

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 April 2017

India: Delhi cab drivers strike

Over 150,000 cab drivers in Delhi, including Ola, Uber and Delhi Taxi Tourist Transporters Association (DTTTA -Kalee-peeli) drivers as well as auto-rickshaw drivers struck for 24 hours on Tuesday over a range of issues. The walkout was originally called as part of a long-running dispute by Ola and Uber drivers over fares charged by app-based taxi services and the gradual tightening of incentive payments by the companies. Kalee-peeli cab drivers and auto-rickshaw drivers, who previously opposed the introduction of apps-based cabs, joined the strike with similar demands.

A DTTTA representative told the media, “Drivers of Ola-Uber are suffering because they are working like bonded labourers and are earning a pittance. Like we have always been demanding, they also want meters installed in cabs and rates to be fixed by the government. Our issues have now become common and so we will fight together,” he said.

Ola-Uber drivers want fares regulated by the government and increased from 6 to 20 rupees per kilometre and the 25 percent commission cab companies collect for every booking. Their action followed a two-week strike in February by Ola and Uber drivers which was called off by their union, the Sarvodaya Drivers’ Association of Delhi, after the government and apps-based operators falsely promised to resolve their grievances.

Punjab state government contract workers protest

Thousands of government contract workers in Bathinda, southern Punjab, demonstrated outside the deputy commissioner’s office on Monday to demand job permanency as promised in the last state election. They also want 26 days’ maternity leave for female contract workers, reinstatement of suspended water supply and sanitation department workers and withdrawal of false police charges against workers involved in the previous protest.

The workers called on the government to set aside the eligibility criteria, such as educational qualification and age limit requirements for permanency. These should not apply, they say, because they have been employed in their jobs for many years. They also complained that the previous state government promised to make all contract workers permanent. Instead it suspended around 27,000 water supply and sanitation department employees.

Himachal Pradesh private school workers demonstrate

Some 30 terminated workers from the Christian-run Auckland House

School in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, held a 24-hour protest outside the school on Monday demanding their reinstatement. They were hired through a contract company but the school authorities fired them in December, claiming their contract had expired.

The workers, who were represented by the Confederation of Indian Trade Unions, claimed, however, that they were fired illegally because as they were direct employees of the school which provided them with living quarters on the premises.

Andhra Pradesh tour bus drivers and cleaners demand unpaid wages

Over 100 Kesineni Tours and Travels drivers and cleaners demonstrated in Kesineni Bhavan in Vijayawada city on Monday to demand 10 months’ unpaid salaries. Vijayawada MP Kesineni Srinivas, who owns the inter-city bus transport company, closed the company without notice and sacked over 400 employees. Many had worked for the company for several decades.

Drivers and cleaners said that they had been forced to take high-interest loans of up to 30,000 rupees (\$US464) because they had not been paid. Srinivas has refused to meet with the workers and has threatened them with police charges if they continue demanding their pay.

Ahmedabad starch factory workers demand wages

Around 35 employees from the Ahmedabad-based starch manufacturer Anil Limited demonstrated at the labour commissioner’s office in Ahmedabad on Monday demanding assistance to recover unpaid wages. The company’s Bapunagar plant employs over 400 workers who have not been paid for four months and 200 office staff who have not received wages for six months.

Workers said although the plant is still operating, at least 100 workers have found alternative employment. The labour commissioner admitted that he already knew of the dispute and claimed to be doing “everything legal” to recover the wages.

Nepalese sugar farmers protest

Sugar plantation farmers in Rautahat province, Nepal, have taken control of the warehouse of the privately owned Garuda-based Shreeram Sugar Mill to demand payment for cane they sold to the company. They

have blocked the transport of refined sugar from the warehouse until they are paid.

A Sugarcane Producers' Association of Rautahat spokesman claimed the mill owes farmers 180 million rupees (\$US1.7 million) for sugarcane purchased in 2015–16 and 50 million rupees for cane purchased since December.

Pakistan: Lahore public school teachers protest

Punjab Teachers Union (PTU) members demonstrated in Lahore on Tuesday in protest against the government's plan to hand over selected public schools to the Daanish Schools Authority and other issues. There have been three demonstrations held since January over this issue. A protest was called off on February 1 after negotiations and false promises from the government to resolve the teachers' grievances.

Long-pending demands include stopping disciplinary action against "negligent" school heads, pay increases, the resolution of pending promotions and making temporary positions permanent and an end to the privatisation of public schools in Punjab province.

Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa government teachers protest

Government school teachers in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province are demonstrating over seven demands. These include a pay increase, time-scale promotions, teaching allowances and paid leave, and a job quota for deceased teachers' children. They held protests between April 11 and April 15 in Nowshera, Mardan, Charssadda and Swabi. The government has continued to ignore their demands.

The All Teachers Coordination Council, a combined body of all school (primary, middle and high) teachers, organised a protest in Peshawar on April 20. Their action has disrupted student enrolments which began on April 18.

Filipino banana packers strike

Hundreds of banana plantation workers at eight packing plants in the Compostela Valley in the Davao Region in Mindanao walked off the job on Tuesday demanding abolition of the piece-rate wage system. A Maparat-Monte Vista Worker's Union representative told the media that the piece-rate system, also known as "pakyawan," forced workers to labour for 12 hours a day for just 310 pesos (\$US6.22). This is less than the official 330 pesos per day for agricultural workers in the region.

Over 130 striking workers at the Japanese-owned Sumifru banana packing plant returned to work after 13 hours on Tuesday when management agreed to scrap the piece-rate system and install an hourly payment scheme. The company has used the piece-rate system since 2015.

Taiwan textile workers protest

Terminated workers from the textile manufacturer Lilytex Group in

Taipei demonstrated outside Taiwan's ministry of labor on Tuesday. The accused the Lilytex of breaking a promise to pay workers severance pay above the legal minimum. The company abruptly shut operations in late March, leaving its 28 workers unemployed.

The textile workers claim they were given the statutory 60-days' notice before the factory's closure and that their severance pay was less than previous terminated workers received. A union spokesman said some of the workers were just two months away from retirement and had lost approximately \$300,000 (\$US9,870) in retirement benefits.

Victorian plywood mill workers locked out

Some 160 full time workers and 47 casuals at the Carter Holt Harvey plywood mill at Myrtleford in Victoria's northeast were locked out on April 19 in a dispute over a new work agreement. The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) said that after 12 months of stalled negotiations workers voted to take protected industrial action in the form of rolling stoppages and an overtime ban over three days starting on Wednesday.

At 2 a.m. on Wednesday, however, security guards escorted workers out of the mill, locking them out and erecting temporary fencing. The company said the lockout was indefinite.

The workers, who are holding a picket in rolling shifts at the plant's front gate, want a 3 percent pay rise annually over three years, one week's annual leave allowable in the Christmas holiday period and better access to income protection insurance. A CFMEU spokesman said the company wanted one nationwide agreement for all its sites and has imposed a 2 percent pay increase at its Tumut and Morwell mills.

Queensland power station workers to vote on new agreement

Workers employed by NRG at the Gladstone Power Station in Queensland will vote at the end of April on the company's latest enterprise agreement. The ballot by members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Services Union follows six months of stalled negotiations and a protest in February.

NRG released its latest offer this week claiming it contains no changes to current wages, hours, leave, superannuation and other benefits to existing employees and that all award protections such as consultation and redundancy provisions are maintained. Workers claim, however, that the agreement offer is two-tiered and that if accepted would allow the company to employ new recruits on contract and under reduced wages and conditions.

The unions claim the latest proposal is an improvement on NRG's past proposals and the company says it is in line with the rest of the power industry. The unions did not indicate whether they would recommend the proposal to its members.

New Zealand Defence Force civilian workers strike

Around 600 members of the Public Service Association (PSA) employed at various locations of the New Zealand Defence Force began strike action this week to demand a pay increase. The workers, including

logistics staff, catering, security guards and IT employees, walked out at Palmerston North on Thursday and Wellington on Friday. Two strikes are planned for next week at the Devonport Naval Base in Auckland.

The workers have not had a wage rise for three years and claim they are paid \$10,000 a year less than others doing the same jobs at similar organisations. According to the PSA, defence force senior management oppose pay increases in a new collective employment agreement.

Saipan casino construction workers protest

More than 50 contract construction workers at a casino resort on the Pacific island of Saipan in the Northern Marianas (a US territory) staged a street protest on April 14 over outstanding wages. They also protested over “sub-standard” living conditions. The Chinese workers said they had not been paid by casino contractor MCC International Saipan, a unit of state-owned Metallurgical Corporation of China Ltd, since February.

According to Reuters, MCC and another contract company, Beilida Overseas (CNMI) Ltd, were charged by the US government on April 3 with illegally importing and employing Chinese workers, including one who died in March. A government official accused the workers of entering the country on tourist visas, callously declaring, “No passports. No work. No money.”



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