

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 March 2017

Burma: Hundred-Tex garment factory ends lockout

Around 500 workers at the Chinese owned Hundred-Tex garment factory in the Shwe Lin Ban industrial zone, Yangon, returned to work this week after the company lifted a three-week lockout and accepted the workers' demands. Workers complained that they had been paid less than the daily minimum wage of 3,600 kyat (\$2.65), had not received overtime payments according to the law, and the customary skills bonus had been withheld.

In order to end protests in December management falsely assured workers it would adhere to the labour laws and meet their demands. The promise was not kept and the angry workers walked out on January 30, after the sacking of a union leader.

Striking workers attempted to occupy the factory on February 23 but were immediately evicted. They agreed to return to work on February 25 after the Yangon Region Arbitration Council ordered the company to reinstate the sacked union leader. Management, however, closed the factory, claiming it needed to repair equipment damaged during the occupation.

The Yangon factory was established three years ago. The minimum monthly wage in Hangzhou, China, the company's former production base, is 1,860 yuan (\$US269) or more than three times the rate in Yangon.

Burmese bread factory workers strike

More than 400 Myanmar Mayson (Good Morning) bread workers in Hlaingthaya, western Yangon, have been picketing the plant since March 8 to protest the sacking of 193 employees. They allege that their sacked colleagues, some with 19 years' service, were terminated as punishment for asking for labour rights.

The strikers want reinstatement of the sacked employees, an end to dismissals without discussions with the union, pay rises, better transport to and from work, a 24-hour health clinic and a recreation area. A Basic Workers Labour Union representative said a complaint was lodged with the township dispute committee and that workers would remain on strike until their demands were met.

Burmese workers protest at a fish canning factory in Thailand

Over 800 Burmese workers at the Golden Prize fish cannery in Mahachai, Thailand demonstrated outside the factory on Sunday over the violation of employees' rights.

A spokesman from the Thai-based Aid Alliance Committee said workers want Golden Prize to allow them to apply for passports and new identity cards, to stop unfair wage cuts, to repair toilets and to provide drinking water. Pressured by Thai authorities and Burmese embassy officials, the employer accepted the workers' demands.

Cambodian garment workers demand wages

Around 600 workers from Bodykids Fashion Wear in Phnom Penh held a two-day protest at their factory on March 10 after not receiving wages for February. Workers fear that the owner has gone bankrupt and has absconded. A spokesman from the Union for Cambodia Workers said it is common for a factory not to announce bankruptcy to avoid their legal obligation for severance pay. Total wages unpaid to these workers is around \$140,000.

Pakistan: Chakwal district health workers protest

Hundreds of National Programme for Family Planning and Primary Healthcare workers in the Chakwal district demonstrated on Tuesday, demanding removal of the programme's account supervisor. Lady health workers, health supervisors and drivers have accused the account supervisor of making fake entries of the amount of work they performed and robbing them of 3.5 million rupees (\$US53,640).

The health workers' other demands included job permanency for those who joined the department in July 2012 and remuneration for using their services for additional campaigns, such as the polio eradication or anti-dengue campaigns.

Karachi university teachers protest military occupation

Karachi University Teachers Society members wore black armbands and put up banners on March 10 to protest university authorities providing military personal with accommodation at the tertiary institution.

The teachers accused the administration of acting in opposition to a previous unanimous decision by the administration and teachers not to allow military on the university premises.

Meanwhile, the military, which is supposedly seeking six weeks' accommodation to participate in a government census, has already occupied several buildings. These include the pharmacy faculty building,

gymnasium, guest house, foreign faculty hostels and special education department building. The military has already posted armed guards and a check point at the university.

Bangladeshi tea garden workers rally

At least 5,000 teagarden workers from the Chunarughat sub-district in Bangladesh's Habiganj district held a one-day rally on March 11 to oppose the government's seizure of land for a special economic zone (SEZ). Workers at tea estates in Chandpur, Begum Khan and Jualbhanga tea gardens held a two-hour work stoppage that day to support the rally.

The tea workers have been holding strikes and demonstrations since December 2015 over the issue. The government wants to establish 100 SEZs over the next 15 years on publicly-owned land traditionally cultivated by locals to supplement their meagre wages.

India: Jammu and Kashmir power utility workers strike

Power Development Department (PDD) workers in Jammu and Kashmir held a two-day strike on Wednesday over long outstanding demands. A spokesman from the Jammu and Kashmir Employees Electrical Union (JKEEU) said the state government had repeatedly ignored workers' grievances.

