

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 January 2017

## Burma: Nickel mine workers protest

Close to 1,500 workers from the Chinese-managed Tagaung Taung Nickel Factory in Burma's Sagaing Region stopped work on January 19 to protest over working conditions. Their action followed a protest in December over the same issues.

Workers complained about the loss of job opportunities and alleged discrepancies between how the foreign and local workers are treated. The factory employs around 1,600 Myanmar workers and about 400 Chinese migrant workers. The protesting workers demanded the same benefits, such as the healthcare and social security plans, allegedly offered to their Chinese colleagues.

The Tagaung Taung factory began mining in 2009 after the government and China Nonferrous Metal Mining Co (CNMC) signed a product-sharing contract.

## Panda garment factory workers resume protest

Over 600 striking workers from the Panda Textile Factory in Mandalay, central Burma, resumed demonstrating outside the factory on Sunday. They have been on strike since June to demand payments they claim they are entitled to under their current employment contracts.

Mediation talks with workers' representatives, factory management and the regional government two weeks ago failed at the last minute. While most of the workers' demands were agreed to, the company refused to reappoint four employees 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 protests resumed at the factory gate after the company announced additions to its employment handbook. Workers said a clause had been added to the handbook stating that the company would not employ dismissed workers.

## Taiwan hospital workers protest

A group of union members demonstrated outside the Veterans Affairs Council in Taipei on January 20 to demand that more than 300 internal delivery workers at the Taichung Veterans General Hospital be hired directly by the hospital and their seniority restored.

One member of the Taiwan Dispatch Worker Industrial Union said the change to a new contractor last month resulted in workers' seniority being

wiped out, denying them any right to annual leave. The union estimated that workers had been denied annual leave worth at least \$US47,569.

## Cambodian garment workers demonstrate

Around 80 garment workers protested outside the Kandal Provincial Court on Wednesday demanding it release money deposited at the court by their employer, GHI garment, to clear outstanding back wages. Over 190 workers were terminated in August without compensation and had not been paid since June.

The Kandal court froze GHI's assets in August, saying it would be lifted if the firm deposited \$160,000 with the court so it could be paid to the workers. The company has paid the deposit but the court has not released the money.

## Protesting Sri Lankan power workers arrested

Colombo police arrested 37 protesting contract workers from the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) on Tuesday night claiming they had violated a court order banning demonstrations outside the building. The workers were released on Wednesday, after paying 100,000 rupees (\$US665) bail each.

Nearly 200 workers began hunger strike protests January 1 to demand reinstatement. Employed as meter readers, they were terminated when they demanded permanent jobs after 180 days' service. The CEB claimed that they had not completed the required 180-days' service and were not eligible to be made permanent.

## Sri Lankan contract telecom workers' strike in fifth week

Around 2,100 outsourced workers from Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) have been on strike since December 26 to demand permanent jobs. The workers are employed by Human Capital Solutions and have been on contract for over seven years.

On Tuesday, they marched to the prime minister's official residence in Colombo and presented a memo demanding integration as permanent SLT employees. The workers ended a protest last May after the government falsely promised to make them permanent. The workers are paid much less than permanent employees and are not provided with adequate facilities or safety equipment.

## **Pakistan: Karachi water and sewerage workers demand job permanency**

Hundreds of casual workers from the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board demonstrated for job permanency in Karachi on January 19. The board employs over 570 workers on an ad hoc basis. The increasing use of non-regular contract employees is being used to cut government spending.

There are currently 585 workers waiting for job appointments based on “deceased quota” rules. These are employment positions offered to family members of deceased workers.

## **Bangladeshi freight workers end strike**

A strike by freight transport owners and workers from 21 districts of Khulna and Barisal division and greater Faridpur ended on Tuesday, 24 hours after it began. It followed a meeting between the home minister and union leaders. The Freight Transport Owners-Workers Union Council members stopped work with 12 demands and to protest alleged extortion, harassment and violence suffered by transport workers.

The strikers want bans lifted on transporting side angles, bumpers and hooks on trucks and covered vans. They also want reductions in bridge toll rates, removal of unnecessary speed breakers, cuts in fuel oil prices, the issuing of driving licences by training programs and an end to the violence against drivers at India’s Petrapole land port.

A union spokesman claimed the government have given an assurance that their grievances would be considered and had also ordered the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority to check the roadworthiness of trucks and covered vans, and would issue driving licences as soon as possible.

## **India: Rural health workers in Karnataka protest**

Hundreds of Anganwadi (rural health) workers and assistants demonstrated outside a local MP’s office in Dharwad on January 20 over various long outstanding demands. Protesters alleged that they have been deprived of a provident fund, ESI (employee state insurance) and a pension for 40 years. The Anganwadi workers held state-wide protests in September last year over the same issues.

