

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 March 2018

India: Tamil Nadu transport workers defend victimised workers

Hundreds of Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) workers demonstrated outside the Transport Corporation office in Madurai on March 6. They were demanding reinstatement of 11 workers suspended during a weeklong statewide strike in January and for the police to drop all charges against these workers who played a leading role in the strike. The victimised workers have been suspended by TNSTC management for 60 days.

While the demonstration was organised by the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the union has isolated the dispute, refusing to organise industrial action by any other of the thousands of members it has in Tamil Nadu.

India: Three hundred women workers protest in Tamil Nadu

More than 300 members of the Women Workers Union (Penn Thozhilalar Sangam) demonstrated near the Tiruvallur railway station, about 40 kilometres from Chennai on Monday, for better wages and benefits. The women included domestic and construction workers who came from across Chennai district to issue their demands.

They called for a minimum wage for domestic workers, implementation of the National Rural Employment scheme, regular payment of widows' pensions, and at least 5 percent of the state budget to be allocated for social security payments.

The union claims that less than 25 percent of the Tamil Nadu workforce is female and that women living in distant communities have no income.

Tamil Nadu transport equipment workers demand union recognition

Seven victimised LGB Rolon Company workers were released on bail this week after being framed-up and arrested by police. The workers, who were leading the struggle for union recognition at the company's Coimbatore plant, had been jailed for up to five days.

The Maoist affiliated All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU) alleges that the police arrests were at the behest of company management. On release, the workers said that they were routinely subjected to verbal and physical abuse. LGB Rolon workers have been trying to unionise the plant since late 2017 but the management refuses to recognise workers' demands and routinely transfers union office bearers.

Andhra Pradesh contract workers call off hunger protest

Contract workers employed in electricity distribution, municipal councils and for BSNL telecommunications in eastern Andhra Pradesh ended a two-day hunger protest on March 6 in Vishakhapatnam without any resolution to their demands.

The protesting workers were calling for abolition of the contract and "piece-rate" systems, salaries equal with those for permanent workers, payments to the families of workers who die whilst on duty, and job security. The workers were planning to stage a protest march to the State Assembly on March 7.

Pakistan: Punjab paramedics protest

Hundreds of paramedical staff at government hospitals in Multan, Punjab boycotted duties on February 28 in protest against privatisation and to demand job permanency.

Industrial action occurred at the Tehsil Headquarters Hospital, the Children's Complex, Multan Institute of Cardiology as well as at the Shahbaz Sahrif, Civil and other hospitals, forcing the suspension of services. The strike included a more than four-hour sit-down protest in the Multan city centre.

According to the Pakistan Paramedical Staff Association, most paramedics work on contract basis, in some cases for as long as 20 years. These workers have not received a pay increase for several years. The Southern Punjab Grand Health Alliance called the protests.

Visually impaired government workers demonstrate in Pakistan

Scores of visually impaired workers from government departments in Rawalpindi demonstrated in the city on Tuesday against police attacks last month on a similar protest in Lahore by visually impaired workers.

The demonstrators want legal action taken against all police officers involved in the attack. They are also demanding higher job quotas for disabled workers and permanent jobs. Tuesday's protest was called off after government officials made vague promises to resolve workers' demands.

Pakistan police assault Karachi government clerks

A protest of around 300 junior government clerks on Monday was attacked by police with tear gas and water cannons. The clerks were demanding higher pay and allowances.

The workers were attacked after they began to march from the Karachi Press Club to the Red Zone, a guarded area of key government installations. At least 41 protesters were detained by the police. The demonstration was called by the All Sindh Clerks Association.

Pakistan laboratory employees demonstrate over unpaid salaries

Over 50 workers from the National Forensic DNA Profiling Laboratory and Divisional DNA Screening Laboratory held a sit-down protest in Dhaka on Sunday and Monday over outstanding salary payments. Protests were held outside the Department of Women's Affairs and the National Press Club.

The workers' main demand was for the payment of salaries outstanding from January to October last year. When salary payments stopped last January the workers struck for two and a half months. The strike was called off by the unions after the state ministry for Women and Children's Affairs promised to pay their salaries, including all the arrears. The promise was never fulfilled.

DNA screening laboratories have been established at Rajshahi, Sylhet, Chittagong, Khulna, Barisal, Rangpur and Faridpur medical college hospitals since 2007.

