

Chinese workers protest over “black lung” disease; Indian auto-parts workers demonstrate

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

27 January 2018

Asia

Food delivery workers strike in Hong Kong

Around 100 workers for Deliveroo, an online food delivery company, went on strike in Hong Kong last Tuesday, disrupting the busy lunch period. The stoppage was a response to cuts in benefits and the number of riders outside of peak hours.

Deliveroo riders are self-employed contractors. Under the previous system they earned around \$HK75 an hour, irrespective of the number of orders they delivered. Workers are required to purchase and maintain their own transport and pay for petrol.

With the introduction of a new electronic monitoring tool, the company has now placed a limit on the number of riders operating during non-peak hours.

One anonymous rider told the media that the change would “deduct about 14 hours a week off each rider.” The rider noted that this equated to 56 hours every four weeks, potentially resulting in wage reductions of HK\$5,000 to HK\$6,000. Subsidies of HK\$200 for petrol and compensation for traffic tickets have also been scrapped.

Deliveroo has approximately 1,000 riders in Hong Kong. Staff in Belgium and the Netherlands also went on strike last weekend in opposition to their classification as self-employed contractors.

Chinese workers demand compensation for “black lung” disease

Around 100 former construction workers and family members have been protesting at government offices in Shenzhen, Hunan Province. The action began on January 8 for overdue compensation related to pneumoconiosis disease, commonly known as “black lung.”

Pneumoconiosis is contracted through the inhalation of dust particles which accumulate in the lungs causing respiratory problems. In severe cases the incurable disease leads to heart problems, high blood pressure and premature death.

The workers were employed on government projects, which involved drilling and blasting for subways, during a construction boom during the 1990s. Similar protests were held in 2009. Some workers received compensation of between 70,000–130,000 yuan. Others were not granted a medical examination until October last year.

Around 150 workers were reportedly blacklisted throughout Shenzhen after the 2009 protests. Many could not find work or social insurance, forcing them to leave the city.

Workers from You County in Hunan Province also began protests outside local government offices last week over a spate of black lung cases. They are demanding medical examinations, along with government oversight and prevention measures.

Taiwan: Golf club workers protest against sackings and unfair treatment

Over 40 employees of the Miramar Golf Country Club in New Taipei City went on strike last Friday—forcing the club to shut down for two days—after 15 union members and three other employees were suddenly dismissed. The Miramar Golf Country Club Union are demanding a 3 percent pay rise, year-end bonuses by the company and the rehiring of the fired employees.

The company rejected all the requests, citing financial losses. After the negotiations failed, 26 of 37 union members voted for the strike. The union also accused the club of deliberately misclassifying its caddies as contract employees to avoid paying labour insurance and pensions. New Taipei City Department of Labor claims the strike is illegal.

Sri Lankan train drivers walk out

Train drivers from Sri Lanka’s state-owned transport service walked off the job this week in protest against management’s suspension of contract drivers and its failure to rectify unsafe brakes in Chinese-built carriages.

The strike began at midnight on Tuesday and was called by the Locomotive Engineers Union (LEU) and the Railway Guards Union. The LEU officials said that the department authorities had suspended contract drivers as “punishment” for supporting last month’s national walkout. The contract workers are retired drivers.

Drivers told the media that carriage brakes were dangerous and that “if anything happened, such as the train passing the stop limit at the stations, the drivers are punished.” The strikers also demanded the government fulfill promises it made to end national industrial action over wages by railway workers in December.

The walkout was ended on Wednesday after railway authorities promised to withdraw the suspension of the contract drivers and appoint a committee to investigate the brake systems.

Indian auto-parts workers demonstrate for union rights

About 40 workers from SPM Autocomp, an auto parts manufacturing company, held a silent protest outside Haryana deputy labour commissioner R K Saini's office in Gurgaon on January 18. The demonstration was against management's suspension of 10 workers who filed applications to form a union. Another 30 workers were transferred as soon as the company learnt that they were trying to establish a union.

The workers said that at least two accidents happen every week on the production line. Another said that the company switched off safety sensors on the conveyor belt to push up production.

Protestors also told the media that the company had sent thugs to threaten them at their houses and on their way back from work, demanding that they stop calling for the formation of a union.

Similar methods were used against Maruti Suzuki workers in Manesar, Haryana, who were attacked by company thugs for attempting to establish a union and then jailed on bogus charges. Thirteen of these workers were sentenced to life imprisonment and remain in jail.

Andhra Pradesh power workers plan strike statewide

Andhra Pradesh power workers from all categories—contract, outsourced and other non-permanent categories—were to begin an indefinite statewide strike at 6 a.m. today over a range of demands. These include permanent jobs, equal pay for equal work as per a Supreme Court order, an 8,000-rupee (\$US125) monthly wage and accident compensation of 200,000 rupees for the family of any employee killed at work.

The walkout is under the control of the Stalinist CPM-affiliated Centre for Indian Trade Unions, which has a long and dishonourable record of defending Indian capitalism and diverting workers' struggles into impotent appeals to the government.

Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa teachers demand pay rises

Teachers at government schools in Karak and other districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa held separate demonstrations on Monday demanding higher pay and time-scale promotions. The Senior School Teachers Association, which called the demonstration in Timergara, accused the government of renegeing on a three-year old promise to grant a one-step promotion for teachers.

The demonstrations also supported the demands of non-teaching education workers, who held a demonstration on January 11 for promotions. The teachers warned that they would hold more demonstrations if the government failed to resolve the issue.

Pakistan: Punjab college professors and lecturers demonstrate

Punjab Professors and Lecturers Association (PPLA) members rallied in Sahiwal on January 18. The protest, which followed a demonstration in December, was in support of their longstanding demand for a pay rise and time-scale promotions, which the government promised to implement by January 15. Protestors also opposed the privatisation of government-run colleges.

The PPLA, which represents 18,000 college teachers, said that the government wanted its deadline extended until January 20. Union officials claimed that they would organise a demonstration on January 25 in Lahore if the union's demands were not met.

The Punjab Teachers Union (PTU), which represents schoolteachers, is supporting the college teachers. The PTU is also campaigning for promotions and pay rises and opposes privatisation.

Bangladesh jute workers remain on strike

Jute mill workers have been on strike since December 28 over an 11-point log of claims, including payment of outstanding wages. More than 26,700 workers from eight of the Khulna-Jessore region's state-owned jute mills are involved in the strike.

While the state minister for textile and jute, Mirza Azam, has said half of the unpaid wages of all striking workers would be paid by next week, he has demanded an end to all industrial action and threatened pay cuts.

Those involved in the ongoing walkout include 650 workers from the Crescent Jute Mill, 2,000 from the Eastern Jute Mill and 1,500 from the Alim Jute Mill. These workers are owed over 406 million takas (\$US5 millions) in outstanding wages. More than 50 million people are directly or indirectly involved in the jute industry in Bangladesh.

Australia and the Pacific

Aluminium workers vote overwhelmingly for industrial action

Workers at the Tomago Aluminium Smelter in Newcastle, New South Wales, have voted 303 to 99 in favour of a range of industrial actions, including indefinite strikes, in a dispute over a new enterprise agreement (EBA).

The workers have already voted down two company offers on pay and conditions. The Australian Workers Union (AWU) is trying to avoid industrial action and to work with the company to settle on an agreement acceptable to Tomago as it did with previous EBAs.

The current enterprise agreement expired in December 2017. It did not include an annual wage increase but instead accepted a performance-based incentive program. This included targets relating to Lost Day Injuries, on site hazards, aluminium sales to customers, revenue and the market cost per tonne of producing ingots. This effectively held pay increases hostage to changes in the market and targets established by management.

The AWU has not yet announced if there is to be a wage claim and has not spoken publicly on why workers rejected the two management proposals.

School support staff plan industrial action

School support staff in Western Australia plan to stop work on February 1 and rally at Wellington Square in East Perth in opposition to the state Labor government's cuts to education. The workers are members of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and the Civil Service Association (CSA).

The decision to proceed with industrial action was unanimously endorsed by a meeting of CPSU and CSA delegates last week. In the wake of a public backlash the government backed away from implementing \$23 million worth of cuts, including the scrapping of the School of the Air and funding for the education department's Gifted and Talented program.

It will now seek to extract the savings by slashing public spending in other areas while proceeding with a raft of other cuts in education that could result in the destruction of hundreds of jobs. Programs targeted include the provision of specialist Aboriginal education staff and truancy support staff.

Further industrial action by the support workers could include a series of work bans including on workers doing extra hours or volunteer work and the imposition of close-down afternoons or mornings when they will not answer enquiries from parents.

Tasmanian casino staff reject paltry wage offer

Workers at Tasmania's two largest casinos, the Launceston Country Club and Wrest Point Casino in Hobart, this week voted against an enterprise agreement proposal by the Federal Group, which owns both sites.

The deal provided for pay rises of just 1.8 percent per annum over the course of three years, barely in line with the rate of inflation and a rapidly rising cost of living. According to the United Voice union, 74 percent of Wrest Point employees and 59 percent from the Country Club rejected the offer, with around 600 staff members submitting ballots.

Workers oppose the company's attempts to remove some redundancy provisions, increase the use of casual labour and reduce casino roster cycles from four weeks to two. The move would lower pay and worsen working conditions for casino employees. The previous enterprise agreement expired last year, meaning that workers have suffered a protracted wage freeze, enforced by the government and the union.

New Caledonia: Telecommunications workers protest funding cuts

Workers at the state-owned telecommunications company OPT held a strike on Tuesday afternoon. Dozens protested outside New Caledonia's congress against the government's plan to take US\$40 million in operating funds away from OPT.

The CFE-CGC union, which called the strike, said OPT was having difficulty sustaining itself after giving millions to the government over the past two years to shore up its budget. According to local media, OPT workers from the towns of Pouembout, Koumac, Ouégoa and Canala, who were not all union members, joined the walkout.



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