

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 March 2017

Asia

China: Volkswagen contract workers demand equal pay

More than 500 agency workers from the FAW-Volkswagen factory in the northeast city of Changchun demonstrated outside the local labour arbitration committee office on February 23 chanting “equal pay for equal work.” Protesters claimed that agency workers are paid significantly less than full employees despite years of service at the factory. Some workers complained that they receive just half the salary of permanent employees. The factory employs over 1,500 agency workers.

Workers decided to protest at the labour office after it failed to respond to their application for labour arbitration on February 13. In December workers met with the labour agency and the Changchun municipal trade union in a failed attempt to settle the dispute. In January workers rallied at the provincial Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security office, where they were only given hollow promises they would follow their case.

Volkswagen Changchun is a joint venture involving both Audi and Volkswagen, with state-owned firm FAW group having a majority stake. The plant produces Audi and Volkswagen-branded models.

Cambodia: Disabled garment workers protest

Twenty sacked disabled women workers from the Shimano (Cambodia) garment factory in Kampong Speu province demonstrated at the Cambodian Disabled People’s Organization (CDPO) headquarters in Phnom Penh on Monday. The women, 14 of whom use wheelchairs, said they were among nearly 90 disabled workers at the factory until they were dismissed without notice or reason on February 23.

The workers said they had been employed at the plant for between four and ten years and received severance pay between \$US1,278 and \$2,730. CDPO is representing their case to the government claiming discrimination and that they were illegally dismissed.

Cambodian garment workers get unpaid wages after equipment sale

Following months of protests, 500 workers from the bankrupt Kbal Koah Garment Company in Phnom Penh’s Chbar Ampov district received

part of their December salaries after the factory’s property was sold for \$130,000. The workers were owed up to \$180 each but only received \$100.

Kbal Koah Garment is owned by the shuttered Top World Garment Cambodia factory. Phnom Penh Municipal Court has issued a warrant for the temporary seizure of Top World’s equipment in order to force the owner to pay 200 workers’ outstanding salaries. Both factories were suddenly closed and the owner disappeared in January without paying December salaries.

Burmese wood factory workers maintain protest

Sixty striking workers at the Kan Kaung Chin Yadanar wood products factory in the Mandalay region are maintaining a sit-in protest that began on March 1 to demand reinstatement of piece-job rates and benefits. Workers claim that factory management cut the rates and benefits after the introduction of the 3,600 kyat (\$US6.25) daily minimum wage law in 2015. The factory has over 2,000 employees.

Other demands include working hours limited to 44 per week, entitlement to welfare and employment benefits as per existing labour laws, access to a company doctor, rest areas for workers at the factory, and the right to protest without fear of being fired.

A representative from Singaing township said they had successfully negotiated eight out of the workers’ ten demands, but the employer refused to negotiate on lunch breaks and restoration of the previous pay rate.

Indonesian copper smelter workers on strike

Around 390 workers at copper smelter PT Smelting in Gresik, Java are maintaining strike action begun on January 19, despite threats from the company that they will be replaced and the smelter reopened by mid-March. PT Smelting is jointly owned by Mitsubishi Materials Corporation and Freeport Indonesia.

Members of the Indonesian Metal Workers Union are striking over wage disparity. A union spokesman said that workers were angry that the company only provided a 5 percent raise to their salary, while managerial employees received a 170 percent increase.

Indonesian fast food workers protest

Sacked workers from the fast food chain Champ Resto have been holding weekly demonstrations outside its restaurants in cities across Java since August demanding reinstatement. Over 80 workers were sacked in 2015 when they held demonstrations outside Champ Resto restaurants at different locations over non-payment into the mandatory government health insurance program for employees and their families.

Workers only became aware that the company had failed to register them in the health scheme in November 2015 when a Champ Resto worker's new-born baby died after the child was refused essential hospital care. Workers said the company has refused to comply with recommendations made last September to reinstate them by three provincial labour departments.

Nepalese dam construction workers strike

Locally hired workers on the Bheri-Babai Multipurpose Diversion (dam) Project downed tools on March 1, after a Nepali worker was assaulted by his foreman, a Chinese national, for not washing the company's vehicle. All construction work stopped due to the strike. Workers demanded action against the foreman and called for an increase in wages and allowances.