Bangladesh bank workers call for improved pay and allowances

Workers from five regional branches of Grameena Bank in Bangladesh will strike from March 26 to 28. The planned walkout was by the United Forum of Regional Rural Bank Unions (UFRBU), an umbrella organisation of seven associations and unions.

The community bank, which was established in the late 1970s, provides small loans to the poor without requiring collateral. It has over 2,500 branches nationally, employing a total of 20,000 people.

Grameena Bank workers are demanding equal pensions and provident fund with commercial banks, as well as a computer allowance, and the minimum wage and statutory benefits for daily waged/casual workers.

Sri Lanka: University non-academic workers' strike continues

Striking non-academic workers from all Sri Lankan universities protested on March 6 in Colombo outside the University Grant Commission (UGC). The industrial action was called by the University Trade Union Joint Committee (UTUJC).

About 15,000 workers are involved in the strike. They are demanding a 20 percent wage rise, a language-proficiency allowance, increased concessionary loans, the introduction of medical insurance and a pension scheme. Lectures and exams have been disrupted by the strike, which has now entered its eighth consecutive day.

The non-academic workers walked out over the same demands almost two years ago in July 2016. The UTUJC called off the strike after 12 days, claiming it had received a written agreement from the UGC.

Sri Lanka: Colombo port container handlers on walk out

Colombo Port container drivers and assistants began strike action on March 5 to demand that the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) resume control of container inspection work, which was outsourced in 2003.

The SLPA has not provided adequate inspection facilities within its premises and over 1,500 containers per day are inspected at two sites outside the Colombo Port by a private company. As a result most drivers have to live and sleep in their trucks for almost three days because they cannot leave the vehicles and available parking is limited.

The port workers want an end to these inhumane working conditions and have demanded that inspections and weighing of goods be carried out within the port premises. The strike was called by the All Ceylon Container Transport Employees Union, which claims that 8,000 employees are involved in the strike.

Sri Lanka power workers' struggle continues

Hundreds of Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) workers mobilised outside CEB offices in Kandy, Galle and Trincomalee in protest against the suspension of union leaders and to demand better working conditions and cancellation of salary increases for senior management. The union leaders were victimised on February 16, with claims that they had broken the law at a mass picket of CEB head office on January 17.

About 22,000 CEB workers struck for eight days last year over these demands before the walkout was called off by the unions following negotiations with the government. The CEB trade union alliance has called a strike and demonstration outside the CEB head office in Colombo for March 14.

Korean glass workers protest in Japan

A delegation of glass workers from Korea demonstrated in Tokyo on March 7 over the use of "irregular workers" and the sacking of union activists at the Asahi Glass factory in Gyeongsang Province, Korea. Irregular workers are those that do not receive the full benefits granted under Korea's labour laws.

The protest was held outside the House of Representatives of the Japanese Diet, Japan's parliamentary building. Workers were joined by Japanese citizens who chanted "Stop treating workers like disposable products."

Hong Kong protest stops victimisation of bus drivers

Four bus drivers were prevented from being sacked in Hong Kong on Wednesday, one day after a protest by other drivers, union members and the public.

About 200 people assembled at the Lai Chi Kok bus depot owned by Kowloon Motor Bus Co. (KMB) on Tuesday night, in opposition to management plans to sack the drivers who led a wildcat strike last month.

KMB management claimed last month's walkout was against company rules and constituted a threat to the safety of passengers and other road

users. The strike was called by the Alliance of Monthly-Paid Drivers, which the company has been forced to recognise. It ended after KMB management agreed negotiate over three demands, including the scrapping of an annual performance appraisal.

Hunter region paramedics to vote for work bans

Hunter region paramedics in New South Wales (NSW) will vote this weekend on a proposal for industrial action. They are opposing a state government directive that they must personally pay the \$80 fee for the compulsory Working With Children Check (WWCC).

Payment of this fee is one of several of grievances, including regressive shifts and chronic staff shortages, being raised by the paramedics. Paramedics, who often confront verbal and physically abuse by patients, claim they are expected to work for up to 12 hours without meal breaks.

Last month, NSW Health Services Union (HSU) members unanimously voted for a state-wide ban on paramedics responding to calls without a partner after a number of violent incidents. The union has not released any details on what industrial action is being considered.

