

Thousands of powerloom workers strike in Tamil Nadu; Migrant workers strike and protest in Taiwan; New Zealand teachers voting on national walkout

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 May 2019

### India: Powerloom workers strike in Tamil Nadu

Over 2,000 powerloom workers are currently on strike in Virudhunagar district in southern Tamil Nadu over outstanding wages. The walkout involves factory workers from Chattirapatti, Rajapalayam, Samasigapuram and Sangarapandiapuram who are demanding outstanding wage payments for 2018–19.

Private companies, powerloom unit owners and workers negotiate a wage and work agreement once every three years. While salaries were paid according to the 2016 agreement, wages for the 2018–19 financial year have not been paid according to the agreed rates. Workers are demanding the immediate release of these amounts and are dissatisfied with the offer made to them for this year's three-year agreement.

### Indian television workers walk out in Mumbai

About 140 civil, video and production units for the Doordarshan television channel have been on strike since May 2 to demand higher pay and permanent jobs.

While most of the workers have worked for the channel between eight and ten years, the company refuses to make them permanent employees or improve their pay. The workers currently receive just 15,800-rupees (\$US240) per month before tax.

### India: Punjab government employees hold hunger-strike

Members of the Punjab UT Employees and Pensioners Joint Action Committee began a hunger-strike on May 2 to demand higher pay and for all contract employees to be given permanent jobs.

Members of the Theka Mulazam Sangarsh Committee, SSA RMSA Union, Class IV Employees Union and the Anganwadi (Childcare) Workers Union joined the protest the following day and blocked the Bathinda-Mansa highway chanting slogans against the Punjab state government.

### Telangana electricity staff strike for equal pay and better conditions

Over 1,400 Telangana state electricity meter reading workers struck on May 4 for equal pay for rural and city employees and improved working conditions. Rural area meter readers are paid between 1.70 to 1.90 rupees (\$0.024 -0.027) per meter but urban area workers are only paid 1.50 rupees.

The strikers want a minimum wage instead of piece rates and allege that authorities are not considering their demands because employees are either on contract or outsourced.

### Andhra Pradesh healthcare workers protest over pending honorarium payments

Members of the Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) organisation protested near the Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation (GVMC) office on May 7 to demand the state government pay a pending honorarium.

The ASHA members have not received the payment since January and claimed that the district collector and other officials had ignored them. The workers also demanded the payment of daily and travel allowances and said the state government was attempting to intimidate by sacking some employees.

ASHA is a community health worker organisation instituted by the government of India's ministry of health and family welfare as a part of its National Rural Health Mission launched in 2005.

### India: Chennai workers protest in support of Asahi employees

BMW, Ford, Comstar, Yasahi, Lear and other factories in the Chengalpattu and Maraimalai Nagar industrial belt protested on May 8 in support of striking Asahi employees. The Asahi workers have been on strike for the past 45 days to demand reinstatement of 29 dismissed workers and recognition of their union.

### **India: Punjab school teachers start week-long protest**

Punjab school teachers began a week-long protest against the state government on May 8 for job permanency and other demands. The decision to strike was taken at a meeting organised by the Adhyapak Sangarsh Committee and began at the district level. Teachers had planned to hold protests in various parts of Punjab this week and a state-level march in Patiala on May 14.

### **Pakistan: Karachi steel mill workers oppose privatisation**

Pakistan Steel Mills workers in Karachi blocked a busy highway for an hour this week in protest against successive government attempts to privatise the state-owned enterprise. Retired workers demanding the immediate payment of outstanding pensions also joined the demonstration.

In line with negotiations for a loan with the International Monetary Fund, the government has presented an expanded list of so-called loss-making state-owned enterprises. According to media reports, the government plans to shut 43 state-owned enterprises, immediately privatise another 48, and over the next three years privatise the rest of its 193 state-run institutions.

### **Pakistan: Sindh revenue department employees demand allowances**

Revenue Department employees in Sindh demonstrated last week to demand the government pay the revenue summary allowance, introduce a service structure, institute timely promotions and a jobs quota for the families of deceased workers.

