

Over 30,000 Indian farmers and agricultural workers protest; Cambodian garment workers strike; New Zealand junior doctors plan 48-hour national strike

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 January 2019

India: West Bengal farmers and agricultural workers hold protest march

Over 30,000 farmers and agricultural workers held a five-kilometre march in the northeast Indian state of West Bengal on December 27 in protest against the anti-farmer policies of the central and state governments. The march was organised by the All India Kisan Sabha and the All India Agricultural Workers' Union.

Thousands of people carrying red flags marched along Mahananda River embankment to Uttar Kanya, the mini-state secretariat for north Bengal. The march was originally planned from the Dagapur Tea garden to the North Bengal Secretariat but this route was banned by the state government.

A delegation of farmers and workers later presented a 13-point charter to the Secretariat calling for loan waivers, higher minimum support prices for small scale agricultural producers and other demands.

Demonstrators accused the state government of encouraging middlemen to take control of the government-run Kisan Mandis, which purchases fruit and vegetables from small farmers for wholesale and retail buyers. Farmers claim they are being coerced to sell their produce at very low prices. The demonstrators are planning an all-India general strike on January 8–9.

Thousands of West Bengal coal workers to join two-day strike

Three major unions covering workers at West Bengal's Mahanadi Coalfields have called a two-day state-wide strike beginning on January 8. The unions, which cover over 15,000 workers out of the 20,000 workforce at the mines, will shut down all mines at Talcher and IB Valley coalfields. Other unions participating in the strike are the Hind Mazdoor Sabha and All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC).

The strike is in response to the all-India action by these unions in

protest against privatisation and commercialisation of the state-owned Coal India Limited. Contract workers will also join the walkout. The coal workers are also demanding a pay increase, an end to the sale of Coal India shares, amendments to the current labour laws and pensions for all contract workers.

Indian power development workers strike

Over 3,400 Power Development Department (PDD) casual and needs-based workers from the north Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir demonstrated on Tuesday in support of various demands, including the payment of outstanding wages. The protest was held outside the office of PDD's chief engineer in Jammu city.

Workers said their families were suffering and called on PDD management to immediately pay their wages so they could pay their children's school fees. They have threatened indefinite strike action if management does not agree to their demands.

Pakistan: Gwadar fishermen's union calls off protests

The Fishermen's Alliance, which represents fishermen in Gwadar affected by a new infrastructure project, has announced that it is calling off protests for a period of one month beginning on December 31. The decision was made after authorities agreed to meet the alliance's demands.

The fishermen have been protesting since September and held a two-day walkout last week over the 4.3-kilometre East-Bay Expressway that will block access to their fishing fields in the Arabian Sea. The new expressway connects Gwadar port to the Makran Coastal Highway.

While the fishermen do not oppose the project itself, they want wide underpass access points for the three main fishing

neighbourhoods. They are also demanding a 1,500-metre-long and 800-metre-wide breakwater to safely berth their boats, a large auction hall to sell fish, higher studies scholarships for their children and job opportunities at the port. An estimated 70 percent of Gwadar's 263,000-strong population are dependent on the fishing industry. The expressway construction project is part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Cambodian garment workers continue strike and occupations

One thousand workers at the Seduno Investment Cambo Fashion and W&D factories in Phnom Penh's Dangkor and Meanchey districts are continuing industrial action after walking out on strike last week.

The workers are defying return-to-work demands by their employers, the Cambodian government and the Cambodian Council of National Unions (CCNU). The two companies declared on Tuesday that unless the strike ended within 48 hours the workers would be dismissed without compensation. Both plants have been occupied by the garment workers, who are calling for payment of seniority indemnity and severance benefits.

Cambodian Labour Ministry spokesman Heng Sour endorsed these ultimatums and claimed that most employees had returned to work. He blamed the strike on one individual. CCNU bureaucrats echoed these claims and said a road protest by the striking workers was threatening public order. The union openly called on the government to victimise the striking workers and others who it claimed had "incited" the industrial action.

W&D worker So Vanna told the media the week-long strike was being conducted without help from any unions. "We depended on the unions," she said, "but they do not dare help us. That's why we organised this strike ourselves, we do not have union representation."

Striking Cambodian garment workers demand reinstatement of sacked representative

Numbers of workers at the Prestige Garment Co Ltd factory in the Stung district of Cambodia's Kandal Province remain on strike in protest against the sacking of their spokesman Huon Sovith. At a meeting on January 3, the company agreed to some of the workers' demands for improved working conditions but refused to reinstate Sovith.

Some of the strikers refused to return to work despite agreement on pay for sick days, leave entitlements, meal allowances and shift starting times. They decided to march on the house of the Prime Minister Hun Sen on January 4 to petition for Sovith's reinstatement.

New Zealand junior doctors plan national walkout

About 3,300 Resident Medical Officers, also known as junior doctors, in public hospitals across New Zealand are planning to strike for 48 hours starting on January 15. The industrial action was announced on December 31 by the Resident Doctors Association (RDA) after pay negotiations broke down between the union and New Zealand's District Health Boards (DHBs). The doctors' collective agreement expired in February 2018, almost a year ago.

RDA leaders have told the media the strike is likely to proceed, but will be called off if the DHBs remove "clawbacks" affecting pay and working conditions. The employers are demanding the right to send doctors to work at any hospital in the country. DHBs have also called for more "flexible" working hours. Doctors are already working 55 to 60 hours a week and many hospitals are severely under-staffed and overflowing with patients.

In November DHBs reached a sellout pay deal with the breakaway union Specialty Trainees of NZ (STONZ), covering about 100 doctors. It included pay rises of 2.5 percent and 3 percent over the next two years, essentially freezing pay against the cost of living. The deal also lengthened the number of consecutive days doctors can be rostered on to work from 10 to 12.

Last year saw an upsurge of strikes across New Zealand's health sector in protest against low pay and the crisis in hospitals caused by chronic underfunding under National Party and Labour Party-led governments for more than a decade.

New Caledonia nickel miners strike

A strike began on January 3 at two sites of the nickel mining company SLN in Thio and Tiebaghi, New Caledonia. The two unions involved—CSTNC and USTKE—told the media that the company wants to extend the working day to 10.5 hours. Those who start work in the afternoon shift would not finish until 2:00 a.m. In a statement, SLN said the longer hours had already been approved by five out of seven trade unions, and the new regime has been implemented at the company's site in Kouaoua.

Mining is the main industry in the French territory, which holds the world's largest known nickel deposits.



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