

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 February 2018

Bangladesh

Bangladesh power workers demand permanent jobs

Workers involved in the development of the newly-built 275MW Barapukuria coal-fired power plant began an indefinite strike on Monday. They were demanding permanent operational jobs at the plant, which is located in Parbatipur subdistrict in northern Bangladesh.

About 500 workers were involved in the development of the third unit of the plant, which began more than three years ago. Their work was terminated once the project was completed last November. Workers have accused Chinese-owned Harbin International, which is contracted to run the plant, of only hiring people from manpower companies.

Community health care workers resume hunger strike in Bangladesh

Hundreds of Bangladesh Community Health Care Providers Association members resumed an indefinite hunger strike on Saturday outside the National Press Club in Lahore to demand the government nationalise the network of companies they work for and provide them with permanent employment.

The association has held a series of nationwide protests since January 22, including a hunger strike which began on February 1. The hunger protest was stopped on February 7, however, following demands from the Dhaka Metropolitan Police. There are around 13,500 community health clinics in Bangladesh which were established in 2011 under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. According to press reports, her government has made no decision on the community health workers' demands.

India

Brihanmumbai Electrical Supply and Transport workers walk out

Brihanmumbai Electrical Supply and Transport (BEST) workers held a one-day strike on February 15 in protest against cuts in January salaries and the replacement of government buses with about 450 privately-owned small buses. Members of the fascist Shiv Sena, which is affiliated to India's ruling BJP government, were used as strike breakers.

According to press reports, 550 rupees or 10 percent was cut from employees' monthly wages to pay for last year's Diwali religious festival

bonus. The annual festival occurs in October. While nine unions were involved in the walkout, the BEST Workers Union and the BEST Electric Workers Union are the only entities officially recognised by management.

One-day transport strike in Assam

All India Road Transport Workers Federation, All Assam Motor Workers' Joint Council and the All Assam Cab Operators' Union members held a 24-hour strike on February 12 in protest against an increase in petrol and diesel prices by India's central government. The strikers also demanded medical benefits and financial aid for education of their children, as well as training for drivers and their assistants.

Sacked Tamil Nadu food logistics workers continue protest

Twenty-nine SICAL Logistics workers and their families are maintaining an indefinite protest near the company's warehouse in Minjur, Chennai to demand reinstatement and equal wages with new recruits. They were sacked on July 28 after protesting against low wages.

SICAL Logistics, which has operations in all of India's coastal states, is connected with the Coffee Day Group, which is owned by the son-in-law of former Karnataka Chief Minister S.M. Krishna.

The sacked workers, who remain in limbo because their case is still before an Assistant Commissioner of Labour, allege that the company is refusing to negotiate. The workers are members of the Minjur regional General Workers Union, which is affiliated to the Stalinist controlled Centre for Indian Trade Unions.

LPG cylinder delivery workers demonstrate in Andhra Pradesh

About 30 LPG cylinder delivery workers protested in the city of Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh, on Monday over the sacking and victimisation of 14 workers by the Sri Agency. Gas Delivery Workers Union members want the company to reverse its decision and have accused the Sri Agency of violating Indian labour laws. The sackings were announced on February 3, straight after the workers established and presented management with a wage contract claim.

A union official told the media that labour laws were in force at six of the other gas agencies in the city but not at the Sri Agency. Workers want labour department officials to inspect the Sri Agency and for the

implementation of pensions and other legally-mandated benefits.

Pakistan

Punjab education workers protest

Hundreds of Literacy and Non Formal Basic Education Department employees protested on February 8 in Lahore, Pakistan's second largest city. Teachers and other department employees are demanding a wage rise and permanent jobs. Demonstrators accused the government of paying only 5,000 rupees (\$US 45.15) per month, which is less than the official minimum wage, and demanded it to be increased to 15,000 rupees.

The department receives international funds, including from UNICEF and UNESCO, to run literacy improvement programs. The low-wage regime imposed by the Pakistani government impacts on 4,000 teachers and over 1,200 other education workers, many of whom have been employed by the department for more than 10 years.

The protest, which blocked a major intersection in Lahore and caused a significant traffic jam, was called off that evening by the Punjab Literacy Association after a government official claimed that workers' demands would be addressed.

