Sri Lankan nurses strike over fingerprint attendance system; Australian power workers vote for industrial action

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 January 2018

Contract sanitation workers in Bihar demand permanency

Over 200 striking contract sanitation workers demonstrated outside Munger municipal corporation offices in Patna last Friday to demand full time jobs and higher wages. The workers are not directly employed by the corporation but through the Nagar Nigam non-government organisation. They walked out on strike on January 5 and have also demanded fixed salary rates and on-time payment of their wages.

The Bihar state government and local councils have systematically outsourced thousands of public sector jobs in recent years in order to slash costs and relieve themselves of having to pay pensions and other requirements for full time workers.

An estimated 10,000 state sector jobs, including in health, education, urban development, education and social welfare, as well as manual labour work, have been outsourced.

Pakistan: Karachi school teachers attacked by police again

On January 4, All Sindh Primary Teachers Association (ASPTA), Primary Teachers Association (PTA) and New Teachers Action Committee (NTAC) members were attacked by police during their eleventh consecutive day of demonstrations outside the Karachi Press Club. The unions represent about 70,000 teachers in Sindh.

The police used batons, tear gas and water cannons when the teachers again attempted to march to the chief minister's house. It was the third assault in less than a week.

ASPTA members want permanency for contract teachers and teachers who have been evaluated prior to being appointed to primary, secondary and high schools. They have rejected the government's offer to re-evaluate these teachers by the National Testing Service (NTS) saying they are already qualified. PTA members want the government to honour a promise given in 2014 to promote them to Grade 16. NTAC members want payment of overdue wages for teachers appointed in 2012, an issue they have protested over for more than five years.

After the January 4 police attack, the Sindh chief minister said that he had agreed to some of the teachers' demands. It is not clear, however, if he has made any directives to that effect.

According to his announcement, 21,000 NTS qualified teachers would be made permanent, and 12,000 teachers promoted to Grade 16. The situation facing NTAC teachers is not clear. The government has repeatedly reneged on similar promises after the teachers' union directed their members to end strikes and demonstrations.

Pakistan: Gilgit-Baltistan workers demand permanent employment

About 2,000 contingent workers (casual and short-term employees) for Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) provincial government departments demonstrated on January 9 to demand they be immediately hired as full time employees. The sit-down protest, which was held at Etihad Chowk, involved workers from as many as 28 departments.

According to the GB Contingent Employees Association, there are about 5,000 contingent workers employed by the government. The union has accused the government of violating the minimum wage laws and said that some workers are only paid 1,000 rupees ($US9.03) a month. Workers told the media that the protests would continue until their demands are met.

Islamabad teachers continue class boycott

Teachers employed on a daily-wage basis in government-run educational institutes in the Islamabad Capital Territory are continuing industrial action and protests for permanent jobs and a pay rise. The action, which began on January 1, is part of a long running, eight-month campaign. The teachers want their monthly pay lifted from 12,500 rupees ($US112.88) to 25,000 rupees, following increases applied to workers in other directorates.

At least 2,200 daily-wage teachers are employed by the Federal Directorate of Education (FDE). The protests, which also involved daily-wage teachers in government colleges, were held on Wednesday outside the FDE and the National Press Club.

Peshawar sub-engineers fight for full time jobs and promotions

Over 930 sub-engineers in Peshawar employed in government departments walked out on Tuesday to demand permanency and

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promotions.

The All Sub-Engineers Association members said they would remain on strike until January 15. They have also threatened to step up protest action, including a sit-down demonstration outside the residence of Imran Khan, whose party heads the provincial government, and at other locations. The sub-engineers said the provincial government previously claimed that the workers would be promoted but had reneged on these promises.

Sri Lankan nurses on strike

Around 150 nurses from the Sri Jayewardenepura General Hospital (SJGH) remain on strike after walking out on January 3 over a newly introduced Fingerprint Attendance System. The striking nurses, who are members of the Public Services United Nurses Association, have defied a court order from the hospital management and refused to work until the fingerprint machine is removed.

The strike, which has brought the hospital to a standstill, has won wide support from nurses across Sri Lanka. On Thursday, nurses from the Colombo National Hospital and Eye Hospital decided to take sick leave protest action in support of the striking SJGH nurses.

Bangladesh: Teachers union calls off hunger strike

A six-day hunger strike by non-Monthly Pay Order (MPO) teachers and staff was called off by their union on Friday after an empty promise from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that the protesters' demand would be fulfilled.

The Federation of Teachers and Employees of Non-MPO Educational Institutions estimates that there are over 5,200, non-MPO education institutions, employing around 80,000 teachers. Most of these teachers are working without any pay, some for more than a decade.

Over a hundred teachers from non-MPO schools, colleges, madrasas and technical educational institutions began a sit-in protest and then a hunger strike on December 31. By last Friday, 115 teachers had become ill and required medical treatment.

The teachers were demanding employment under the Monthly Pay Order category. The MPO is the government's share in the payroll of non-government education institutions.

Philippines: University workers protest over pay

Workers at the Ateneo de Manila University carried their campaign for wage increases onto the streets of Quezon City last week. Nearly 250 members of the Ateneo Employees and Workers Union have been waiting for negotiations over pay and other issues to be concluded for six months.

