

Thousands of Indian health workers strike; teachers protest in China

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 February 2018

China: Teachers protest over unpaid benefits

Hundreds of teachers, including many retired education staff, protested in Beijing on January 29 over unpaid pensions and other benefits.

Despite sub-zero temperatures, current and former teachers participated from Heilongjiang, Liaoning, Jilin, Guangxi, Hebei, Jiangsu, Shandong, Sichuan, Hunan, Hubei, Inner Mongolia and Beijing took part. The event was described as the first nationally coordinated rally of teachers in a number of years over pay and benefit arrears.

The teachers demonstrated outside the Ministry of Education demanding reemployment for community teachers who had been laid off before reaching retirement. They also called for the full payment of entitled pensions, an exemption on pension contributions for those who are legally retired, and compensation payments to the families of teachers still due retirement pay.

National legislation introduced in 1993 supposedly granted community and substitute teachers the same status as civil servants, along with comparable wages and benefits. Many local governments, which hire teachers, however, have never implemented the law. Kindergarten teachers, for instance, are among the lowest paid educational professionals in China.

India: ASHA workers strike in Haryana state

Almost 22,000 Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) employees held a four-day strike on January 27 in Faridabad, Haryana state to demand job permanency and higher pay. The ASHA workers, who are employed by India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, assist expectant mothers and provide post-natal care, including the immunisation of babies. The strike also involved a three-day boycott of a national polio eradication program.

The workers' want permanent employment and the government's paltry 1,000-rupee honorarium or ex gratia payment, and other incentives, increased so they receive a minimum 18,000 rupees (\$US280) per month. ASHA employees have not had a pay rise for over three years.

Workers protest wages and sackings at Bajaj Auto in India

Workers at Bajaj Auto plants at Chakan and Akurdi in Maharashtra state

are demanding the company increase wages and reinstate victimised employees. Bajaj, the country's largest manufacturer of two- and three-wheel vehicles, has three plants in India.

In May 2010, the company signed a nine-year deal with the Vishwa Kalyan Kamgar Sanghatana (VKKS), the auto labour union, under which wages were to be increased every three years. Pay rises for 2016–19, however, have been stalled since April 2016, despite 40 negotiating meetings with the company.

Baja Auto management has also rejected demands for reinstatement of eight workers sacked by the company over their involvement in industrial protests in 2013–14 and six other militant workers who refused to accept forcible transfers to other plants.

This week VKKS president Dilip Pawar demagogically announced that he would begin a "fast to the death" this week and that union members at the Chakan and Akurdi plants would boycott breakfast and lunch provided by the company.

The campaign is bogus, with the union, which covers 1,000 of the 2,500-strong workforce at Chakan, assuring management that there would be no disruption to production at both plants. On Thursday the Pune labour commissioner directed Bajaj Auto management to hold conciliation talks with the union.

Bangladesh: Non-government teachers and employees end fast

On Monday, the Besharkari Shikkha Jatiyakaran Liaison Forum, which represents hundreds of teachers and employees of non-government secondary schools and colleges in Bangladesh, called for an end to a fasting protest outside the National Press Club in Dhaka. The directive was made after the government's five-member education ministry team made various empty promises to protestors.

The teachers and education staff are employed under the so-called monthly payment order (MPO) system. They are demanding nationalisation of the non-government education institutions and permanent jobs. The education ministry team told the unions that the nationalisation issue would be raised in the government's 2018–19 budget.

A day before the hunger strike was shut down about 500,000 teachers and education staff from about 35,000 non-government MPO-schools and colleges were involved in protests over the issue.

The teachers have warned they will resume their demonstrations if nothing positive occurs during the government's pre-budget discussions.

Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa university staff strike

Non-teaching staff at the government-run University of Haripur in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa boycotted work this week to demand permanent jobs, promotions and the removal of teaching staff from administrative positions. The sit-down protest outside the vice-chancellor's office began on Monday and was still underway three days later.

About 80 workers including clerical, janitorial and other assistance staff are affected. In line with cuts to non-teaching positions, university administration has also transferred some workers to part-time and casual office assistant positions.

Pakistan railway workers protest

Hundreds of Pakistan Railway workers demonstrated outside the Workshops Divisional Superintendent's office in Lahore on January 24 to demand permanent jobs for contract workers, increased pay and a decent service structure. They also opposed government moves to privatise the railways and other public sector services.

In line with International Monetary Fund demands, the Pakistan government has slashed public sector spending, including major budget cuts to the railways. A permanent freeze has been placed on new hires, with management employing large numbers of temporary workers and demanding permanent employees work longer hours. The protest was called by the Railway Workers Union.

