Midday meal workers protest in Telangana, India; Telstra technicians implement work bans across Australia

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 March 2019

India: Telangana midday meal workers demand outstanding payments

Midday meal workers in the southern Indian state of Telangana protested on March 20 over a range of demands including the non-payment of outstanding food and gas bills. The Indian government established the National Program of Nutritional Support to Primary Education or midday meal scheme in 1995.

Protesting workers said that the state government is deliberately running down the scheme and preparing to privatise it. Numerous studies demonstrate that the program reduces malnutrition amongst school children.

Workers want the immediate payment of four months' outstanding food bills and other demands including a minimum 18,000 rupees ($US262) monthly wage, government identity cards to workers and increased funding for eggs and subsidised gas fuel supplies.

Ford India workers protest against low wages

Ford India workers in Sanand city in the western Indian state Gujarat have been protesting for one month over management's refusal to increase their wages. Currently they are only paid 17,000 rupees ($US244) per month and are reportedly the lowest paid auto workers in India.

The Sanand Ford India Workers Union (Karnavati Kamdar Ekta Sangh) members told the media that they are unable to provide their families with decent living conditions. The union is currently negotiating for a collective bargaining agreement for the 2018 to 2020 period.

Railway sanitation workers strike in Kerala

About 65 contract cleaners at Ernakulam Junction Railway Station, the biggest station in Kochi, in Kerala state have been on strike since March 13. They are demanding the immediate payment of three months' outstanding salaries.

The mainly women workers are usually paid 466 rupees ($US7) per day and not provided with medical facilities or the basic Employee State Insurance.

Railway management says it has already paid the contractor who claims he will soon pay the arrears. The same promise was made last December when the cleaners walked out on strike. Only a few of the workers were paid and not the full outstanding amount.

Texport Apparels employees strike in Bangalore

Over 200 Texport Apparels workers walked out on a strike on March 18 after the factory's general manager was accused of physically assaulting one employee. The alleged incident happened on March 11. Senior management have suspended the individual accused of the assault.

Bangladesh garment workers protest in Chittagong over death of young worker

Police violently attacked demonstrating Four H Apparels employees in Chittagong on March 13 after they barricaded Chittagong-Hathazari Road. The workers were protesting over the suicide of a fellow young female worker.

Twenty-year-old Hajera Akter committed suicide in her home on March 11 after she was reportedly insulted by factory authorities who accused her of stealing from the plant earlier that day. The factory employs about 1,000 workers, 600 of them female workers. Physical and verbal abuse of workers by management is common in the Bangladesh garment industry.

Jewel Shil, a staff photographer for the *Prothom Alo* newspaper, was physically assaulted by police and his pictures deleted after he photographed police beating the women demonstrators.

Pakistan: Lahore health workers demand higher salaries

Lady Health Workers program employees are continuing a sit-down demonstration to demand higher wages outside the provisional assembly premises in The Mall, a main artery in Lahore. The protest began March 18.

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While the government agreed to make their jobs permanent in 2012 the workers do not have permanent employment and have not received any pay rise. They also demanding a proper service structure which takes into consideration their education and experience, pension rights and other benefits paid to government employees.

The Lady Health Workers Association said the demonstration will continue until the government accepts their demands and they want written confirmation of any agreement with the government.

The Lady Health Workers program provides essential health services such as vaccinations in rural and poverty-stricken areas of Pakistan where health facilities are scarcely available. They remain one of the most exploited sections of the Pakistani working class.

Telstra technicians implement work bans across Australia

Following a 24-hour strike of over 3,000 Telstra technicians earlier this month, Communications Electrical Plumbing Union (CEPU) members have imposed work bans in a dispute over a proposed enterprise agreement (EA). The industrial action will impact on the installation and maintenance of home telephone and mobile services, including the National Broadband Network. Workers are refusing to respond to emergency callouts, work overtime or accept deliveries of Telstra equipment at their home addresses.

CEPU members have rejected Telstra's proposed pay rise of 4.5 percent over the next three years, which amounts to an increase of just 1.5 percent per year, well below the official rate of inflation. The union has called for a meagre 12 percent wage increase over three years.

The CEPU and Telstra have been in negotiations for a new EA since March 2018. According to the union, Telstra has not responded to its calls to resume negotiations since industrial action began.

Bus drivers in Tasmania walk out

Bus drivers in Tasmania's capital Hobart walked off the job for four hours on Thursday morning to demand a pay rise. Metro Tasmania, the state owned transport provider, said that over 500 services were affected.

A Rail Tram and Bus Union spokesperson said 92 percent of drivers rejected the government's enterprise agreement offer – a meagre 2 percent pay increase. This would be the equivalent of a 1 percent pay cut, given that inflation in Hobart is 3 percent.

A Metro Tasmania representative said the company was keeping within the Liberal government's 2 percent cap on pay increases for all public sector workers.

Meanwhile, teachers from government schools have rejected the state government's latest pay offer. According to the Australian Education Union, 100 percent of members last week voted against a proposed 2 percent pay increase. The union has called for a 3 percent increase, caps on class sizes and increases in in-class support.

New Zealand primary teachers' union calls off stop-work meeting

The New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), a primary school teachers' union, announced on Thursday that it had cancelled a planned one-hour stop-work meeting, which had been scheduled for this week to decide whether to hold another nationwide strike on April 3. The Christchurch terrorist attack on March 15 was given as a pretext for the meeting being called off.

Teachers will instead vote in an online ballot from April 1–5 on whether to accept the Ministry of Education's offer, which has been widely opposed. It does not provide for any significant increase in staff and resources for schools. The pay rise of 3 percent per annum is not enough to make up for at least a decade of effective wage freezes. The cancellation of meetings is intended to limit the discussion among teachers of the sellout deal.

Negotiations between the NZEI and the government have dragged on throughout 2018. Primary teachers held two one-day nationwide strikes last year. They have demanded a pay increase of 15 percent over two years and improvements in workload and other conditions in schools, which face a crisis of under-resourcing.

On Thursday, the Post-Primary Teachers' Association, which had also scheduled a strike for April 3, told the media that it was also considering whether to call off the strike. No final decision has been announced.

Disability carers vote to strike

The E Tu union announced this week that 3,000 care and support workers employed by IDEA Services have voted to strike on April 1. The vote follows five months of negotiations between the employer and the union, which says workers want the restoration of allowances for taking on extra responsibilities, recognition for weekend work and a greater say in health and safety.

An E Tu spokesperson said IDEA wants to "cut sick leave accumulation, force staff to move workplaces without agreement or notice and simply refused to consider recognition that staff are required to work anti-social hours."

New Caledonia public sector workers strike

A strike by public sector workers in New Caledonia began on March 18. Workers have been demanding a 20 percent pay rise to compensate for increased living costs over the past decade, which have not been matched by wage rises.

Workers also protested on Friday against a plan to increase the pension age from 60 to 62—a move that triggered a general strike in French Polynesia last year. The strike does not include all public sector workers. Reportedly, postal workers, some airport workers and some teachers are on strike.

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