

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 January 2017

Taiwan railway workers threaten to strike

About 2,000 workers, including train conductors, station workers and other operational staff represented by the Taiwan Railway Union (TRU) have threatened to take strike action during the Lunar New Year. The industrial action is to protest the Taiwan Railways Administration's (TRA) failure to solve staffing shortages and pay cuts after new labour laws came into effect.

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

TRU members held demonstrations in September and December demanding that staffing levels be increased, or the number of passenger and cargo services reduced. Other demands included higher bonuses, subsidies for employees exposed to vocational hazards, and pensions and benefits on par with civil servants.

The TRU is a new union whose members broke from the TRA Corporate Union. The corporate union is opposed to the Lunar New Year strike action.

Burma: Panda garment workers still on strike

Over 600 workers from the Panda Textile Factory in Singaing township, Mandalay have been on strike since June to demand payments they claim they are entitled to under their employment contracts. The textile workers have been demonstrating outside the factory.

Mediation talks with workers representatives, factory management and the regional government last weekend failed at the last minute. Although most of the workers' demands were agreed to, the company refused to reappoint four workers who had been fired for protesting. Workers alleged that the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry and a labour rights judge had previously instructed the company to reappoint the sacked workers.

The formerly state-owned No.2 Textile Factory was privatised in 2012 under an agreement that required Panda Textile management to retain its workforce on the same working conditions and wages. Workers complained that the new management has cut their pay and makes them work Saturdays and Sundays, their normal days off, and in breach of their employment contract.

Cambodian garment workers strike

Around 600 workers from two garment plants in Phnom Penh's Chbar Ampov district and neighbouring Kien Svay district, in Kandal, went on strike yesterday to demand their December salaries, amid suspicions that the factories are going bankrupt. Both factories, Kbal Koah Garment and Top World Garment, have the same Hong Kong owner.

One worker said the factories had not officially announced that they were going bankrupt but work began to slow down late last year. The garment workers want their December wages so they can start looking for other jobs.

Construction workers in Phnom Penh protest

About 40 Chinese construction workers at a residential development in Phnom Penh stopped work on Monday claiming their Beijing-based employer had not paid their salaries in months. The project is for the Graticity Real Estate Development Co (GRED), which contracted the job to the China State Construction Engineering Corp.

One protesting worker said he had not been paid in nearly six months and that salaries were lower than originally agreed. "They promised us 9,000 yuan [US\$1,300] but they are only paying us 7,000 yuan," he said.

Filipino bus workers union shuts down strike

The Association of Genuine Labor Organisation (AGLO), representing 700 striking drivers and conductors from the DLTB bus line, a provincial bus company that operates in most regions in the Philippines, ended a 12-day strike by its members on Sunday, claiming to have signed an agreement with DLTB management.

DLTB originally refused to negotiate, claiming the strike was illegal because AGLO is not recognised by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). Most DLTB workers are members of the Philippine Trade and General Workers Organisation (PTGWO), which is recognised by DOLE and did not support the walkout.

AGLO members struck on December 28 demanding an increase in salaries, which they said were well below the minimum wage. The strikers claim they were paid 404 pesos per day when the company began operations six years ago but under the Aquino administration their wages were cut to 370 pesos (US\$7.45) per day. The drivers also want payment of their 13th month bonus, which they claimed was being withheld by management.

While DLTB management said they would reemploy all striking employees under the same terms and conditions if they returned to work immediately, a labour department spokesman claimed that none of the

issues that led to the dispute were resolved.

India: Maharashtra sanitation workers protest

Around 3,500 Maharashtra sanitation workers demonstrated in Mumbai on January 6 to demand equal pay for equal work, payment of wage arrears, minimum wage and work security. The protest was organised by the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI).

A Sangli district sanitation worker said she had been hired on an ad hoc basis to clean roads for 22 years. She only gets about eight days work per month and is only paid 192 rupees (\$US2.81) per month. Another worker said he was paid about 7,000 rupees (\$102.6) a month.

The protesting workers said that two years ago the government promised to sanitation workers a 14,000 rupees minimum monthly wage but the pledge was never implemented.

East Delhi sanitation workers' strike in second week

Over 16,000 sanitation workers and other employees from the East Delhi Municipal Corporation (EDMC) have been on strike since January 6 over the non-payment of salaries for three months. In talks on Monday evening, unions representing the strikers accepted a corporation offer to pay two months' salary. Workers rejected the offer, however, saying they would remain on strike until their wages were paid in full. Some workers returned to work after EDMC began paying wages on Tuesday.

On Tuesday, sanitation workers from the North Delhi Municipal Corporation, who have not been paid for December, threatened to strike if their salaries are not paid by January 18. The corporation released wages for group C and D employees (clerks and labourers) on Tuesday but claimed to have no funds to pay groups A and B (office managers, nurses and teachers).

In February last year over 150,000 employees from municipal corporations of New Delhi, East Delhi and South Delhi struck over unpaid wages and in 2015 Delhi sanitation workers walked out three times over the same issue.

Telangana contract college lecturers still on strike

The Telangana state government has issued an ultimatum to striking contract college lecturers to return to work by January 12 or it will take "stern action." Around 25 percent of the state's contract lecturers from various government junior and degree colleges have been on strike since December 31 over the government's delay in resolving their long-outstanding grievances.

Of the 5,000 current college lecturers, around 3,600 were recruited on contract in 2000 to overcome a severe shortage of lecturers. Organised by the Joint Action Committee of the Telangana State Government Colleges Contract Lecturers Association, the lecturers want job permanency and basic pay and dearness allowances as per the tenth pay revision commission recommendations.