The power workers want safety tools at all receiving stations, guidelines segregating the works of employees at different ranks, training for all employees as per national guidelines, amendment in welfare fund rules, casual workers' pay increased in line with permanent employees and compensation to families of workers injured or killed on the job.

Tamil Nadu auto workers protest

Truck and bus assembly workers at Ashok Leyland's Unit II plant in Hosur began a protest hunger strike on March 10 to demand wage parity with the fellow employees at a neighbouring sister plant.

The Hosur Ashok Leyland (Unit II) Employees Union said that the last wage agreement, which covers the plant's 1,600 workers, was made in 2013 and should have been renegotiated last year. Workers decided to take action because management, after several months of talks, offered a wage increase but failed to address the pay disparity issue.

National strike by Sri Lankan nurses

Up to 5,000 Public Services United Nurses Union (PSUNU) members began a national a two-day sick note campaign on Tuesday over a charter of demands. The strike followed a March 1 demonstration outside the Sri Lankan health ministry in Colombo.

The public hospital nurses want changes to salary anomalies, a 25,000-rupee professional allowance, increases in uniform, inventory and risk allowances, the promotion of nurses with 12 years' service to grade one positions and a nurse director's position in the health ministry. The

PSUNU has threatened further industrial action if its demands are not met.

Sri Lankan power workers strike

Around 15,000 employees of Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) struck for 24 hours on Wednesday to demand a correction to salary disparities between lower grade workers and engineers at the state-owned enterprise. Workers have threatened an indefinite strike if management fails to address their demand.

Northern Territory construction workers protest mass sackings

A group of sacked workers from the \$34 billion Impex-led Ichthys LNG Plant in the Northern Territory demonstrated outside Laing O'Rourke's offices in Darwin on Wednesday morning. Over 644 direct employees of Laing O'Rourke and 200 sub-contractors were told early Wednesday that they were redundant because of a pay dispute between Laing O'Rourke and Kawasaki Heavy Industries.

One worker told the media the announcement was a shock and they were not given time to get their personal tools. Some said they had signed leases or bought houses thinking they still had six month's work at the project.

Laing O'Rourke has the contract to build cryogenic tanks for the Ichthys project on behalf of Kawasaki, one of the largest contracts on the project. The Electrical Trades Union and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union have lodged an application in the Fair Work Commission claiming Laing O'Rourke had failed to consult on major changes at the project.

In January 500 workers' jobs at Ichthys were abruptly terminated over a \$600 million pay dispute between the managing contractor JKC and sub-contractor UGL. At least 1,400 workers have been made redundant this year, before construction is completed.

Federal public servants resume strike action

Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members at the 34,000-strong Department of Human Services (DHS), which runs Centrelink, Medicare and the Child Support Agency, resumed limited strike action on Friday. The action is part of a three year enterprise agreement dispute with the Liberal-National federal government.

Last month the CPSU called off scheduled rolling 30-minute strikes due to begin on February 13 and entered talks in the Fair Work Commission. The talks were deadlocked last week.

Last November DHS workers overwhelmingly rejected, for the third time in 14 months, a proposed enterprise agreement offer from the Turnbull government. Nearly 75 percent of the 160,000-strong federal public sector workforce have rejected the government's pay offers during the past three years.

The government wants all federal public sector annual wage increases 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 claimed that the last round of FWC talks failed because DHS management was still demanding cuts in essential rights and working conditions. The union said its members would be taking more significant action over coming months.

Uber drivers in Melbourne and Brisbane strike

According to the Ride Share Drivers United (RSDU) group, more than 2,000 Uber registered drivers in Melbourne and Brisbane participated in its call for a “No Uber Tuesday” Log-Off protest. Uber drivers say they are paid significantly below the minimum wage.

RSDU claimed that the drivers are being financially squeezed and that under Uber contract arrangements they have no bargaining power. The drivers want an increase in minimum rates of pay, a limit of 12 hours per shift, and a softening of the deactivation policy which bans low-rated drivers from using the ride-share app.

Uber drivers in other major cities like New York City and New Delhi and Bangalore in India have also been protesting against the US-based company's decision to reduce fares.

New Zealand: University of Auckland academics strike

Tertiary Education Union (TEU) members at the University of Auckland walked out for half a day on Thursday in a dispute over a proposed new pay agreement. Their action follows seven months of negotiations with university management. TEU members want a pay rise that closes the gap between highest and lowest paid workers.

Members want a 1.2 percent pay increase in 2017, followed by a flat rate pay rise of \$1,200 from 1 February 2018, as well as an increase of \$3,500 for those at the bottom of the professional pay scale. Management proposed a 1.2 percent increase for two consecutive years, with a commitment to discuss the merits of a flat rate rise after the first year.



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