

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 February 2017

## Filipino jeepney drivers and owners strike

Jeepney drivers and owners from the Stop and Go Coalition held a nationwide stoppage on Monday to protest government plans to phase out passenger jeepneys 15 or more years old. Most major cities were affected by the strike, which the government tried to minimise by deploying hundreds of military vehicles to transport commuters.

The Duterte government claims it wants to modernise transport vehicles and make these environmentally friendly. Stop and Go says that only big companies can afford the vehicle replacements demanded, and have suggested an upgrade of their jeepneys and improved enforcement of road-worthiness rules.

A Stop and Go representative accused other transport groups of backing the modernisation program in order to edge out small operators. He added that under the draft plan, a jeepney operator was required to have 7 million pesos (\$US140,393) to get a franchise. The operator must have 20 units by 2018 and increase the fleet to 40 units in 2019. Operators were to install GPS and Wi-Fi into the jeepneys.

The jeepney phase-out will affect more than 600,000 drivers and 250,000 operators.

## Manila industrial estate fire injures over 100 workers

Over 100 workers were injured when a fire destroyed the Housing Technology Industries (HTI) factory in Manila's Cavite Export Processing Zone on February 1. Over 3,100 workers were in the three-storey building at the time. Forty-one victims remain in hospital, sustaining severe burns to 70 to 90 percent of their bodies, while 81 have been discharged.

Provincial authorities claimed that HTI had assured them that regular employees would be absorbed by the company but outsourced workers only used if they are needed. Labour groups on February 3 staged a protest at the Labor Department office in Intramuros, Manila, demanding the government investigate the fire.

## Cambodian garment workers demand wages

Around 1,000 workers from the Pattern International factory in Cambodia's Kampong Speu province demonstrated at the labour office on February 4 after the factory owner disappeared without paying wages. Workers said they had not been paid since the company declared bankruptcy in December, even though they had remained working during

December and January.

According to a spokesman from the Voice of Khmer Youth Union Federation, the company's owner had been trying to sell the factory's machinery since declaring bankruptcy but had found no buyers. Workers said they were waiting to see if the sale of equipment would allow them to receive the wages and benefits they are owed.

## Pakistan: Utility workers shut off water to Hyderabad

After the Sindh provincial government ignored their three-day sit-down protest outside the Hyderabad Press Club and water filtration plants at Latifabad and Jamshoro in their dispute over unpaid wages and other long pending demands, frustrated workers of the Hyderabad Development Authority and its subsidiary Water and Sanitation Agency shut down the water supply to the city between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. on Tuesday.

The Hyderabad Development Authority Employees Union said its immediate demands were for payment of four months' overdue wages for permanent employees, six months' outstanding wages for contract workers, and all other overdue payments including the provident fund. Other demands were pensions for over 550 retired workers and reinstatement of laid-off employees. Over 850 regular workers and 1,300 contract workers are affected.

The workers have threatened to continue the water shut-downs for six hours every day if the government ignores them.

## Pakistan government hospital nurses walk out

Hundreds of nurses from several government hospitals in Sindh province walked out on Tuesday and demonstrated outside the Karachi Press Club to call for a pay rise, increased staffing levels and other demands. Nurses from all grades in most districts joined the strike.

The Joint Nurses Action Committee wants monthly pay lifted from 6,000 rupees (\$US57) to 20,000 rupees, a health allowance, provision of uniforms, a mess allowance, staff incentives equal to other provinces and the recruitment of another 1,000 nurses.

A nurses' representative said that there are only 3,000 nurses to care for millions of patients in Sindh public-sector hospitals, and that most basic health units and rural health centres had no nurses at all. Tertiary hospitals, such as Benazir Bhutto Hospital in Larkana, had 28 nurses but required more than 200. A nurse from the Peoples Medical University in Benazir claimed just one nurse was caring for 60 patients.

The nurses, who have begun a hunger strike outside the Karachi Press Club, said they would continue their protests.

### **Bangladeshi tea garden workers demonstrate**

Over 15,000 tea estate employees in north-eastern Bangladesh's Habiganj district are fighting government moves to seize land on which the workers cultivate paddy rice. The 14-month struggle has involved protests and limited strikes as well as violent reprisals by police.

Thousands of workers from four tea gardens stopped work for two hours on Tuesday and demonstrated in Chandpur to demand the government drop plans to construct a special economic zone (SEZ) on over 500 acres of their land.

