

Mass strikes by transport workers and government employees in India

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 November 2018

India: Historic strike by Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) workers

On Monday, Delhi Transport Corporation workers launched their first major strike in 30 years. Over 12,000 contract workers and more than 2,000 permanent employees took part in the stoppage. Several union leaders were reportedly detained or arrested after the Delhi government invoked the Essential Services Maintenance Act to ban the action.

The immediate trigger for the strike was a circular released on August 21 by DTC management reducing the wages of contractual employees by almost 25 percent. Delhi's High Court had previously blocked a minor increase to the workers' minimum wage by the state government.

Workers have demanded the immediate restoration of wages, wage parity for all employees and an increase in the number of DTC buses from 3,500 to 11,000. Some 98.2 percent of DTC's 10,200 workers voted in favour of Monday's strike last September.

India: Haryana government employees join transport workers' strike

Most Haryana government employees took part in a two-day stoppage on October 30 and 31, in support of the state's roadways employees who began indefinite strike action on October 16. They are opposing the state government's decision to hire the services of 720 private buses. The workers have condemned it as an attempt to privatise public transport.

Haryana Roadways employs roughly 19,000 workers and has a fleet of 4,100 buses transporting around 1.2 million passengers every day. The entity's buses also travel to other states including Jammu, Kashmir, Delhi, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Punjab.

Indian Uber and Ola drivers continue Mumbai strike

Drivers for the ride-sharing service Uber and Ola continued a strike in the Indian capital of Mumbai that began the previous week. Meetings between union officials and representatives of the companies failed to end the dispute. Union spokespeople claimed that the corporations had accepted "80 percent" of their demands, but had not agreed to a standard fee for drivers waiting for passengers.

India: Madurai meal workers protest in front of district collector's office

Over 300 cooks continued a protest last week by blocking traffic in front of the district collector's office in Madurai on Monday. The midday meal program supplies free lunches for children in primary and upper primary classes in government-funded schools.

The workers are demanding improved wages. The employees have also stated that they are overworked as a result of understaffing.

Their main demands are to be treated on par with other government employees, with retirement benefits for meal organisers to be increased to 500,000 rupees (\$US6,850) and for the cooks to 300,000 rupees. They held a sit-in protest.

Pakistan media workers continue campaign over unpaid entitlements, job cuts and censorship

Journalists and other media workers rallied in Lahore and Peshawar outside the press clubs of both cities last Monday. The protests were part of a nationwide campaign against the major media companies over their failure to pay owed wages, in some cases for the past three months, and a series of recent job cuts.

Media employees have also denounced the frequent imposition of censorship by the corporations, acting in league with government authorities, across newspaper, television and online reportage.

A previous series of demonstrations was held on October 9 in Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar and Quetta. They were called by the All-Pakistan News Employees' Confederation, along with local organisations including the Karachi Union of Journalists, the Punjab Union of Journalists, the Khyber Union of Journalists and the Balochistan Union of Journalists.

The Pakistani military-intelligence establishment is widely accused of imposing a regime of censorship, especially targeting any criticism of state forces. Journalists have reported receiving threats. Some reporters have also been abducted, or have "disappeared" in unexplained circumstances.

Pakistan: Retail workers call off protests

The union covering workers at Utility Stores Corporation (USC), Pakistan's largest state-run retail chain, called off a sit-in demonstration in Islamabad on October 25.

The action was scuttled by the All Pakistan Utility Stores Corporation Union after it carried out negotiations with the government. The workers had demanded permanent jobs for all contract employees and an increase in wages. They also opposed government plans to privatise the chain, which currently employs 14,000 workers.

The union claimed the government agreed to all of the demands and called on workers to reopen the stores the following day. It threatened to resume protests if the government reneged on its promises.

Over the past seven years, successive governments have failed to release funds for the subsidised goods sold by the USC, resulting in the corporation accumulating a debt of 27.6 billion rupees (\$206.58 million).