An Anganwadi Workers and Assistants Association representative said the workers also want their monthly salaries increased to 18,000 rupees (\$US264), a 3,000-rupee pension for retired workers and assistants, and those workers without a pension scheme to be paid between 200,000 and 300,000 rupees for a retirement fund. Protesters have threatened to hold a permanent demonstration outside parliament if the government continues to ignore their demands.

## **Hospital contract workers in Chandigarh strike**

Over 300 contract workers at the Civil Hospital in Panchkula, Chandigarh walked off the job on January 16 and picketed the hospital’s main gate to demand payment of wages in arrears and a provident fund. The protesters included sweepers, lift operators and computer operators.

The workers also want reinstatement of employees previously fired by the contractor. In a memo submitted to the district commissioner on January 20 workers called on the hospital to end the contract of M/s Sunrise Facilitators Private Limited and a new contractor hired.

## **Government hospital nurses in Chandigarh walk out**

Government Medical College and Hospital (GMCH) nurses in Chandigarh walked out for 48 hours on Monday over long pending demands. The Nurses’ Welfare Association members said their demands had not been resolved despite numerous appeals to management. Representatives from the teaching faculty also joined the protest.

Protesters want promotions, restoration of gazetted holidays and national holidays that were stopped following shortages of nursing staff in 2014. Other demands included the filling of vacant staff nurse positions, Type 4 houses for nursing personnel in the GMCH house pool, implementation of central pay scale and access to the hospital canteen and parking facilities.

Protesters have threatened indefinite strike action on February 1 if the administration does not fulfil their demands.

## **Andhra Pradesh government workers demonstrate**

Women workers from various government schemes, including the midday-meal, Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) and Anganwadi programmes, marched through Srikakulam on January 20 to demand minimum wages and other benefits.

Over 5,000 workers participated in the rally calling for improved working conditions and a minimum 18,000-rupee monthly wage.

## **Jammu and Kashmir government irrigation labourers protest**

Casual labourers from the Irrigation & Flood Control Department demonstrated outside on Canal Road, Jammu on January 21 to demand several months of unpaid wages. The protest was organised by the J&K National Trade Union Front.

It is commonplace for the government to delay payment of wages to casual and daily wage workers. Daily wage workers from the J&K Public Health Engineering (PHE) water utility section struck for over 27 weeks last year over unpaid wages and calling for permanent jobs. Contract and daily wage employees from the Power Development Department (PDD) also struck for a month in December over the same issues.

## **Assam tea garden workers protest**

Tea garden workers demonstrated across Assam on January 19 to

oppose the Indian government's abolition of cash wage payments and the removal of subsidised rations. Under the Plantation Labour Act, 1951, the wages of plantation workers included cash, as well as rations, healthcare and education services (in kind). The workers, who are organised by the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS), demanded the government immediately return to the old payment system.

The daily wage of a plantation worker in Assam is 137 rupees (\$2). He or she is also entitled to 35 kilograms of rice and wheat every month at subsidised 54 paise per kg.

Assam has some 850 tea estates with the number of workers—permanent and casual—estimated at around 900,000. Together with their family members, some 2.5 million people are the beneficiaries of the subsidised rations.

accommodation costs. A union spokesman claimed it had been years since workers have had a pay rise.



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### **Bengaluru private taxi drivers strike against increased commission**

Private cab drivers in Bengaluru, Karnataka employed by Ola and Uber companies stopped work for the day on Monday to oppose increased commission charges. The commission paid to the online taxi operators has increased from 10 percent to 30 percent in the last two months. The drivers claimed that they would have to make 18 trips per day to cover the increases.

Uber and Ola are multinational aggregator companies who exploit the drivers through a contract system. The drivers are liable for any costs incurred in their work, the company claiming the workers are “self-employed.”

### **New South Wales engineering workers protest**

Employees of Coffs Harbour engineering company, WE Smith, demonstrated outside a local MP's office on Thursday in protest against the sudden closure of the plant. When workers came to the plant on Wednesday the gates were locked and no explanation given as to why.

About 100 employees have been on leave since Christmas, amid ongoing financial hardship that has seen the company cut hours and told workers to look for alternative employment. According to the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, WE Smith workers were owed wages and seven months of superannuation payments.

WE Smith, which makes equipment for oil, gas, petrochemical and mining industries in Australia and overseas, has been operating on the NSW mid-north coast for more than 80 years. A sign at the plant's locked gate said the company had moved to an address in Coffs Harbour's central business district. There is no factory at this location.

### **New Zealand: Retail car parts workers walk out**

Some 20 employees of car parts supplier Brake and Transmission (BNT) walked off the job in Auckland on Thursday after the company postponed pay negotiations. Workers initiated bargaining five months ago. The company has offered only meetings during that time but made no pay rises offer. BNT workers struck in December over the issue.

FIRST union members at BNT are only paid the minimum wage. They want a pay rise that reflects New Zealand's rapidly rising housing and