

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 April 2017

Bangladeshi bus drivers on wildcat strike

In defiance of their union, bus drivers and helpers in Tangail, Dhaka division took strike action on March 30 in protest against the Road Transport Act 2017, which was approved by cabinet on March 27. They were joined by transport workers plying routes in Jessore, Khulna, Magura and Narail on Sunday. The Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation said it did not support the strike.

Transport workers are concerned about stricter conditions to obtain an operator's license and heavy new penalties for any infringements. One driver told the media that they do not accept that all drivers need to complete class eight in order to qualify for a driver's licence.

Bangladeshi municipal workers strike

Around 1,600 temporary workers and 541 class-II and III staff from the Barisal City Corporation (BCC), 120km south of Dhaka, ended a week-long strike on Sunday after the corporation agreed to pay overdue wages. The workers, mainly garbage collectors employed by a manpower company, walked out on March 27 to demand payment of five months' salaries and provident fund.

Pakistan: Government hospital workers in Lahore protest

Paramedical workers, including laboratory technicians, operating theatre staff, dispensers and other hospital workers, held sit-in protests at the Punjab Institute of Cardiology, Lahore General Hospital, Services Hospital and Mental Hospital in Lahore on March 30. They were protesting against the proposed privatisation of public sector hospitals. Other demands included legislation of professional allowances, risk allowances and restructuring of all staff from grade 1 to grade 16.

The action by members of the Pakistan Allied Health Professionals' Organisation (PAHPO) follows a series of demonstrations outside the hospitals over several days. A PAHPO representative said that most of the paramedics and health professionals have been working on contracts or for daily wages for the past five to 20 years. Their wages, he claimed, had not been increased for "many" years.

India: Tamil Nadu rural employment scheme workers protest

A group of over 30 workers, mostly women from three villages in Ramanathapuram district employed in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS), demonstrated outside the Ramanathapuram Collectors' Office on Monday. Their spokesperson said at least 300 MNREGS workers in Vellathur, Kattukkudi and Manjur villages had not been paid wages for nine months. Due to recent crop failures and the lack of farm work the women depend entirely on the meagre wages from the employment scheme.

Vietnamese garment workers strike

Some 1,000 workers at the Indonesian-owned Mei Sheng Textiles in Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province refused to work on Monday. They were demanding the sacking of the newly appointed Chinese manager over new work rules he had imposed.

Workers complained that management limited food and water that employees could take to work and that pregnant women were banned from bringing milk. They also complained that canteen food was poor quality, break times strictly controlled and working hours had been extended. Workers said that anyone violating the rules had their wages cut by 10 percent for a first offense, 20 percent on the second offense and sacked fired after the third violation.

Later that day, the factory owner told strikers that the manager had been replaced and that requests about bringing food and water and improving the quality of canteen food would be met.

Burmese farmers protest over confiscation of their land

Over 300 farmers from five townships in Mandalay region demonstrated in Singu on March 29 to demand the immediate release of a fellow farmer and to drop what they claim were unfair charges against other arrested farmers. Protesters claimed that the farmers were charged under a Penal Code for robbery after they ploughed confiscated land that they had previously owned.

The protest was one of many over several years by angry farmers attempting to reclaim over 3,000 acres of their land confiscated in the 1970s by the Burmese army under the control of former dictator General Ne Win.

South Australia: Light-City Bus drivers' union calls off strike

The Transport Workers Union (TWU), representing drivers of one of Adelaide's three commuter bus service providers Light-City Bus (LCB), called off a planned 24-hour strike this week. It followed a tentative agreement with the state Labor government in their dispute over a proposed enterprise agreement. Previous industrial action was suspended by the TWU after it reached an "in principled agreement" with LCB on March 15. The deal was rejected by members. Another modified proposal was rejected by members last Saturday.

The TWU is demanding annual 3 percent pay increases to secure pay parity with others in the Adelaide metro network, a reduction in broken shifts, no broken shifts on weekends, and regular start and finish times. The LCB wanted to limit the wage increases to 1.9 percent, extend unpaid break in broken shifts to five hours, increase casualisation of the workforce—from 15 to 30 percent—and other demands.

The drivers are yet to vote on the proposal. The TWU and LCB have not released details of the new proposal other than to claim that it included an improved pay offer and shift rosters.

Victorian: Disability support workers in Bendigo protest

Around 40 disability support workers and carers walked off the job on Thursday and marched through Bendigo and rallied outside the local Labor MP's office. They were protesting the Labor state government's plan to privatise disability support services under the former Gillard federal Labor government's Nation Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Health and Community Services Union members claimed that the scheme was grossly underfunded, services would be cut and at least 200 jobs were at risk.

The Liberal government in New South Wales (NSW) 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. Jobs have been slashed and wages cut. The NSW government wants the ADHC fully privatised by 2018.

Federal public servants continue strike action

Community and Public Sector Union members at the 34,000-strong Department of Human Services (DHS) will begin another series of strikes commencing with a four-hour strike on April 13 and running through to April 26. There will be six full-day strikes for April 18 through to 25. The walkouts follow limited rolling strikes in December.

The action is part of a three-year enterprise agreement dispute with the Liberal-National federal government. Last November DHS workers overwhelmingly rejected, for the third time in 14 months, a proposed enterprise agreement offer from the Turnbull government. DHS runs Centrelink, Medicare and the Child Support Agency.

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.

New Zealand disability support workers vote to strike

Some 98 percent of E tu union members at IDEA Services, which is funded by the government through the organisation Intellectually Handicapped Children's Association, voted this week to take industrial action following the Easter holidays. Half of IDEA's 3,000 disability support employees are members of the union.

The vote follows six months of negotiations for a pay rise for administration and support workers. The union claims that these employees are only paid a maximum of \$18 an hour, which is less than the official Living Wage. The E Tu said IDEA has made no pay offer, has ignored critical health and safety issues around current staffing levels and not agreed to job protection.

IDEA refused to make a pay offer during negotiations and is now refusing to enter further talks, claiming it is waiting for the government to finalise funding in the disability sector. The vote for the strike came five days after IDEA announced it intended to cut services by five percent. Details of the strike are expected to be released following a union meeting next week.

Vanuatu airport refuelling crews on strike

Over 75 employees of Pacific Petroleum Company, in Port Vila and Luganville, Santo, walked off the job for six hours on Monday over working conditions. All Air Vanuatu domestic flights were cancelled and Pacific Petroleum fuel outlets in Port Vela closed.

The Vanuatu National Workers Union members said that the negotiating time allowed for their grievances to be dealt with lapsed last week. Details of their demands have not been made public.

Vanuatu senior nurses in Port Vila protest

Over 30 senior nurses at Vanuatu's main referral hospital in Port Vila walked off the job on March 27 to protest delays in paying new salary increments and over pay anomalies associated with the recruitment of 50 new graduates on contract under the new health structure. Nurses at the Vila Central Hospital complained that contract graduates had been placed in senior positions on salaries higher than existing permanent senior nurses.

Members of the Vanuatu Nursing Association demonstrated outside the Public Service Commission's office.



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