

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 February 2017

Taiwan railway workers strike

Around 500 workers, including train conductors, station workers and other operational staff, covered by the Taiwan Railway Union (TRU), refused to report for work during the Lunar New Year holiday to protest the Taiwan Railways Administration's (TRA) failure to solve staffing shortages and pay cuts after new labour laws came into effect. Commuter services were affected over the weekend and ticket windows at major stations were closed on January 28 due to the shortage of staff.

The strikers allege that the new labour law 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 are demanding that staffing levels be increased or the number of passenger and cargo services reduced. Other demands include 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 opposed the Lunar New Year strike action and over 5,000 TRA employees did not participate.

Thailand seafood processing workers make demands

Over 2,000 migrant workers from seafood exporter Sea Value Group submitted a petition to management on Monday calling for higher wages and better working conditions, a rare stand in a country where foreign workers are banned from forming trade unions.

According to the Migrant Worker Rights Network, at least 2,200 Burmese (Myanmar) workers are employed at several Sea Value processing factories. The workers want increased welfare benefits, improved work conditions, a higher nightshift allowance and increased incentives.

Thailand is the world's third largest seafood exporter. The sector is mainly staffed by desperately poor migrant workers from Burma, Laos and Cambodia. Workers in the industry endure slave-like conditions in factories and on fishing vessels where injuries and fatal accidents are common.

Sea Value Group's factories process more than 1,000 tonnes of fish a day, much of it exported to Europe and the US.

Cambodian garment workers protest

More than 200 workers from the Kbal Koah Garment Company and Top World Garment Cambodia factories demonstrated on National Road 1 in Phnom Penh's Chbar Ampov district for an hour seeking government intervention in claiming unpaid wages.

Workers believe the shuttered factories have gone bankrupt and are demanding their unpaid December wages. A factory administrator said the owners have left and can't be found.

Bangladeshi journalists protest against police violence

Journalists demonstrated in Dhaka on January 28 against the brutal attack by police on two colleagues—one ATN News correspondent and a cameraman. The two journalists were covering a protest against the proposed construction of the Rampal coal-fired power plant near the Sundarbans tidal mangroves.

Witnesses said police singled out the two journalists and dragged them into the Shahbagh Police Station where they were allegedly beaten so badly that they were hospitalised from their injuries. The Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists, Bangladesh Crime Reporters Association and Dhaka Union of Journalists General demanded trial and punishment for the policemen involved in the attacks.

India: Contract nurses at Gandhi Hospital in Hyderabad on strike

Following a week of unsuccessful protests, 210 outsourced nurses from the Gandhi Hospital in Secunderabad, Hyderabad walked out on January 28 on an indefinite strike over permanency and equal pay. They are maintaining a protest in the hospital grounds. On Sunday at 2 a.m., police arrested 90 striking nurses who had occupied the fourth floor of the hospital. The nurses were later released after being charged with trespassing, unlawful assembly and mischief.

Nurses said many of them have been at the hospital for ten years, receiving a monthly wage of 17,500 rupees (\$US260), compared to nurses directly employed by the hospital who receive 28,000 rupees a month. Hospital management is refusing to talk to the nurses.

A nurse from the Telangana Medical Contract Employees Workers Union told media that they struck last June, "but were promised that our services would be regularised. We were fooled. This time we are determined and will not work unless the government takes a decision."

Striking workers in Jammu and Kashmir occupy mine

Fifteen workers at the Moughla coal mine in Kalakote tehsil, Rajouri district began a hunger strike on January 25 as part of their ten-year campaign for entitlements and permanency. According to the Bhartiya Cola Khan Mazdoor Union, they are occupying the mine “deep underground.” They want permanency for casual workers, an increased dearness allowance, promotions and release of the cost of living allowance.

Pondicherry childcare centre workers protest

Childcare centre (anganwadi) workers demonstrated outside the Swadeshi Cotton Mills in Pondicherry on Monday for a wage increase and entitlements. They want implementation of minimum wages, social security, including ESI (Employee State Insurance), Provident Fund and a pension. Other demands, include implementation of the Seventh Pay Commission recommendations and payment of 50 percent arrears as per the Sixth Pay Commission.

Power loom workers in Tamil Nadu strike

Over 120 workers in Ayakattoor and Anna Nagar areas, operating 327 power looms at 14 factories in Tamil Nadu, walked out on an indefinite strike on January 27 to oppose a wage cut. Workers complained that their wage per metre of cloth produced was cut, resulting in about 1,700 rupees reduction in their monthly income.

Tamil Nadu explosives factory workers end strike

Industrial Explosives Limited (TEL) factory workers in the Panamadangi Reserve Forest near Katpadi ended a three-day strike on January 27, after management paid two months’ outstanding salaries and assured them they would receive their remaining four months’ back salary within a week. Workers warned that they had only suspended their strike action for a week while management honoured its agreement and addressed other issues, such as the voluntary retirement scheme.

Pakistan: Punjab polio workers demand wages

Punjab government-run anti-polio vaccination campaign workers in Rawalpindi demonstrated outside the deputy commissioner’s office last Saturday to demand immediate payment of two months’ wages. The protest was in response to the Punjab government’s decision not to pay salaries to female health workers, sanitary patrol workers and employees engaged in anti-polio awareness until the next polio campaign. Workers have threatened to boycott the upcoming vaccination campaign if the government does not pay their wages.