The demonstration was triggered when the assistant commissioner (land) of the sub-district ordered police on Monday to seize four tractors and told workers to stop cultivating the land. The protesters were from the Chandpore Tea Estate, Ramgonga Tea Estate, Begumkhan Tea Estate and Jhal Bangla Tea Garden.

One villager with a five-member family said, "We will starve to death if the government acquires the land." Another said, "We have been living and cultivating here for more than 150 years, but still we do not have the ownership of the land."

The plantation workers said they would maintain their protests until the government cancels its SEZ construction project.

### **India: Kerala LPG bottling-plant workers strike**

Workers at the Indian Oil Limited (OIL) LPG bottling plant in Udyamperoor, Ernakulam district, Kerala downed tools indefinitely on Tuesday after a maintenance worker suffered an electrical shock and severe burns from an electrical flash. He was rushed to hospital by his colleague on a motorcycle.

Workers complained that there was no ambulance at the bottling plant, which also did not have adequate safety measures. The strikers want an ambulance at the site and other facilities to meet any emergency situation. Several meetings with the company and local government have failed. More meetings, however, are scheduled.

### **Andhra Pradesh government transport workers protest**

Long-distance bus workers at Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation (SRTC) demonstrated at the Kurnool Collector Office on Monday demanding identity cards, a minimum wage of 15,000 rupees (\$223.74) a month, Provident Fund and Employee State Insurance facilities and an end to management harassment. The workers were organised by the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU).

### **Karnataka steel workers' strike enters fiftieth week**

Workers from the steel fabrication manufacturer JSW Structures Limited (JSSL) in Bellari, Karnataka, who have been on strike since April 2016, are maintaining a protest tent outside the Bellari labour

department's office.

The strike began after five JSSL employees were terminated, 15 suspended and 29 transferred outside the state, in violation of the company's standing orders.

The strikers want reinstatement of the retrenched workers with back pay, revocation of the transfer orders, withdrawal of false cases lodged against workers and the convening of government-union-employer talks on pay revision.

The strikers, who are organised by the Krantikari Kamgar Union and Trade Union Centre of India (TUCI), marched in Bellari on February 5 to mark the 300th day of the strike. The unions, which cover tens of thousands of workers, have isolated the long-running strike.

### **Sri Lankan telecom union condemns striking contract workers**

The Telecommunications Workers Union and other Sri Lankan Telecom (SLT) unions have falsely claimed that if 2,100 striking manpower workers win their claims it will badly affect permanent workers' rights. The statements are a blatant attempt to drive a wedge between the striking outsource workers and permanent employees.

The strikers are employees of Human Capital Solutions, an outsourcing company. They 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 as new employees each year. This means it would take over 10 years to recruit all the 2,100 manpower workers. Their basic monthly salary would be reduced to 17,500 rupees, down from 30,000 rupees. Management has only agreed to integrate workers who have more than seven years' continuous service and are less than 50 years old, which means that considerable numbers cannot take up the offer.

The permanent workers' unions closed down a nine-day strike over 13 demands on January 11 and refused to support the striking outsourced employees. The permanent workers wanted a 20 percent pay rise, an end to wage disparity, increased medical allowances and a half-hour reduction in daily working hours. The unions accepted an inferior deal in which management offered 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.

### **Sri Lankan non-academic university workers strike**

Non-academic workers from all 14 government universities walked out for the day on Tuesday and demonstrated outside the University Grants Commission in Colombo to demand a higher monthly compensation allowance. The joint committee of the federation of trade unions coordinated the strike. Workers said that they would begin continuous strike action from February 15 if their demand is ignored.

### **Sri Lankan power workers protest**

Around 4,000 workers from the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) demonstrated at the board's Colombo head office on Monday demanding

a pay rise and for salary anomalies to be rectified. The protest was called by the Joint Trade Union Front of the CEB. The unions claim wage disparities increased for 90 percent of workers after they won a salary increase in 2015. Management has falsely promised to correct these disparities on multiple occasions. Workers have threatened indefinite strike action on February 15 if management failed to address their demands.

### **Australian public sector workers continue rolling stoppages**

Over 30,000 federal public servants from the Department of Human Services (DHS), which runs Centrelink, Medicare and the Child Support Agency and administers veterans' payments, will begin rolling strike action on February 13. It follows two weeks of rolling stoppages in December.