A senior project engineer from the China Overseas Engineering Group Limited said the foreman was fired after the incident and requested that workers enter negotiations on their other demands.

Pakistan: Karachi trainee doctors protest

Postgraduate trainee doctors at the Dow International Medical College of the Dow University Hospital in Karachi stopped work on March 2 demanding three months of unpaid wages and that university authorities stop assigning them duties outside their contract.

When the doctors turned up at the vice chancellor's office for a scheduled meeting he called in paramilitary rangers who turned them away and threatened to throw them off the hospital premises. As a result, the Young Doctors Association warned that the boycott of duties would continue, except in emergency departments, until the issues were resolved.

Hyderabad doctors intensify industrial action

Doctors and trainee doctors from the Liaquat University Hospital appointed to Hyderabad and Jamshoro hospital branches have expanded their daily rolling stoppages begun on February 27, from two to three hours, taking effect on Tuesday. The limited stoppages have impacted on the functioning of the outpatient departments. A sit-in protest was held outside the Hyderabad hospital in Liberty Chowk affecting traffic flow in the city.

The doctors want a pay increase for more than 250 postgraduates and the implementation of higher paid positions in the hospital as announced by the government last year, increasing such positions from 276 to 500. Another key demand is for authorities to immediately pay 14 months' outstanding salaries to more than 200 trainee doctors.

India: Jammu and Kashmir national health workers maintain strike

Contract workers from the National Health Mission (NHM) have been on a state-wide strike since March 1 demanding jobs as full-time government employees and equal pay for equal work. The 13,000 workers involved in the strike include doctors, paramedical staff, technicians, lab assistants and nurses who were recruited into the NHM scheme in 2007. Hospital medical services were severely affected.

A march by several hundred strikers in Srinagar on Monday was violently dispersed by police using water-canon, teargas and batons. Dozens of workers were taken into custody. The workers are organised by the All J&K National Health Mission Employees Association and the Health and Family Welfare Employees Confederation.

Orissa school teachers threaten state-wide strike

Teachers at block grant colleges in Odisha have threatened to hold a state wide strike on March 15 and demonstrate at the state assembly on March 18 as part of a long running dispute for salary increases as per the Seventh Pay Commission and for job permanency. This will give them pay parity and the same entitlements as full-time government employees.

According to the School Teachers' Federation of Odisha (STFO), over 40,000 contracted teachers at 4,000 block grant colleges have been demanding the abolition of the block grant system for over two years. The teachers ended a 40-day strike over the issues in September 2015 after the government "at a high level" said it would address their demands.

A 50-day strike in February/March last year over the same issues was shut down by the STFO after the high court ordered the Odisha government to submit an affidavit on what it had done to resolve the issues. The STFO leaders told teachers to wait until after the hearing to decide on further action. The government made several commitments to increase teachers' salaries and entitlements that were never fully implemented.

Karnataka rural health workers protest

Rural healthcare workers and assistants (anganwadi workers) demonstrated outside the Women and Child Welfare Department deputy director's office in Kalaburagi on Monday. They were demanding the government reinstate 12 anganwadi workers and assistants who were abruptly dismissed from service two years ago. The workers said the government has refused to release the findings of an official investigation into the dismissals, which was finalised three months ago. The protest was called by the Karnataka State Anganwadi Workers Association.

Sri Lankan university teachers strike

Teachers from most universities across Sri Lanka walked out for the day on Wednesday to demand the withdrawal of a salary circular issued by the University Grants Commission, which they claimed erroneously provided for deductions from their salaries.

A Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA) spokesman

said the government circular affected university teachers badly because their allowances are higher than their basic salaries. He added that an indefinite strike would be called if the government continued to ignore their demand.

Australia and the Pacific

New South Wales: Sydney bus drivers hold more strikes

Following over two years of failed negotiations for a new work agreement, 200 bus drivers of private operator Transit Systems walked off the job on Tuesday between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m. and 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. Commuters on 50 routes in Parramatta, Liverpool, Merrylands and Blacktown were affected. Their action followed a two-hour stoppage on February 27. The drivers have not had a pay increase for two and a half years.

The dispute began in August 2015, when drivers rejected the company's first enterprise agreement offer, which included a 3 percent pay increase but was not back dated. At that time Transport Workers Union (TWU) members blockaded buses entering or leaving the western Sydney, Smithfield depot of Transit Systems. Drivers said they want wages on par with other bus drivers in the industry.