The government claimed it had begun to implement job permanency and offered a 50 percent pay increase, which the lecturers said was "illogical and ridiculous."

Assam tea garden workers protest

On January 6, workers from most of the 104 tea gardens of the Barak Valley, in the southern part of the Indian state of Assam, began three days of demonstrations outside their respective managements' offices to protest unpaid wages.

Banks across India are suffering cash shortages since the Indian government declared all 500-rupee and 1,000-rupee notes illegal. The law is aimed at forcing employers to pay wages into bank accounts. The government's "demonetisation program" has led to thousands of workers, particularly in rural areas, not being paid until they open a bank account. Most rural areas do not have banking facilities because workers were always paid in cash.

A Barak Cha Shramik Union spokesman said that the workers wanted cash wage payments to continue because only five or six tea gardens in the Barak Valley had ATMs.

Telangana road transport union defers strike without resolution

The Telangana Mazdoor Union (TMU) has deferred a pending strike over unpaid salary and allowances after accepting a vague government promise to meet with the union to discuss its demands on January 17, after the Sankranti festival. The union covers Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC) workers.

The union wants payment of outstanding salaries and leave, some of the entitlements outstanding since 2012. The union called off planned strike action in May 2015 after TSRTC management said it would pay 50 percent of arrears in the form of bonds, with 8.75 percent interest, in three instalments. Only one instalment was paid.

Pakistan: Karachi doctors and paramedics stop work

Doctors and paramedical staff at the 250-bed Sindh Government Children's Hospital in Karachi shut down the outpatient department on January 6 to protest salary increase delays. The hospital was a target of the government's privatisation program and has been transformed to a public-private partnership (PPP).

The health workers said that the Poverty Eradication Initiative, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) which runs the hospital, has not honoured previous agreements to pay promised increments. Workers refused to end the strike after talks with the NGO on Monday.

The NGO entered into a PPP agreement with the government in September last year and the new initiative was launched in December. The Sindh government's PPP privatisation program is part of the Pakistan government's efforts to cut public expenditure while claiming to maintain public services. The social attacks are in line with International Monetary Fund demands for privatisation of state owned enterprises, including aviation and airports, power, health and education.

Karachi municipal workers protest against outsourcing

Garbage collection workers from the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation refused to work on Monday in protest against the Sindh Solid Waste Management Board's decision to privatise garbage collection. The strike affected the entire city, the largest and most populous in Pakistan.

A KMC employees' union spokesman accused the government of deliberately neglecting the services and slashing funds to create conditions for privatisation. The union has threatened to take legal action and organise an indefinite walkout if the government does not agree to the union's demands.

Bangladeshi coal miners end strike

Mine workers at the state-owned Barapukuria Coal Mine at Parbatipur, Bangladesh ended a three-day strike on Wednesday after the district administration promised a meeting with power ministry officials. However, no date for the meeting, between workers' representatives and Barapukuria Coal Mining Company management, was given. The company is a subsidiary of Petrobangla, a government-owned oil, gas and mining company.

Miners walked out indefinitely on January 8 over long-outstanding demands for permanency. In December, mine management falsely claimed that they would resolve workers' demands by January 7. The workers have been demonstrating since 2011 for better wages and permanency. There are 1,041 non-permanent workers at the mine on a daily wage of 300 taka (\$US3.80).

Sri Lankan telecom workers' strike enters third week

Around 2,100 outsourced workers from Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) have been on strike since December 26 to demand permanent jobs. On Tuesday, the Colombo district court issued an order preventing the strikers establishing pickets outside SLT premises and directed them not to call on other workers to join the strike. The workers are employed by Human Capital Solutions and have been on contract for over seven years.

Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena promised to make all temporary workers permanent after he was elected, but only 121 SLT workers were made permanent.

Meanwhile, SLT permanent employees ended a nine-day strike on Wednesday over 13 demands. They want a 20 percent wage rise, an end to wage disparity, an increased medical allowance to 400,000 rupees and a half-hour reduction in daily working hours.

The workers have agreed to consider a management offer to revise working hours, increase pay by 10 percent and for other demands to be referred to an "Expert Committee" to negotiate with the unions on January 25.

New South Wales road construction workers vote to strike

Fifty Telum Labour Hire employees working on the Pacific Highway upgrade between Kempsey and Kundabung on the New South Wales mid-north coast voted unanimously at a meeting on Tuesday to strike for better wages and working conditions. A Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union spokesman told the media that the workers will meet on

Monday to decide when the strike will begin.

New Zealand ambulance workers maintain industrial action

Over 800 members of the Ambulance Professionals First union at the government-subsidised ambulance service St John New Zealand are maintaining low-level industrial action begun in November for a new collective agreement. This includes wearing a union T-shirt reading "Healthy Ambos Save Lives" instead of their typical St. John attire, and a ban on covering at public entertainment events up to February 6. St John management have threatened to dock 10 percent from workers' pay if they refuse to wear the standard uniform.

In November the paramedics 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 issues resolved on single-crewing, prolonged work periods without tea breaks and shortages of skilled paramedics.

The union has called for a 2 percent pay rise but St John's latest offer is 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.

Lyttelton Port workers on strike

Over 160 members of the Maritime Union of New Zealand at the Lyttelton Port container terminal in Christchurch have been striking each weekend since December 24 over a proposed new work agreement. Workers are opposed to management's demands for rostering changes in the current work agreement.

The proposed collective agreement will cover about 60 percent of the terminal's workforce. Strike notices have been issued for January 14-15 and 21-22. Union members are maintaining weekend pickets outside the port terminal.



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