Health workers demonstrate in Lahore for permanent jobs

About 1,500 employees of the government's School Health and Nutrition Supervisors program protested last Saturday in Lahore for a third consecutive day to demand job permanency. Over 1,800 people work in the nutrition program, with most of them employed for more than 10 years on contract.

The demonstration was organised by the Punjab Nutrition Association and blocked the city. Many of those involved travelled from across Pakistan's Punjab province to participate.

Attempts by government officials to end the protests failed when workers demanded immediate action to make them permanent government employees. The workers have threatened to boycott a polio vaccination campaign, which was scheduled to begin on February 12.

Sri Lanka

Northern Province volunteer and contract teachers protest

Over 3,200 volunteer and contract teachers in Sri Lanka's Northern Province protested outside the chief minister's office in Jaffna on Wednesday for more permanent appointments. Teachers accept low-paid voluntary and contract work in the hope that they will eventually enter the permanent workforce. The government is using them as a cheap labour solution to teacher vacancies, especially in rural schools.

Demonstrators denounced the chief minister, alleging that he gave appointments to his political supporters but blocked the regular appointment of others. Many of those involved in the protest said that they had worked for more than ten years on poverty level wages, without

annual leave, salary increments or other benefits enjoyed by permanent teachers.

Cambodia

Cambodian workers jailed over strike action

Four union leaders in the Cosmo Textile factory in the Snuol district of Cambodia's Kandal province were imprisoned on Monday after the company claimed they had led an illegal strike.

The four workers, Chhean Vannak, Moeun Chhit, Lok Neang and Phan Sary, are members of the Workers Friendship Union Federation (WFUF). They were arrested on Monday and sent to Kandal Provincial Prison for pre-trial detention. Police said they were planning to arrest other workers.

The dispute erupted the previous week after the company sacked two union members for allegedly not stamping their attendance cards. The WFUF claims that one of employees had lost their card and already reported it to management but that management was targeting union members.

Cambodia's authoritarian Prime Minister Hun Sen, who is facing national elections, has been posing as a champion of garment factory workers. The Cambodian state machine is directed towards keeping the country's 700,000 garment industry workers, who produce 80 percent of export earnings revenue, in check and enforce a low wage regime.

Queensland construction workers hold second rally

Dozens of workers employed by Monadelphous Engineering rallied on Thursday outside Queensland Alumina Limited in Gladstone, situated 400 kilometres north of Brisbane. Monadelphous Engineering carries out maintenance at the alumina refinery.

It is the second time this month that the workers, who are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU), have rallied in opposition to Monadelphous' drive to casualise the workforce and slash a raft of working conditions.

The AMWU, which is currently negotiating a new work agreement (EBA) with the maintenance contracting company, claims that Monadelphous has been replacing permanent employees with casuals and is seeking to remove weekend and public holiday penalty rates, casual loading and overtime.

The workers have had their pay frozen since 2015 and a variation in a previous agreement has been used to cut wages by 17 percent. The union took no action against the past assault on wages and is now containing opposition to the limited rallies.

New Zealand: Lyttelton Port Workers vote for strike action

Two hundred workers at Christchurch's Lyttelton Port on Thursday overwhelmingly voted for industrial action after mediation between the company and the Rail and Maritime Union (RMTU) over a new work agreement broke down on February 13.

According to press reports, Lyttelton Port workers unanimously

endorsed a ban on overtime or a complete withdrawal of labour for up to three weeks.

The RMTU has already had 21 meetings with the company since it began negotiations over a new work agreement. The company wants the port run on a 24/7 basis. The union has no fundamental opposition to this demand but is feigning concern for the safety of the workers. It has called for more talks with the company and not announced a date for the industrial action.

The union is required to give 14 days' notice before taking any industrial action. RMTU South Island organiser John Kerr told the media that strike action at the port was "the last thing we want to happen. We would much rather get this sorted out around the table."

The RMTU covers hundreds of public transport workers in Wellington and Auckland and is currently in negotiations with TransDev, which operates transport in the two cities. The union opposes any unified action in defence of jobs, wages and working condition by its members. RMTU members in Auckland were recently balloted over whether they will strike over their work contract. The union has not publicly released the results of that ballot.



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