In order to have the least effect on the government, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) has organised micro-strikes of 30 minutes throughout the working day. The union says there will be other forms of industrial action at various locations across six days from mid- to late-February.

The walkouts are part of protected industrial action in a three-year dispute with the Liberal-National federal government over a new enterprise agreement (EA) affecting workers in over 100 federal departments.

The DHS has applied to the Fair Work Commission to stop strikes, claiming the action is mainly a protest over the failure of the newly-introduced computerised "robo-debt" collection system. Thousands of computer-generated letters have been sent to welfare recipients falsely claiming they have been overpaid and threatening to use debt collectors.

The industrial action follows DHS workers' overwhelming rejection in November, for the third time in 14 months, of the Turnbull government's proposed enterprise agreement. Nearly 75 percent of the 160,000-strong federal public sector workforce have rejected the government's pay offers over the past three years.

The government has ordered that all federal public sector EAs' annual wage increases be capped at 2 percent and that these be combined with cuts in benefits or working conditions. It has also declared that there will be no back-pay from the last agreement, in effect a three-year pay freeze for around 100,000 public sector workers.

The CPSU and other public service unions have opposed unified strike action or mass meetings of their members and have reduced their original pay demands from 4 percent annual increases for three years to between 2.5 and 3 percent. As with previous enterprise agreements, the unions have offered to assist the government devise new cost-cutting methods.

### **New South Wales disability workers to strike**

The Public Service Association (PSA) in New South Wales has called a strike and rally of its members in Sydney on February 14 in protest against cuts in disability services. The Industrial Relations Commission has ordered the union to call off the industrial action.

Disability care workers allege that with full privatisation of services under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), clients with complex behaviours needing highly specific and expensive needs would receive inferior care. These clients in the past were cared for in government-run facilities which have been either closed and the assets

sold or handed over to the private sector.

The NSW government passed legislation in 2013 which allowed for the forced transfer of public servants working in Ageing, Disability and Home Care (ADHC) to a private employer under NDIS. The NDIS was introduced by the previous federal Labor government.

The government plans to have the ADHC fully privatised by 2018. Disability workers fear that when they are forced to transfer to the private sector they will be forced onto lower pay and worse conditions.

### **Victoria: Lockout at Parmalat in fourth week**

Sixty maintenance and production workers at the Parmalat dairy-processing plant at Echuca in northern Victoria have been locked out since January 18 in a dispute over a new enterprise agreement. The workers, who are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and Electrical Trades Union (ETU), are maintaining a 24-hour picket outside the plant. A Parmalat spokesperson said the Echuca site would remain closed during conciliation talks with union representatives in the Fair Work Commission.

Negotiations for a new work agreement began in August. Parmalat offered a 3 percent pay rise in exchange for major cuts in the hourly pay of all new employees. The unions claim the company wants to reduce new employees' wages by \$8 an hour or 20 to 30 percent less than the existing hourly rate. Production workers are paid around \$30 an hour.

In November, Parmalat applied to have the existing enterprise agreement cancelled and employees placed under an inferior award. The Fair Work Commission was due to consider the company's application this month. The AMWU claims that if the company has its way employees would have to work two extra hours a week, wages would be almost halved and redundancy and other entitlements cut.

Parmalat is owned by French company Lactalis, the world's largest dairy products group. Parmalat, whose brands include Pauls, Vaalia and Oak, purchased the Echuca plant from Fonterra in February 2016.

### **New Zealand maritime union extends strike action at Lyttelton Port**

The Maritime Union of New Zealand (MUNZ) has extended weekend strike action at Lyttelton Port. The limited industrial action is designed to wear down workers' resolve.

Over 160 MUNZ members at the Lyttelton Port of Christchurch (LPC) container terminal have been striking each weekend since December 24 over a proposed new work agreement. Following failed negotiations last week, the union issued strike notices for weekends up to, and including, February 18-19. A court challenge by LPC over the legality of the strikes was rejected.

Workers are opposed to management demands for rostering changes to the current work agreement. They are concerned that management will be able to more easily cancel shifts or shorten the advance notice they must give to employees before starting new shifts.

The proposed collective agreement will cover about 60 percent of the terminal's workforce. Union members are maintaining weekend pickets outside the port terminal.



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