Two hundred thousand Indian midday meal workers still on strike; Tamil Nadu data entry workers protest: Tigerair pilots walkout in Australia

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 January 2019

India: Two hundred thousand midday meal workers continue strike

Indefinite strike action which began on January 7 by over 240,000 Mid-Day Meal (MDM) workers who are employed in 70,000 primary and middle schools in the east Indian state of Bihar is continuing. The workers want permanent jobs and 15 other demands.

The walkout, which began in Patna district, has expanded to involve MDM workers across the state and has been endorsed by India's four main union alliances—the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, All India Trade Union Congress, the All India United Trade Union Centre and the All India Central Council of Trade Unions.

MDM workers want to be classified as government employees and receive a pay rise, social security benefits, such as pensions, provident funds and insurance, and an honorarium of 18,000 rupees ($ US 254) per month.

The provision of midday meals in schools has had a long history in India. The first MDM program was introduced for disadvantaged children by Madras Municipal Corporation in 1925 and now exists in 12 Indian states. According to media reports, student attendances at state schools have dropped by 10 to 20 percent since the strike began.

India: "Marine hands" strike reduces ship movements in Kolkata

Ongoing strike action by "marine hands" at Kolkata's Haldia port has affected the movement of nearly 50 ships at the busy facility. Marine hands are responsible for berthing and unberthing ships.

Nearly 60 members of the Kolkata Port Trust Permanent Employees' Union walked out on strike on January 20 over increased workloads. Port management says the strike is illegal and claim it has resulted in the loss of 100 million rupees.

Workers claim that retiring marine hands are not being replaced and no new employees have been recruited in the past 10 years. They have told the media that crews should have 20 members but that some crews only have eight workers.

Tamil Nadu data entry workers protest

Hundreds of Data Entry Operators (DEOs) at E-sevai and Aadhar centres from across Tamil Nadu state demonstrated outside the Collectors Office in Chennai on January 20 to demand payment of outstanding wages and improved working conditions. The workers are members of the Information Technology and Information Enabled Services union.

E-sevai and Aadhar centres are controlled by the Tamil Nadu Arasu Cable TV Corporation Ltd (TACTV), which operates over 650 centres across the state. Services are outsourced to contractors, which recruit data entry workers.

DEOs are mainly women who are only paid about 6,000 rupees ($US84) a month, but over the last four months most have not received their full salaries, some receiving as little as 500 to 1,000 rupees.

The protesters, who said that authorities have ignored their concerns, have threatened to strike.

Hyundai Motor workers at Chennai plant protest

Hyundai Motor workers at the company's plant in Chennai are refusing the lunches provided by the company in protest over the lack of progress toward a new wage deal by the giant corporation. Unions representing the workers have been involved in negotiations since April last year.

The workers want a pay rise, reinstatement of victimised employees and the company recognition of a union for irregular workers. Around 80 percent of the 10,000 assembly line workers at the plant are irregular workers and the company is using trainees to replace skilled workers.

Workers held various sit-down protests and strikes between 2008 and 2012 over wages and work practices. Hyundai Motor's first overseas plant is located in India and handles 14 percent of the company's global production volume.

Indian defence workers strike

About 40,000 defence employees in Maharashtra, including 20,000 in Mumbai, walked out January 23 to demand better pensions and against government plans to privatise or close defence industry plants.

The strike has shut down production at the Mumbai ordnance factory at

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Ambarnath and work at the central defence depot in Kandivali as well as the Naval Dockyard and Military Engineering Service.

The industrial action was jointly called by the All India Defence Federation, Indian National Defence Workers Federation and the Bharatiya Pratiraksha Mazdoor Sangh. The Centre of Indian Trade Unions has also endorsed the strike.

Strikers are demanding that the government withdraw its decision to declare ordnance factory production as "non-core" and other job-destruction and cost cutting policies, including closure of electronics and mechanical engineering workshops. They also want the government to scrap its current national pension system and restore the previous Central Civil Service pension. Workers struck over these issues in 2014. There are 400,000 civilian defence workers in India.

Pakistan government hospital doctors demonstrate

Young Doctors' Association (YDA) members at government hospitals in Peshawar boycotted duties and protested on January 17 for unpaid salaries. The doctors marched from Lady Reading Hospital to the Provincial Assembly.

The YDA members are demanding an increase in the number of positions in post-graduate medical institutes. Demonstrators blocked major city roads for more than five hours. The union called off the demonstration after meeting with government authorities and claiming they had promised to resolve the issues.

Sri Lankan trade zone workers strike against employee victimisation

ATG Ceylon gloves factory workers in Sri Lanka's Katunayaka free trade zone are still on strike after walking out on January 12 in protest against the dismissal of six fellow workers. The workers were office bearers of a new union established at the plant in opposition to a management-backed trade union.

When ATG Ceylon workers put up a notice announcing a blood donation on the second anniversary of their new union, management claimed this was "misusing factory property" and filed a court case against the workers. Management then sacked the workers without paying them entitlements for their 15 years of service, before the court made any decision on the case.

Strikers said that they faced sweatshop and unsafe conditions and feared losing their jobs unless they joined the company-backed trade union.