The USC's financial crisis is being used as the pretext to push for its privatisation as the government prepares for negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The privatisation of state-run enterprises has been a key feature of IMF loans throughout the region. The IMF has demanded that Pakistan rein in subsidy programs and slash all public expenditure.

Bangladesh: Transport workers protest against new legislation

Transport employees in the Bangladesh Road Transport Workers' Federation staged a 48-hour strike on October 28 and 29 to demand that an eight-point charter they have proposed be adopted by the government, including an amendment to the Road Transport Act 2018.

The strike began when the government's Road, Transport and Bridges minister stated that it would not be possible to meet the workers' demands before upcoming general elections.

The federation had earlier postponed the strike after the Home Minister assured them their demands would be considered. Transport workers belonging to various sectors staged an eight-hour strike on October 19 and a three-day strike between October 1 and 3.

Under the new laws, truck drivers can be sentenced to five years' jail and fined 500,000 takas (\$US5,913) for traffic offenses. The law also states that if a driver kills anyone in an accident, they can be charged with murder or culpable homicide.

Bangladesh: Garment workers strike over death of a worker

Garment workers at Fame Apparels Limited's factory staged a demonstration on October 24 over the death of a worker. They demanded compensation for the family of the deceased.

The worker, a supervisor, was electrocuted. He was pronounced dead after being taken to a hospital.

The factory is in the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation industrial area in Narayanganj. Workers at other enterprises joined the demonstrators.

The strike was ended after the factory owners assured workers that compensation would be forthcoming.

Migrant workers in Taiwan protest unsafe dormitories

On Sunday, around 100 migrant workers and supporters protested in front of Taiwan's Ministry of Labor in Taipei, demanding legislation to separate workers' dormitories from unsafe factories.

Factory fires are a major issue in East Asia, where high rents and low wages compel migrant workers to live in cramped conditions attached to their workplaces, which often have poor safety standards and limited, if any, fire exits.

Between December last year and April, factory fires have killed eight migrant workers who were living in dorms connected to factory buildings, as well as six firefighters who entered burning buildings trying to save them. According to protest organisers, a survey conducted among Taiwan labor groups found that one in six migrant workers live in dorms connected to factories.

Burmese garment workers end strike

Workers at the Fu Yuen Garment Factory in Yangon, Burma's largest city, ended a 72-day strike and protests outside the plant last Wednesday.

The Yangon Region Chief Minister negotiated an agreement that allows 30 workers' leaders who were sacked on August 20 and the 300 others who have been supporting them with strike action since to return to work on November 6.

The agreement came a few days after 100 workers demonstrated in Yangon demanding the regional government intervene on their behalf. Under the agreement, the workers will have to sign employment contracts with the employer and will be paid from when they resume.

The 30 workers were originally sacked for demanding better working conditions and an end to the mistreatment by management. On October 15, the picket supporting them was set upon by thugs wielding iron bars. One young female striker is still recovering from multiple fractures. Two days later, police arrested two student union leaders who were among local residents involved in an incident with people still working at the plant.

Support staff at Airservices Australia walk out

Critical support and administration staff at Airservices Australia walked off the job for 24 hours on Wednesday as negotiations over a new Enterprise Agreement (EA) between the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and the government-operated company stalled. Professionals Australia and Electrical Trade Union members working at Airservices said they would be taking industrial action the next day.

The vast majority of Airservices workers voted in favour of taking industrial action in August. This follows a year without a pay rise and unsatisfactory offers from Airservices Australia which seek to limit any wage increase to 2 percent per annum, in line with the federal Liberal-National government's cap on wage increases. The company is demanding a number of cuts to staff and reductions in working conditions in return for the limited pay increase.

The CPSU has held 24 meetings with Airservices Australia. It blames the "hard-line" stance of the federal government and its "ideological" attack on workers. In reality, the union has maintained limited action to sporadic stoppages and has made no clear wage claim in opposition to Airservices' demands, calling only for a "fair agreement." Workers have demanded pay and conditions on par with airport traffic controllers and firefighters.