TWU members rejected the company's last pay offer in February, claiming it meant they would remain the lowest paid drivers in NSW. The TWU claim that Transit Systems is withholding over \$1,136 million of government funding earmarked for increasing drivers' wages.

NSW: Central Coast garbage collectors strike over pay cut

Garbage collection workers on New South Wales' Central Coast, north of Sydney, are threatened with a \$300 a week pay cut after their employer Remondis received permission from the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to cancel the current enterprise agreement if a negotiated agreement cannot be reached by 2018. The workers would then come under the inferior industry award.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) members walked out for 24 hours on Wednesday stopping garbage collection in several suburbs of the Central Coast Council jurisdiction. Their action followed limited stoppages this year and a five-day strike last June over failed negotiations for a new enterprise agreement. Remondis proposed that workers accept a 25 percent pay cut to secure its contract with the Central Coast Council.

The workers want a clause inserted into the council's tender for waste services that protect local jobs, existing workers and their conditions. They also want clauses protecting current conditions if the council renews its contract in 2018 and for temporary outsourced employees to be paid the same as other depot workers. The garbage collection workers fear that future contracts will force them onto general award conditions that pay nearly 30 percent below their current rate.

The TWU has dragged out the dispute for over eight months claiming that limited strike action would force Remondis and the Central Coast Council to maintain their current wages and conditions.

NSW: Pacific Highway construction workers on strike

Over 100 construction workers on the Lendlease project on the Port Macquarie to Kundabung Pacific Highway upgrade walked off the job on Thursday in a dispute over a new work agreement with Telum labour hire. The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) claim that Telum wants workers to accept an effective wage cut but workers want 4.5 percent annual wage increases over the life of the agreement.

A CFMEU representative said that despite the union making some concessions the company has refused to enter talks following the January 13 vote to take strike action.

Australian childcare workers strike on international women's day

More than 1,000 childcare centre workers walked off the job nationally on Wednesday afternoon and rallied in capital cities to demand higher wages in the childhood education sector. The United Voice union said the walkout was a protest over "gross underpayment" of what is a predominantly female workforce. The union appealed to the Turnbull Liberal government for additional funding for pay increases.

The action had been planned to coincide with International Women's Day to draw commentary over the large pay gap between male- and female-dominated professions. An educator on the base rate for certificate III only receives \$20 an hour, slightly above the minimum wage, while workers who have diploma-level training receive between \$23 and \$25 an hour.

While the union attempts to blame the low wages in the sector on the fact that over 80 percent of educators are female, this perception ignores the broader trend across all industries towards falling or stagnant wages, as part of a general assault over several decades on workers' pay and conditions. The Fair Work Commission (FWC) ruled last month that penalty rates for work on Sunday and public holidays will be reduced for full-time and part-time workers in the hospitality, retail and fast-food industries, reducing the annual wage in the sectors by up to \$6,000.

Locked out Parmalat workers reject latest wage proposal

In a ballot held on March 3, locked out workers at the Parmalat dairy processing plant at Echuca in northern Victoria voted 67 to 1 to reject the company's latest proposed enterprise agreement (EA). Parmalat decided to hold the ballot after it was unable to make a deal with union representatives during conciliation talks in the FWC.

Over 60 maintenance and production workers at the plant have been locked out since January 18. 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.

Parmalat has tried to pressure the workers into accepting its proposed EA by applying to the FWC to have the existing agreement terminated and then forcing them onto the inferior industry award.

Negotiations for a new work agreement began in August. Parmalat offered a 9 percent pay rise over three years for permanent workers 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.

Papua New Guinea communications workers on strike

Around 500 workers from Telikom PNG in Port Moresby have been on strike since March 2 to oppose the government's telecommunication restructure plan. The O'Neill government passed legislation in December that allowed for the merging of Telikom PNG, bmobile and DataCo into a new entity Kumul Telikom Holdings Limited.

Some 150 members of the PNG Communication Workers Union, and non-union workers, are concerned over job security. Telikom has over 500 employees who would lose their jobs under the merger legislation. They would be offered employment in the new communications entity on a six-month probation period.

The union said workers would remain on strike until the government's National Executive Council (NEC) decision 360/2017 was rescinded in its entirety and that Telikom PNG, bmobile and DataCo not be merged.



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