by a coalition of 21 different contract employees' organisations.

Police used water cannon and batons to break up a previous demonstration in Bathinda on October 13, and forcefully stopped a protest march in Lambi on October 24. The workers ended a mass protest on September 18 after the government falsely claimed it would consider their demands.

Odisha social health workers protest

Hundreds of Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers demonstrated outside the state assembly in Bhubaneswar on Monday to demand monthly salaries and benefits. Represented by the Odisha Rajya Asha Karmi Sangha (ORAKS), the union also wants the establishment of district and block level committees to oversee implementation of the various provisions required by ASHA workers and a rest room for ASHA workers in every hospital.

There are about 45,000 ASHA workers in India's Odisha state, the overwhelming majority in rural districts. They provide a vital link between doctors, nurses and the public. In 2014–15, the average monthly income of ASHA workers in Odisha was 1,819 rupees (\$US26.79).

ORAKS wants ASHA workers categorised as government employees with eight-hour shifts, paid 200 rupees per shift and included in all welfare schemes, such as provident fund, insurance and pension programmes. Currently they are on call 24 hours and are paid an honorarium with no other benefits.

Odisha ambulance workers walk out

Members of the 108 Ambulance Service Workers Association walked off the job in several districts of Odisha on December 17 to demand better and timely payment of wages and the resolution of several outstanding claims issues. The 108 ambulance service is operated by Ziqitza Healthcare which began a Public Private Partnership agreement with the Odisha government in 2013.

The workers, including drivers, attendants and emergency medical

technicians, walked out for several days in March over 12 demands. These included a minimum guaranteed wage, a 15 percent annual increment and the construction of rest shades for employees. They also complained of being forced to work longer than their eight-hour designated shifts.

India: Bihar tourist sector workers on strike

Around 200 Bihar State Tourism Development Corporation (BSTDC) workers have been on strike since December 15 over pay and conditions. The BSTDC Employees Association members want equal pay for equal work, permanency for contract workers, bans on the recruitment of retired workers and an end to the privatisation of hotels.

According to the union, BSTDC contract workers receive lower pay than those at outsourced companies. It claimed that a security guard at a private agency receives between 12,000 and 15,000 rupees a month compared to a guard at BSTDC who only receives a maximum of 6,000 rupees.

It is the third time this year that the BSTDC workers have struck over the same issue. The union called off a week-long strike in May, and a month-long strike in August after the BSTDC management claimed it would grant workers' demands.

Sri Lankan postal workers strike

Around 21,000 workers from over 600 main post offices and 3,500 sub post offices throughout the country struck for three days beginning Monday over several demands. They want an immediate solution to recruitment and promotion issues; a resolution of salary disparities and other allowances; restoration of the main Post Office and the provision of infrastructure facilities. The strikers defied "cancellation of leave" orders by the Postal Department.

Postal workers demonstrated in central Colombo on Wednesday, causing a major traffic jam. Police obstructed the demonstration near Sri Lankan President Sirisena's office, allowing only a few trade union leaders inside. Hundreds of thousands of letters and parcels were piled up in the central mail exchange in Colombo due to the strike.

The strike was organised jointly by 25 postal trade unions. Union leaders claim they will call indefinite strike action if the government fails to implement recent promises made by the president.

Electricians to strike at Loy Yang A power plant

The Electrical Trades Union (ETU), which covers maintenance electricians at the Loy Yang A power plant in Victoria's Latrobe Valley, notified the plant operator AGL Power on Tuesday that its members would stop work for an hour and impose bans on December 25. The industrial action is part of a long-running battle over pay and conditions.

The ETU and the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) have been in negotiations for 15 months with AGL Power over a proposed enterprise agreement. Last week, the CFMEU, representing over 500 workers at the coal-fired plant, called off a 24-hour strike planned for December 28 after AGL threatened to lock out its entire workforce at the plant and the accompanying mine.

The lockout would have opened the way for the Victorian state Labor government to force the dispute into the Fair Work Commission and impose a non-negotiated settlement.

Workers have twice rejected an AGL Power agreement. The offer includes annual five percent pay increases over four years and no changes to superannuation or long-service leave entitlements. The unions are concerned that the company wants to remove minimum staffing levels, change restrictions on some work practices and introduce various cost-cutting measures that endanger health and safety. The proposed agreement could result in 36 jobs being lost.

Victorian ambulance managers implement work bans

Ambulance Managers and Professionals Association (AMPA) members at the state-run Ambulance Victoria have begun industrial action in their dispute with the government over an enterprise agreement pay rise offer. The “protected action” includes bans on nine work duties, such as attending meetings, providing monthly reports to the CEO, responding to ministerial requests and other issues. The bans will remain active for an indefinite period.

An AMPA representative said that Ambulance Victoria’s latest pay offer will see senior paramedic managers earning almost \$28,000 a year less than the clinical staff they manage.

Negotiations with the state Labour government for a new work agreement have been ongoing since September 2015. The managers and senior paramedics are responsible for running ambulance dispatch systems and centres, co-ordinating emergency response to major events such as bushfires, and managing complex IT systems.

New Zealand ambulance workers strike

Over 800 members of the Ambulance Professionals First union at the government-subsidised St John New Zealand began strike action on December 17 and will not provide cover at public entertainment events up to February 6. The union is in dispute with the company over a proposed new work agreement.

St John has threatened to use strikebreakers from other unions, non-union employees, casual staff and volunteers.

The paramedics 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 understaffing. They also want single-crewing, prolonged work periods without tea breaks and skilled paramedic shortages resolved.

The union has called for a 2 percent pay rise but St John’s latest offer is only 1.25 percent. Attempting to justify its limited pay offer and cuts in penalty rates, the company claimed it only received a 0.4 percent increase in government funding for 2016–17 labour costs.



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