The HSU says there is a shortfall of 50 paramedics in the Hunter region. Ambulance Service NSW Chief Superintendent Jeff Hescott has publicly admitted that staffing levels in the Hunter had not changed since August 2013.

Bureau of Meteorology staff impose nationwide work bans

Bureau of Meteorology's (BOM) staff are maintaining nationwide work bans which began last month in a long-running dispute over a new enterprise work agreement (EA). The previous EA expired over four years ago and the BOM workers have not had any pay-rise since 2014.

BOM staff held limited stoppages and imposed work bans last year, from June 20 to August 9. The current industrial action includes bans on answering phones, unless it relates to severe weather warnings, or answering media enquiries.

BOM management wants to cut workers' conditions, including cutting allowances for staff working in remote locations. Some regional weather stations are also being automated, resulting in the destruction of jobs.

While the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) continually insists it is seeking a "fair agreement," three previous agreements it brokered in closed-door negotiations with BOM have been rejected by the workers.

Paper workers' strike ends despite no agreement on pay

More than 90 workers employed at Australian Papers (AP) envelope factory in the Melbourne suburb of Preston returned to work Tuesday after an eight-week strike over a new workplace enterprise agreement (EA).

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), which has coverage at the work site, urged a return to work even though there had been no definite result on the workers' pay claim and on other issues. A minority of workers voted in opposition.

Workers were told that the company had dropped its demand for a reduction in Rostered Days Off (RDOs) and the number would remain the

same as before. However, there was no agreement on a pay increase and workers were informed this and other outstanding issues would be discussed in meetings between the union and the company in the industrial relations court.

The workers wanted a 7.5 percent increase over three years. The company insisted that they accept 6.5 percent over four years.

The AMWU refused to call for any action by other sections of the working class to back the strikers during the eight-week strike. National Union of Workers (NUW) members in the factory's dispatch area continued working during the strike.

New Zealand rail union calls off industrial action in Auckland

On March 5, the Rail and Maritime Trade Union (RMTU) called off all industrial action by Auckland rail workers. On February 26, workers imposed bans on overtime and during peak-hours. The action was to continue until March 16. The RMTU have also confirmed there will be no strike action, as was previously considered.

Transdev, the private company which manages the rail network for Auckland Transport, has threatened to destroy over 300 jobs by implementing driver only operations (DOO).

In a joint press release by the RMTU and Transdev, the union says it has come to an "amicable agreement" after a week of discussion and was happy to end the industrial action. RMTU organiser John Kerr said the union would keep "an open mind" about DOO "as soon as the collective agreement is ratified." No details have been released about the deal or the number of job cuts the union has agreed to.

The union has no fundamental differences with Transdev's pro-corporate agenda and continues to separate the struggles facing Auckland and Wellington rail workers. Both networks are run by the giant transport corporation.

RMTU delays Lyttleton Port workers strike

The RMTU this week deferred a planned March 8 strike at Lyttleton Port over management plans to run the facility on a 24/7 basis. While strike action from March 13 to 21 has not been called off and overtime bans remain in place, the union is manoeuvring to cancel the industrial action.

The union, which has already held 23 meetings with the company, deferred this week's strike, it said, because the latest meeting showed "progress." As with Auckland rail, they have limited their opposition to the company on empty pleas to maintain worker safety. They have explicitly agreed with the port's plan to extend working hours.

New Zealand nurses to vote on pay offer

New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) members are voting this month on a pay offer from the District Health Boards (DHBs). The union has said strike action will be considered if the deal is rejected. The last agreement expired in August last year.

The DHBs are critically underfunded by decades of successive National and Labour party governments. The last offer, which does not increase

real annual salaries, was rejected in December. Fifteen thousand NZNO members have signed a petition requesting a better deal.

French Polynesia: Second general strike to defend age pension

Following a four-day general strike this week, the French Polynesian government has announced that it would withdraw legislation to raise the pension entitlement age from 60 to 62. On March 8 between 4,500 and 10,000 people rallied in the capital Papeete. The latest industrial action follows a general strike last month, which was cancelled after one day by the union leadership.

On March 9, some demonstrators reportedly entered the Territorial Assembly building. Afterwards, representatives from five trade unions negotiated to end the strike in exchange for President Edouard Fritch withdrawing the bill.

Fritch said he had done so to prevent social unrest ahead of next month's election. He insisted that the pension scheme was still unaffordable, an indication that there will be more attempts to cut spending at the expense of the working class.



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