University authorities have refused to increase their budget for employee pay and benefits over the equivalent of 4.72 percent of the total of the 70 percent increase in tuition fees, the minimum required by law.

Anger over the "deadlock" in the 2017–2019 collective bargaining agreement, and the fact the union says no agreement can be mediated through the National Conciliation and Mediation Board, led the workers to organise the January 3 lunchtime demonstration.

The protesting workers said that the university could afford to make a decent pay offer. The employers' extra amount for pay and benefits amounted to 8.77 million pesos ($US174, 226) over two years. The university had net incomes of P350 million, P382 million and P415 million in 2015, 2016 and 2017 respectively.

New South Wales power workers vote for industrial action

Workers at Ausgrid, the partly privatised NSW energy distribution network company, have voted overwhelmingly for a campaign of industrial action for new enterprise agreements.

The agreements, which cover close to 3,000 workers in four unions, expired in December 2014. Negotiations since then have failed to produce another agreement, meaning the company's owners have been able to achieve a protracted wage freeze.

The proposed industrial action, which includes work stoppages of up to eight hours and 30 different work bans including on overtime and call-outs, could begin as early as the second week in February.

The unions are seeking a 3 percent annual pay increase and changes to the current classification system, which they claim does not recognise skills or contain a satisfactory progression for promotions. The company has offered just 7 percent over three years with a one-off payment to each employee as a sop to sell the deal.

Ausgrid was partly privatised by the NSW state Liberal government in 2016, with only 46 percent remaining in government hands. The power unions facilitated the sell-off, and the privatisation of other parts of the state's electricity assets, by sabotaging, and then closing down, all industrial action by workers opposing the move. The unions also played a critical role in assisting the government to slash hundreds of jobs across other state-owned electricity companies.

Griffin Coal maintenance strike continues

A protracted strike by 70 maintenance workers at Griffin Coal mine in Collie, Western Australia is continuing after the company rejected the basis for a settlement put together by the Fair Work Commission (FWC) last month.

The workers walked out almost four months ago after rejecting a proposed enterprise deal struck by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the company after 12 months of negotiations. That agreement cut pay by 8 percent—from $139,301 a year, based on 42-hour working week, to $128,000 for a 49-hour week—and imposed detrimental changes to shift allowances.

Last month, the Fair Work Commission proposed that the rates "offered" by Griffin Coal remain except for when employees are placed on a 12-hour roster for more than 21 days. The recommendation was accepted by the AMWU but the company decided the cuts did not go far enough.

The AMWU from the outset has isolated the striking workers, refusing to organise any industrial action by other sections of its membership in support.

In November, the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) rammed through a new enterprise work agreement (EBA) covering production workers at the mine that slashed employee earnings by 35 percent. This sell-out acted to strengthen the hand of the company against the striking maintenance workers.

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Esso workers continue picketing Longford gas plant

Around 200 workers previously employed to maintain Esso Australia's onshore and offshore oil and gas operations in Victoria are continuing an around-the-clock protest outside the Longford gas plant in Gippsland, Victoria. The so-called community picket has been ongoing for more than 200 days.

The protest by Australian Workers Union, Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union members has had no impact on production. Police and security guards are escorting replacement workers in and out of the plant daily.

The dispute began after Esso—Exxon-Mobil's Australian arm—awarded a five-year maintenance contract to UGL, an engineering and mining company, last February.

UGL told workers that they would not be offered employment unless they signed up with a subsidiary MTCT on much lower wages—between 15 and 35 percent less—and changes to rosters that would see workers working two weeks on and two weeks off.

While the workers are determined to defend their wages and conditions the unions have left the workers completely isolated. The unions' principal concern is that they are not being included in the new agreement with UGL.

Fiji: Protest in Nadi over locked out airport workers

The Fiji Trades Union Congress has called a protest today in Nadi over the lockout of 170 Air Terminal Service (ATS) workers since December 16. Initially 250 were locked out, but some have returned to work. ATS has employed 150 short-term scabs to replace the locked out workers, who include baggage handlers, check-in staff, engineers and caterers.

Government and military leaders have demanded that ATS employees return to work on management's terms. This includes signing a declaration saying that a walkout to attend a shareholders meeting was wrong and to apologise and accept disciplinary action. The workers own 49 percent of ATS through an Employees' Trust, but have no say in its operations. The majority is owned by the Fiji Government. Workers suffer poor conditions and have had their pay frozen for 11 years. The total workforce of ATS is 639.

The ATS and the Federated Airlines Staff Association are reportedly awaiting a decision by the Ministry of Employment on whether to mediate the dispute. On Wednesday, Fiji Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama denounced the upcoming protest rally as a political ploy by the opposition parties ahead of this year's election.

Papua New Guinea weather service workers strike

Workers at Papua New Guinea's National Weather Service (NWS) began strike action on January 5. Their union, the National Weather Service Working Committee, said that the Department of Transport had assured workers in December that discrepancies over salaries would be resolved. This has not occurred.

Transport Secretary Roy Mumu threatened the NWS workers on Wednesday, telling the media the strike was "illegal" because there had been no secret ballot before notice was given last month.

The workers' grievances have been unresolved for nine years. In 2016, the Department of Personnel Management awarded back-pay of over K300,000 (US$92,890) to 63 NWS workers, but this has not been paid. The indefinite strike affects meteorological services and industries such as shipping and aviation.

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