Australia and the Pacific

Tigerair pilots take strike action

Tigerair Australia pilots walked off the job for four hours on Friday morning in a dispute over a new enterprise agreement. All Tigerair flights from 5 a.m. to 9 a.m. were cancelled, affecting around 2,500 passengers.

There could be further disruptions over the Australia Day long weekend, with pilots refusing to operate aircraft with non-safety-related defects on Saturday, Sunday and Monday.

The low budget airline, which is owned by Virgin Australia, has been in negotiations for a new agreement with the Australian Federation of Air Pilots, which covers around 150 pilots, and the VIPA union for the past two years. Over that period, pilots have suffered an effective wage freeze. Until now, the unions have avoided any actions that would disrupt Tigerair's operations. Low-level industrial action began in December with minimal effect.

The current agreement is reportedly well below industry standards for pay and conditions.

Telstra technicians vote on industrial action

Thousands of workers at Telstra, Australia's largest telecommunications provider, have begun voting in a protected action ballot on whether to take industrial action, including strikes, after rejecting a new enterprise agreement offer. Telstra and the Communications Electrical Plumbing Union (CEPU), representing 6,000 employees in Telstra's technical section, have been in negotiations since early 2018.

The major point of contention is Telstra's proposed pay rise of 4.5 percent over the next three years, amounting to a rise of just 1.5 percent per year. This is less than inflation and would amount to an effective wage cut.

The latest attack by Telstra follows its announcement last year that it would eliminate 9,500 jobs over the next three years. Around 750 positions are set to be destroyed over the coming months. The first round of sackings, which cut 1,200 jobs, were imposed last year.

None of the unions representing Telstra workers, including the CEPU and Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), have done anything to oppose the job cuts, which are the largest in Australian corporate history.

Hutchison ports workers in Sydney strike

Dock workers at Hutchison's container terminal at Port Botany, Sydney walked off the job for 24 hours on Monday to oppose demands from the global stevedoring company for sweeping wage cuts and a further erosion of working conditions in a new enterprise agreement (EA).

About 100 members of the Construction Forestry Mining Maritime and Energy Union (CFMMEU) were met by riot police, some on horseback, as they marched from Hutchison's car park to the Patrick Port Botany Terminal.

Hutchison is demanding that workers accept pay cuts of up to 10 percent, followed by a wage freeze. Hourly rates could be reduced for workers at all wage levels, potentially costing some workers tens of thousands of dollars a year. The company is also seeking to slash parental and sick leave, impose a 2.5 percent reduction in superannuation payments and abolish full-time first aid positions.

Redundancy and long service leave payments would be cut by half for most workers, the union claimed. According to the CFMMEU these reductions would result in workers being up to 26 percent worse off in retirement.

Some 98 percent of workers at Hutchison Ports terminals in Sydney and Brisbane who voted in a union-organised ballot on January 14 registered their support for industrial action that included strikes and work bans. Although the CFMMEU covers workers employed by various other stevedores at the Sydney and Brisbane docks the Hutchison workers are kept isolated and industrial action has been restricted.

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Queensland rail coal haulage workers resume industrial action

Up to 1,000 Queensland rail workers employed by coal hauler Aurizon are due to begin seven days of overtime bans from Monday, January 25 in a long-running dispute for a new enterprise agreement. The action by members of the Australian Federation Union of Locomotive Employees (AFULE) and the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) follows stoppages in December that affected Aurizon's four major railways in the Central Queensland Coal Network (CQCN).

The AFULE, RTBU, Electrical Trades Union and Australian Manufacturing Union have been in negotiations with Aurizon since before the old enterprise agreement expired four months ago. Their members have not had a pay increase for 16 months.

The unions claim that major disputes were over Aurizon's refusal to back-pay any negotiated wage increase, rostering, proposed changes to the "voluntary" redundancy scheme and changes to the dispute procedures, including removal of "arbitration."

In separate action, AFULE train crew working on Aurizon's North West Line, known as the Australia Eastern Railroad (AER) struck for 24 hours on January 21 and implemented seven days of overtime bans in their dispute for a new enterprise agreement. Issues include back pay, proposed changes to the redundancy scheme, re-aligning superannuation for all members and roster changes.

New Zealand learning support managers begin job action

About 55 specialists who support children with learning needs began a month of industrial action on January 21 after rejecting a wage offer. The Ministry of Education had offered a pay increase of just two percent a year, barely matching the official inflation rate.

They workers are demanding pay parity with other managers employed by the Ministry. The New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), the union representing the workers, has limited industrial action to an overtime ban.

Across the education sector, workers are demanding improved staffing levels, working conditions and significant pay increases to match the soaring cost of living. The support workers' action follows a one-day strike by primary school teachers, who are also members of NZEI, last year. NZEI and the Post-Primary Teachers' Association are negotiating with the Labour Party-led government in an attempt to avert another strike this year.

New Caledonia miners' strike continues

A strike by workers at New Caledonia's major nickel mining company SLN is now in its fourth week. Three of the company's four mine sites have been affected by the strike and SLN reports that it has been forced to cut nickel production, which props up the French territory's economy. SLN is New Caledonia's largest company, with 2,000 employees.

Trade union leaders in Noumea have agreed to a proposed restructure by SLN, designed to improve profitability. But they have been unable to pressure striking workers into accepting the sellout deal, which would significantly lengthen shifts for part-time workers.

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