University of Canberra staff strike

Members of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union at the University of Canberra (UC) stopped work for 24 hours on Thursday in a dispute over a proposed Enterprise Agreement (EA). The strike follows a half-day stoppage in October over what the unions claimed was an inadequate offer.

In response to the strike action, UC management announced that they would proceed to an all-staff ballot to seek endorsement of its proposed EA. The NETU has directed its members to reject management's offer.

The NTEU claimed that key issues which remain unresolved include professional staff and academic workloads, job security, the Assistant Professor scheme, rights for casually employed staff, and improvements in salary.

Queensland: Department of Education workers protest

Around one hundred non-teaching workers from nine different work categories in the Department of Education demonstrated outside State Parliament in Brisbane on Tuesday afternoon in a dispute over the Queensland Labor government's proposed enterprise agreement. Workers held placards saying "0% pay increase-No way" and "Respect school support staff" among others. The action followed similar rallies a week earlier in Cairns, Mackay, Rockhampton and Townsville over the issue.

As well as a pay increase, members of the Together union are demanding equal pay for equal work no matter which agency they work in, safe workloads, workplaces and "real" job security. The current enterprise agreement expired in May. The Labor government has refused to offer a pay increase to these workers, most of whom are on the lowest public service pay scales.

In response to the workers' anger, the union has begun to survey members asking if they would be willing to participate in a half-day strike. However, in a tactic to wear down their resolve, the union is forcing the dispute into the industrial court. The Together union will meet with the government in the Industrial Relations Commission to discuss preliminary matters before going to the Commissioner, a process that could take weeks or months.

New Zealand ambulance workers vote for partial strike

About 900 ambulance workers employed by St John have voted to take industrial action this month to protest against low pay. Workers are calling for penalty rates for unsocial shifts on weekends and nights. The workers are members of FIRST Union.

From November 14, workers will refuse to cover any additional events, such as concerts. FIRST Union will enter mediation with St John on November 9 in an attempt to avert the action.

Since the 1990s, ambulance services have been outsourced by District Health Boards to private charities, including St John, which employs around 2,000 people and has 7,500 unpaid volunteers. Successive governments, led by the Labour and National parties, have severely underfunded this vital service.

The starting rate for paid ambulance workers is just \$19.10 an hour, not much more than the \$16.50 minimum wage. They work gruelling hours and are frequently responsible for saving lives. Many of them have degrees and large student loans.

The ambulance workers strike vote follows a nationwide strike in July by 30,000 nurses and healthcare assistants against low wages and dangerously understaffed hospitals. Anaesthetic technicians have also held strikes throughout the country.

New Zealand court workers strike

On November 1, members of the Public Service Association (PSA) voted to strike at the Auckland District Court and High Court. The District Court was closed from 3pm after workers walked off the job. A simultaneous strike was held by court workers in Rotorua.

These were the latest in a series of small strikes after nearly 2,000 PSA members, including court registry officers, victim advisers and others voted for industrial action in September. Part-day strikes were held on October 30 in Napier and Hastings, and on October 26 courts across the South Island were closed after 300 workers walked out from 3pm.

The Ministry of Justice is offering a pay increase of just 5 percent over two years, essentially a pay freeze. The PSA initially claimed a 13 percent increase but a ministry spokesperson told the media the union had reduced its claim to 11 percent. The ministry will apply for an injunction at a hearing on Monday to ban further strikes.

New Caledonia: Firefighter strike called off

An indefinite strike that had been scheduled for firefighters at New Caledonia's airports on October 31 was called off four days earlier.

Firefighters have held several strikes and protests in recent months demanding a restructure of their profession to integrate it into the territory's civil service, in order to recruit and train staff locally. Under the current system, firefighters must be trained and brought to New Caledonia from France.

President Philippe Germain had ruled out any restructure to meet the firefighters' demands. This week's strike was suspended in light of New Caledonia's referendum on independence from France, on November 4. Nothing has been resolved and the government has said discussions on the dispute will be postponed until later this month.



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