On May 2, hundreds of employees locked down offices and demonstrated in Mirpurkhas and held a sit-down protest outside the offices of the deputy commissioner of the department. Protests and boycott of duties continued in Hyderabad on Friday where a demonstration was held outside Hyderabad division headquarters.

Workers want the government to pay five years' outstanding payments, which is a significant component of their income. The All Sindh Revenue Employees Association organised the protests and said these would continue until the government accepted workers' demands.

### **Bangladesh garment workers oppose factory closure and unpaid salaries**

Over a thousand garment workers from the Golden Horizon Limited factory in the Nasirabad industrial area demonstrated for outstanding salaries and other benefits on Monday. Protesters surrounded the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association Bhaban building. Factory management suddenly closed the plant and refused to pay two months' outstanding wages.

### **Bangladesh: Jute mill workers agitate for unpaid salaries**

Jute mill workers from private and state-run mills demonstrated from Sunday to Wednesday demanding their unpaid wages and other benefits.

Some 1,000 workers from the Latif Bawani Jute Mills and Karim Jute Mills in Demra demonstrated on Wednesday in Demra, Dhaka, blocking the road near the Demra Staff Quarter area. These mills are owned by private companies with the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (a state utility) holding some shares.

Workers of all 26 state-owned mills—jute and non-jute plants—said they would begin a strike on May 13 for nine demands, including unpaid salaries. Their four-day strike in mid-April was suspended after authorities promised to meet workers' demands by April 25. Management broke the promise.

### **Migrant workers strike and protest in Taiwan**

About 70 migrant workers from Vietnam protested outside the headquarters of a bakery in Xizhi District Friday, demanding the business pay them for the overtime and reimburse unlawful deductions from their monthly pay. The action was reportedly organised outside the control of any union. Mei Ti Foodstuff in New-Taipei has since agreed to compensate its workers, which includes returning money deducted over a two-year period.

According to the labor department, the migrant workers complained that they worked an average of 16–18 hours per day without standard pay. The employer also often deducted money from workers' pay for any defective items produced.

On the same day various civic groups, including Migrants Empowerment Network and the Vietnamese Migrant Workers and Immigrants Office, protested yesterday outside the Ministry of Labor. They accused officials of abandoning promises to keep migrant workers' dorms separate from factories and warned that this would expose workers to deadly fires.

After a blaze at Chin-Poon Industrial Co's Taoyuan factory in April last year killed two Thai workers staying in a dorm and six firefighters trying to rescue them, the ministry said it would separate all dorms from factory complexes. The promise has been dropped.

Under a new government policy dorms can be built near industrial facilities, including boilers, kilns and storage spaces for explosives, flammable materials and dangerous chemicals. The authorities are only proposing that employers fill out a form reporting any safety risks concerning workers' dorms.

Last Sunday, 20 migrant workers protested outside the Vietnam Economic and Cultural Office in Taipei demanding a direct hiring scheme replace the current brokerage system. According to one worker, brokerage fees to go to Taiwan for work were \$4,000, several times their monthly income, and could be higher in some cases.

### **Chinese workers protest layoffs at tech giant**

Staff at the Oracle's China Development Centre in Beijing demonstrated this week against the US-owned company's plans to lay off at least 900 employees. A second round of dismissal the remaining 700 employees in July, according to media reports.

Workers are being pressured into signing prearranged termination agreements, after their retrenchment was announced in a conference call Tuesday morning. If the workers do not agree to the package by 22 May,

they could lose a substantial portion of the pay-out.

The move throws the workers and their families into economic uncertainty. Many are worried that they will be unable to find another job in the tech sector, which traditionally favours younger workers.

The majority are also migrant workers, who will struggle to pay their social insurance contributions, thereby jeopardising their chances of obtaining residency in the capital. Workers want Oracle to continue paying social insurance for at least three months.

### **Toll Transport truck maintenance workers vote to strike in South Australia**

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union members at Toll's truck maintenance facility in Adelaide have voted for industrial action in a dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). Industrial action will include unlimited strikes ranging from two to 48 hours and/or work bans on overtime and training of casuals and labour hire employees.