Sindh university teachers begin province-wide strike

Hundreds of academic staff from nine major public universities in Pakistan's Sindh province began an indefinite strike on Wednesday in protest against the government's ongoing failure to address long outstanding demands. The walkout followed a one-day boycott of duties on January 24.

The main issue raised by the teachers is their opposition to the Sindh Universities Law (Amendment) Act of 2013, which overrides university administration autonomy.

Other main demands include approval of pending hardship promotions, housing for teachers, increases in the PhD allowance, more scholarships and higher budget allocations for universities.

The strike, which was called by Federation of All Pakistan Universities Academic Staff Association (FAUASA), was launched after the government failed by the January 30 deadline to meet the teachers' demands. Teachers were also angry over the reappointment of Asim Hussain as Sindh province's Higher Education Commission (HEC). Hussain led previous and unsuccessful negotiations with the teachers.

Peshawar secondary school teachers demand promotions

Teachers of government-run secondary schools in Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, demonstrated in the city on January 26 to demand a one-step pay-scale upgrade.

Holding banners and placards, protesters marched through the city

chanting slogans denouncing the government for ignoring them in the upgrade of basic pay rates for other government employees. The teachers said that secondary school teacher pay scales had not been increased despite a two-year old departmental recommendation.

The All Secondary School Teachers Welfare Association, who called the protests, has threatened to boycott classes on February 1 and demonstrate again if teachers' demands are not granted.

Sri Lanka doctors walk out for 24 hours

On December 30, the Government Medical Officers' Association (GMOA) launched a 24-hour strike over several demands. These included, the rectification of salary anomalies, payment of various allowances and provision of tax concessions and duty leave.

The GMOA also demanded the government shut down a private medical college—the South Asian Institute of Medicine and Technology (SAITM). According to the union, the government had agreed to close SAITM before December 31.

The GMOA ended the strike by noon December 30, telling the media that the minister of health had agreed to fulfil the union's demands. Union officials, however, have released no details on its deal with the government.

Australian Paper seeks court intervention into dispute

Around 90 Australian Paper (AP) workers at the company's plant in Melbourne are continuing indefinite strike action. They walked out on January 16 after negotiations for a new enterprise bargaining agreement that began last March broke down.

Owned by Japan's Nippon Paper Group, the company is demanding cuts to wages and working conditions, including a reduction in rostered days off (RDOs)—from 16 to 14 annually—and changes to classification structures that will financially disadvantage workers.

This week AP applied to the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the federal government's industrial tribunal, to "mediate" negotiations.

The FWC has regularly intervened in other disputes, following calls by employers and the unions. These interventions are to shut down industrial action and impose outcomes in line with the employers' demands.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union organiser Dean Griffiths enthusiastically backed the company's move, declaring, "We are just waiting for the commission to set a date and a time so we can kick off negotiations." The union, which last year imposed wage cuts on AP workers at the company's Maryvale plant, has isolated the strikers.

New South Wales power unions suspend industrial action

A campaign of industrial action overwhelmingly endorsed last month by thousands of Ausgrid workers was suddenly suspended this week by the power unions following a meeting of about 100 delegates on Thursday. Ausgrid is a partly privatised New South Wales (NSW) electricity distributor.

The delegates were presented with a new enterprise offer following closed door negotiations between the company and the power unions. The

four unions involved were seeking a 3 percent annual pay increase over three years and changes to the company's classification system, which underrates skills and makes promotions difficult.

The company's latest pay offer is for three annual increases, all below 3 percent and, and a one-off \$1,600 bonus. No details have been provided about the company's push for a two-tier workforce with new starts paid at lower rates.

The Electrical Trades Union claimed that the company had agreed in negotiations that there would be no forced redundancies. Thousands of jobs, however, have already been axed across the NSW power industry using union sanctioned "voluntary" redundancies. Since 2014, Ausgrid has eliminated nearly 2,000 jobs and driven up productivity by an estimated 43 to 62 percent.

New Zealand: Rail workers in Auckland to vote on industrial action

Rail workers in Auckland will begin voting next week on further industrial action in opposition to proposed driver-only services. Workers struck on this issue for 24-hours on December 8. Voting will take place over two weeks.

The Rail and Maritime Trades Union (RMTU) has been in negotiations with Auckland Transport and private contractor Transdev since May. A proposed restructure will affect up to 300 workers, 160 of whom are on-board train managers who will be replaced by electronic ticket gates.

The union initially announced that it would not strike because this would be "illegal." When it eventually called a strike, the walkout was limited to 24 hours under the pretext that "members don't want to inconvenience the public."

The RMTU have separated this struggle from Wellington rail workers, also employed by Transdev, who held a 24-hour strike in November over a proposed Multi-Employer Collective Agreement which will reduce wages, cut staff and degrade working conditions.



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