

Bangladesh garment workers demonstrate for unpaid wages; New Caledonia nickel miners' strike enters second month

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 February 2019

### Bangladesh garment workers demand unpaid wages

Several hundred former Peninsula Garments employees demonstrated on Wednesday, blockading the main entrance of the Chattogram Export Processing Zone (CEPZ) in south-eastern Bangladesh to demand unpaid wages.

Workers began their protest at around 10 a.m, and after almost two hours marched for about 11 kilometres towards the Chattogram Press Club in Kotwali.

While the Peninsula Garments plant was shut down nine months ago, an estimated 700 of its 1,500 workers are still owed one month's salary, bonuses and other benefits. Some workers, who had found employment at plants in Barishal, Rangpur, Gopalganj, Dhaka and other areas, travelled across the country to join the protest.

While company authorities told a meeting between the police, the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority and some government bodies that the wage arrears would be paid by February 28, demonstrators are sceptical.

Protesting worker Shahinur Khatun, holding her 6-month-old daughter in her arms, told the media that she had worked at the factory for seven years. "I came all the way to Dhaka because they had promised all of our money but now they have delayed the date again. This is the third time this has happened."

### Five thousand Bangladesh government workers sacked after recent wage strikes

Garment owners have intensified their witch hunts against garment workers who struck last month in the industrial belts of Ashulia, Savar, Gazipur and Narayanganj to demand higher pay. An estimated 5,000 workers have been victimised and sacked since the strikes, which lasted ten days and involved tens of thousands of workers.

Labour rights groups, however, estimate that more than 7,000 workers have been sacked. Police have also filed charges against nearly 3,500 named and un-named protesters. Workers' demonstrations were violently attacked by police, and one young worker killed, during the walkouts, which were betrayed by the garment unions.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association—the manufacturer's lobby group—told the media that factory owners were justified in terminating the workers.

Bangladesh garment workers have been fighting since 2016 for their minimum wage to be increased from 5,300 taka per month to 16,000 taka (\$US190). Last September, the government only agreed to below poverty level pay of 8,000 taka, or half the amount demanded by workers.

### Pakistan: Government doctors shut down outpatient departments in Sindh province

Doctors at Sindh government hospitals walked out on Monday over outstanding payments of salaries, allowances and health insurance. They also want the same salaries, allowances and other benefits paid to doctors in other provinces.

The strike, which was organised by the Doctors Action Committee and includes the Young Doctors Association and Pakistan Medical Association, forced the closure of out-patient departments at Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre and Civil Hospital in Karachi and other major hospitals in Sindh province cities.

The Doctors Action Committee said the government had failed to respond to their demands. It has threatened to extend the industrial action to other departments and impact on emergency services if the government fails to address their claims within a week.

### Union shuts down Sindh university workers' protests

The Employees Welfare Association ended protests by workers at the Benazir Bhutto Medical University in Larkana on Tuesday after the authorities held negotiations with the union.

The university workers were demanding better working conditions as well as a higher quota of job openings for their children, fringe benefits and timely promotions. Many recently recruited employees have not been paid for up to 15 months. The protests disrupted the administrative processes and the academic work of the tertiary institution.

### Sri Lankan management assistant workers demonstrate across the island

Management assistant workers at Sri Lankan government service began a series of nationwide protests on January 22 to demand higher wages, re-establishment of an exam promotional scheme, a training centre and reinstatement of the pension scheme suspended in 2016.

Hundreds of Management Assistant Service Trade Union Alliance members demonstrated outside divisional secretariat offices in the Kandy, Galle and Badulla districts. The union said protests would be held in different locations, including government administrative institutes, next week.

### **Sri Lankan Bank workers protest against non-payment of increments**

Sri Lanka Savings Bank (SLSB) workers protested outside the Central Bank on January 24 over the non-payment of wage increases granted in 2018.

The workers, who are members of the Ceylon Bank Employees Union, want these increases paid before a scheduled merger of the bank with the National Savings Bank occurs. Prior to the recent demonstration, the bank workers wore protest badges to work for two weeks and organised a poster campaign.

### **Hong Kong hospital workers protest staff shortages**

Around 40 hospital support workers rallied in Hong Kong last Wednesday to protest insufficient staffing during the winter flu season.

Organised by the Hong Kong Medical and Health Care Staff General Union, workers marched from Admiralty Centre to government headquarters. They submitted a petition to the Food and Health Bureau.

Many hospitals are overflowing with patients. The United Christian Hospital in Kwun Tong registered occupancy rates at 122 percent of capacity. Most night shifts only have one nurse and two care assistants to cover 50 to 55 patients.