The existing agreement covering 15 workers expired in 2007. Their wages have been frozen for four years. A union spokesman said that after months of refusing to come to the negotiating table, Toll is now trying to force the workers onto an unsafe, family unfriendly, 21-day rotating roster. Workers would have to work fourteen days straight of 12-hour shifts.

The union claimed that Toll's shift proposal would lead to fatigue that could result in poor maintenance and unsafe vehicles being put back onto the road. Over 1,060 people have been killed in truck crashes in Australia since 2013.

### **Aurizon bulk haulage train crew extend industrial action**

The Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Employees (AFULE) told rail freight haulage company Aurizon that members at the company's Queensland East Coast and North-West depots will impose a 14-day overtime ban on May 15. The action follows 24-hour rolling stoppages from April 23 to 25 that included a seven-day overtime ban.

Aurizon's extensive Queensland rail network hauls coal, bulk freight, grain, sugar, cement and other freight. Separate enterprise agreements cover workers in coal haulage and bulk haulage. While work conditions and rosters varied for both groups, wages were at the same rate depending on classification.

The unions fear that Aurizon wants to implement different wage rates between Coal and Bulk which workers fear would lead to lower pay rates in Bulk. Other disputed issues are the company's demand that workers use up to 160 hours of their annual leave for planned shutdowns, replace the current payment system for working beyond ten hours and give credits instead, among other issues.

Negotiations for new agreements covering over 1,000 Aurizon employees have been dragging on since September. Workers have not had a pay increase for 17 months.

### **New Zealand teachers vote on strike action**

Members of the New Zealand teacher unions, the NZ Educational Institute (NZEI) and the Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) have been voting this week on whether to hold a one-day strike on May 29, to coincide with the Labour government's budget announcement.

If the strike goes ahead, it will be the first combined stoppage of primary and secondary sectors and will involve some 50,000 teachers. The teachers had previously voted in favour of a strike on April 3. In an anti-democratic move the unions cancelled the strike, using the March 15 Christchurch terror attack as a pretext.

Teachers have rejected several pay offers of a 3 percent pay rise each year for three years, which provoked two one-day strikes by primary teachers last year. In 2017 NZEI members voted for a pay increase of at least 16 percent and their secondary colleagues 15 percent. Teachers are angry not only about pay, which has been stagnant for at least a decade, but also the crisis of understaffing and under-resourcing in schools, which has led to impossible workloads.

The unions, which support Labour, have been seeking to derail the strike movement by dragging out negotiations to impose a sellout deal. In an effort to avert further strikes, the government this week announced an extra \$95 million for teacher training, which is not enough to relieve the chronic staff shortages. It also increased its pay offer to a total of \$1.2 billion, declaring it is the final offer. This is still well short of the more than \$3 billion which would be required to meet the teachers' claims in full.

The unions are yet to respond to the new offer, but the outcome of the strike votes will be known next week.

### **Big Ben pie workers strike again**

George Weston Foods workers in South Auckland have struck again this week and set up a picket over a pay dispute. The two-day strike follows a 24-hour strike held last month.

About 30 workers from the company's Big Ben pie department, represented by FIRST Union, have been in bargaining with the company since September last year. The employer has not increased a 2 percent pay offer since the strike actions began. The workers are paid between the minimum wage of \$17.70 and just over \$21 an hour. Most are on \$18-\$19 and some have 20-plus years of service.

George Weston Foods is owned by the Weston family, of Canada and the UK, who have a recorded wealth of more than \$ NZ19 billion. The company also manufactures Tip Top, Bûrgen and Ploughmans bread, and Golden crumpets. It is one of the two main players in New Zealand's bread market.

### **Public sector strike closes schools in French Polynesia**

Strike action by public sector workers closed a number of schools in French Polynesia on Friday. The walkout is part of a France-wide protest against the Macron government's planned reforms which are supposed to be tabled in the National Assembly next week. In French Polynesia, hundreds of people joined a march in Papeete while several schools in Tahiti decided not to open.

An umbrella group of seven unions in Tahiti called for the strike, fearing the reform will lead to job losses and a degrading of services. In France, more than 100,000 people joined rallies against the reform plans.



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