Pakistani construction workers in Azad Kashmir strike

Over 200 construction workers at the Neelum Jhelum Hydroelectric Project in Azad Kashmir province walked off the job on Monday to oppose the Water and Power Development Authority’s (WAPDA) refusal to make workers permanent and to oppose the axing of retirement plans and other benefits.

The WAPDA workers have been involved in a protracted campaign against the restructuring and privatisation of the state-run utility. The WAPDA Labour Union called off the strike after authorities verbally promised to address the issues.

Sri Lankan contract telecom workers maintain strike

Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) workers remain on strike after failed negotiations between representatives of striking outsourced workers and management.

Around 2,100 workers of the outsourcing company, Human Capital Solutions, walked out on December 26 to demand permanent jobs. The strikers are paid much less than permanent employees and not provided with adequate facilities or safety equipment.

The workers rejected an offer from SLT to recruit 200 of them per year as new employees, which will take more than 10 years to recruit all 2,100 manpower workers. Their basic salary would be reduced to 17,500 rupees a month from 30,000 rupees. Management has only agreed to integrate workers who have a service of more than seven years and are less than 50 years old, making a considerable section of workers ineligible to take up the offer.

Sri Lankan port workers protest against privatisation

Workers from the Hambantota and Trincomalee ports marched last Wednesday in Central Colombo against government plans to privatise the ports. Police fired tear gas and used water cannons in an attempt to break up the demonstration at Lotus Road in the Colombo Fort area. Heavy traffic congestion was caused by the police action.

The government has announced that 80 percent of Hambantota Port will be sold to Chinese-owned Merchant Port Holdings and Trincomalee Port sold to an Indian consortium. The newly-developed east container terminal of the Port of Colombo is also in the pipeline for privatisation.

The government is following International Monetary Fund orders to privatise state-owned enterprises.

The Hambantota Port workers walked out on December 7, demanding permanent jobs with the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA). This demand took on a new urgency after the government hastily signed an agreement to privatise the facility. The government mobilised hundreds of navy soldiers who brutally attacked the strikers with poles and rifle butts in an attempt to end the walkout. Several workers were hospitalised.

Following a court order overturning the port workers’ right to strike, they returned to work on December 15 fearing they would lose their jobs.

New South Wales coal workers on strike

Some 140 contract workers at the South 32 coal mine in Appin (near Wollongong, south of Sydney) have been on a protected action strike for

nearly three weeks demanding job security and wages and entitlements on par with full-time workers. The workers are employees of labour hire firms Delta and Southern Colliery Maintenance (SCM). They are also demanding the right to move from casual to permanent employment after 12 months' service.

Meanwhile, another labour hire firm at the Mastermine pit has terminated all its workers before rehiring them on a new contract. Some workers have been at the mine for nine years and are not sure if they will be rehired.

South 32 is a spin-off from BHP's coal operations in the district and has developed a ruthless reputation for driving down labour costs by forcing the three competing labour hire firms to cut labour costs to get a contract. According to the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) the number of labour hire workers has been cut by 40 percent over two years.

Over 300 contract workers from South 32 demonstrated in December over pay cuts in new contracts proposed by the labour hire firms. A protesting worker at a rally in Wollongong said that his wages had dropped from \$36 to \$30 an hour during the last four years. South 32 management said it intended to axe 300 permanent and contract jobs by June.

While a CFMEU South West District representative has assured the miners that the union "fights for the rights of all members, whether they are permanent or contract employees," the union isolated the contract workers' dispute.

on Monday over payment of an allowance. The National Doctors Association said the outstanding allowance, totalling 5.6 million kina (\$US1.76 million), is part of the association's award negotiated with the government in 2013 and came into effect on January 1, 2014. Doctors said that classes would not resume until the matter is resolved.



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New Zealand: Lyttelton Port workers extend strike again

Over 160 members of the Maritime Union of New Zealand at the Lyttelton Port of Christchurch (LPC) container terminal have been striking each weekend since December 24 over a proposed new work agreement. Following three days of failed negotiations last week, the union issued strike notices for weekends up to, and including, February 11–12. A court challenge by LPC over the legality of the proposed strike for this weekend was declined on Monday. Talks are scheduled to resume today.

Workers are opposed to management's demands for rostering changes to the current work agreement. They are concerned with how quickly they can be required to take up a shift or a shift can be cancelled. The proposed collective agreement will cover about 60 percent of the terminal's workforce. Union members are maintaining weekend pickets outside the port terminal.

Papua New Guinea university lecturers on strike

Some 138 lecturers at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) boycotted classes on Tuesday to protest over the non-payment of a salary increase. A National Academic Staff Association (NASA) spokesman said lecturers were awarded a 7.5 percent pay increase in 2014 to be spread over three years. While they received an adjustment (2.5 percent) to their salaries in 2014, there was none in 2015 and 2016.

Around 90 percent of the university's lecturers signed a notice to strike. NASA warned that they would continue the strike for five days, then decide on further action.

Meanwhile, 30 lecturing doctors at the PNG School of Medicine and Health Sciences, at UPNG's Taurama campus, began a boycott of classes