### **Hundreds of Burmese workers protest plant sackings**

On Wednesday, 500 garment workers from 30 factories in Yangon gathered outside the Dishang Kenny garment factory in Hlaing Tharyar township to demand the reinstatement of seven of union members sacked last November.

The rally was organised by the Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar.

Company officials claim the seven were sacked for disruption and delaying production. Workers have stated that they were victimised as part of a long-running dispute over conditions. The issues at the factory have included workers being forced to carry out overtime and not being paid the proper rates for additional work.

### **Australia: Aurizon coal haulage workers to strike again**

Over 550 Aurizon train drivers on the central Queensland coal network

are set to begin three 24-hour rolling stoppages on February 4. The action follows seven days of overtime bans and strike action in December as part of a long-running dispute for a new enterprise agreement.

The Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Employees (AFULE) and the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) have limited the stoppages to cause minimal disruption to Aurizon's operations. There is to be only one day of strike action on three separate rail corridors beginning in Newland on February 4, then Goonyella, followed by Blackwater on February 6.

The AFULE and the RTBU, along with the Electrical Trades Union and Australian Manufacturing Workers 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 are over Aurizon's refusal to back-pay any negotiated wage increase, rostering, and proposed changes to the "voluntary" redundancy scheme and dispute procedures, including the removal of "arbitration." The AFULE said it would "de-escalate" its industrial campaign if some progress was made on rostering, shift extensions and annual leave deductions.

### **Port Kembla Coal Terminal workers to strike**

Over 50 workers at the Port Kembla Coal Terminal (PKCT), south of Sydney, are scheduled to begin seven days of strike action, starting today, in the long-running dispute over job security in a proposed enterprise agreement (EA). The previous EA expired in early 2015.

The stoppage follows a seven-day lockout by PKCT to prevent one-hour rolling strikes that had been called by the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU). PKCT replaced locked out workers with hired labour.

The company has threatened to shut the facility if workers do not accept "flexible" conditions in a new EA. It is seeking to remove job security provisions, so it can expand the use of casual and contract labour.

PKCT ships coal mined in the Illawarra region to ports across the country and internationally. It is owned by major mining companies including PeaBody Energy, South32, Wollongong Coal, SIMEC mining, Centennial Coal and Glencore.

The CFMMEU has left the workers isolated and repeatedly signalled its willingness to strike a sellout agreement with PKCT.

### **New Zealand health administration workers to hold stop work meeting**

Over 5,500 health administration workers employed by New Zealand's District Health Boards will attend a national two-hour stop work meeting on February 11 to discuss possible industrial action over wages.

Administration staff are paid less than others in the health system. Some are on the minimum wage. Workers want an increase in pay and an end to the DHB's practice of de facto recruitment freezes to cut costs.

Nurses, midwives and junior doctors have held strikes over pay and conditions in recent months. Industrial action by nurses was betrayed by the unions, which agreed to a paltry 9 percent pay rise over three years, with no commitments on patient to staff ratios.

A spokesperson for the Public Services Association, the union representing the administration workers, sought to temper workers' expectations, stating, "We don't want this group to fall behind the pay increases that other groups have already achieved."

### **New Zealand midwives prepare for second strike over pay**

Around 1,100 hospital midwives have voted for a series of four 12-hour strikes starting on February 11. The workers, covered by Midwifery Employee Representation and Advisory Services (MERAS), held rolling two-hour strikes in November, 2018.

Many midwives are members of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) and are already paid by a midwives scale as part of the NZNO's sellout multi-employer collective agreement last year. MERAS members are demanding a better outcome than the nurses' union's recent sell-out deal, including a rise in midwife's starting salary from \$49,450 to \$56,788. Midwives are also planning to march on New Zealand's parliament on February 14.

### **New Caledonia miners' strike enters second month**

Hundreds of nickel miners at Société Le Nickel (SLN) have been on strike since January 3 in opposition to a company restructure. On Thursday, more than 100 strikers employed at mine sites in Thio, Népoui and Tiébaghi held a mass meeting at Thio. They reaffirmed that they will continue the strike until SLN withdraws its demand to extend shifts to ten-and-a-half-hours and a total of 147 hours per worker per month. Strikers also oppose plans to make them work after midnight.

The striking workers are part of two unions, CSTNC and USTKE. CSTNC official Arnold Delrieu told the media that "from the beginning we never refused to increase working hours" and complained that SLN refused to negotiate.

In a deliberate decision to divide the workforce and isolate the strike, five other unions, led by USOENC, have agreed to SLN's demands. The company's restructure is being driven by the declining global price of nickel, New Caledonia's main export.



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