

Tens of thousands Bangladeshi jute mill workers protest; Jetstar pilots and workers strike in Australia

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

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Bangladeshi jute mill workers and families on hunger protest

About 50,000 impoverished workers and their dependents from state-owned Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation plants in Khulna, Jashore, Rajshahi, Chittagong and Dhaka began an indefinite hunger strike on Tuesday over 11 demands. The general health of the workers is so poor that within 48 hours at least 150 became ill and needed medical attention. Some were hospitalised.

The low-paid workers want implementation of the National Wage and Productivity Commission Award 2015, payment of all outstanding weekly wages, payment of provident fund and gratuities owing to retired workers, settlement of insurance benefits to the families of deceased workers, full time work for temporary employees and reinstatement of all sacked workers.

The protesters' other demands included increased recruitment, higher budgetary allocations for the jute sector and modernisation and expansion of the jute mills to boost production. The workers held a nine-hour hunger strike on November 27 over the same demands.

The hunger strike is part of a seven-day program of escalating protests, which began on December 2 and included a 24-hour strike on December 3. The jute mills' 30,000 workers are organised by the Jute Mills Collective Bargaining Association and Non-CBA Sangram Parishad.

Bangladeshi garment workers demand outstanding wages

Hundreds of garment workers from two readymade garment factories in Gazipur demonstrated along the Dhaka-Gazipur Road on Tuesday blocking traffic for five hours. The workers were demanding payment of two months' outstanding wages.

Management at both factories—Style Craft and Young Ones—have not paid wages on time, despite numerous pledges to do so. The demonstration was organised after the factories failed to pay October wages by Tuesday. Workers said they have not received a leave bonus for the last two years.

Workers ended their protest after a government official assured them that the October wages would be paid on Thursday and the November wages on December 23.

India: Karnataka child care workers demonstrate

Over 30,000 childcare centre (anganwadi) workers from across Karnataka gathered in Tumakuru on December 10 to begin a march to Bengaluru in protest against the introduction of pre-primary classes in government schools.

Police intervened and blocked the march, however, forcing workers to postpone the protest until December 16. Several workers were arrested. Government officials agreed to meet with workers' representatives prior to the December 16 protest. The workers are members of the Karnataka State Anganwadi Workers' Association, which is affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

Anganwadi centre workers told the media that a pilot program establishing kindergartens at 176 government schools in March had seen falling enrolments of pre-primary school age children at anganwadi centres. The workers are demanding pre-primary schools be set up in anganwadi centres and that they receive a minimum monthly wage of 21,000 rupees.

Punjab government employees demand overdue pay

Hundreds of workers from various Punjab government departments in India stopped work and rallied in Bathinda on December 6 over unpaid salaries. Punjab Subordinate Services Federation members demanded implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations and the payment of all salaries and outstanding Dearness Allowance instalments.

Protesters burnt an effigy of the government and threatened to call a state wide protest if the government continues to ignore their demands. Workers from the Irrigation, Technical Education and Industries departments and the Public Works Department in Chandigarh also stopped work to demand payment of outstanding November wages.

Delhi University teachers on strike

Thousands of teachers from Delhi University in New Delhi began indefinite strike action on December 4 to demand the withdrawal of an August 28 management circular they believe jeopardises the careers of

some 4,000 ad-hoc teachers. The circular proposes that all vacant positions be filled by guest teachers.

The university teachers claim that some campuses have stopped recruiting ad-hoc teachers and withheld salaries for November since the circular was issued.

The striking Delhi University Teachers' Union members want employment of all temporary and ad-hoc teachers and that all promotions are determined according to years of service. While the university offered to withdraw the August 28 circular it has refused to concede to the other demands.

Police used water cannon on a group of protesting teachers from the North Campus on December 10 when they attempted to march towards Mall Road. Teachers said they will not return to work until all demands are resolved.

Indian public sector bank workers strike over mergers

Hundreds of workers from state-owned banks demonstrated outside parliament in New Delhi on December 10 against the Modi government's plan to merge ten state banks into four. The workers fear that the plan will see the closure of around 5,000 government bank branches and boost the fortunes of private operators.

The bank workers claim that the mergers are also to divert attention from the banks' bad loans recovery, reduction in deposit interest rates, increased service charges and other penalties on banking people.

Some 400,000 employees of public sector banks struck for 24 hours on October 22 over the issue. The public sector banks account for 70 percent of banking assets in India with over a million employees.

New Delhi nurses demand a minimum wage

The United Nurses Association (UNA) held a protest march in New Delhi on December 10 to demand implementation of a Delhi High Court directive that nurses receive a minimum wage. The UNA alleged that the High Court in July ruled in favour of implementing an "expert" committee recommendation that the minimum wage be applied within three months. The directive has not been carried out.

Maharashtra workers protest over job losses

A large group of workers marched in Nashik, Maharashtra on December 7 over high unemployment. The protesters alleged that 20,000 people have been sacked in the Nashik district alone due to rationalisations in the industrial sector. The workers want a waiver of loans for those who have lost their jobs.

The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which organised the protest, has directed the workers' anger into dead end appeals to the government. CITU officials issued a series of empty calls on the state and the central governments to negotiate so "amicable solutions" could be worked out and mitigate the "ill-effects of the economic slowdown."

Hundreds of foreign workers protest brokerage system in Taiwan

About 500 foreign migrant workers held a rally in Taipei on Sunday to oppose the broker system and calling for a "government to government" (G2G) scheme to put an end to punishing fees to find and maintain employment.

The biennial protest, which was organised by the Migrants Empowerment Network in Taiwan, was attended by a wide variety of other worker's organisations.

The action began at about 1:45 p.m., when migrant workers and supporters marched from the Chinese Nationalist Party headquarters to the Democratic Progressive Party headquarters, before stopping outside the Ministry of Labor near Taipei Railway Station.

Victorian rail workers strike

Members of the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) employed at Victoria's state owned regional commuter rail network V/Rail began a series of 24-hour rolling stoppages and work bans on Wednesday. The action is part of their dispute with the Labor government over its proposed enterprise agreement (EA).

Other industrial action by guards, shunters and drivers, involves short and frequent stoppages ranging between six minutes and one hour and intermittent bans on relief work at non-home depots. The government has attempted to minimise the effect of the strike by using commuter busses. V/line's workforce is over 2,000.

The RTBU has demanded annual 6 percent pay increases but the government refuses to offer above 2 percent.

Jetstar pilots, baggage handlers and ground crew strike

Pilots, baggage handlers and ground crew from Qantas Airways budget subsidiary Jetstar began strike action yesterday in two separate disputes over the company's proposed enterprise agreements.

Members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU), covering 250 baggage handlers and ground crew, walked off the job in two separate two-hour stoppages at airports at Sydney, Melbourne's Tullamarine and Avalon airports, as well as Brisbane, Cairns and Adelaide airports, against "poverty wages" and underemployment. The TWU is demanding annual 4 percent pay increases, a minimum 30 hours' work a week, more rest breaks, a guaranteed 12-hour break between shifts and safety improvements.

The Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP), representing around 800 Jetstar pilots, called strikes for Saturday and Sunday. Pilots on domestic flights will stop work for four hours at 4:59 am. on Saturday and Sunday, while international pilots will strike for four hours at 2:30 p.m. on Saturday and 9:30 p.m. on Sunday. Jetstar has cancelled 90 weekend flights due to the strike.

The issues in dispute between the pilots and Jetstar include demands for salary increases and changes in fatigue management through improved rostering. Jetstar claimed that the salary increase demanded by AFAP would increase labour costs by 15 percent. Pilots originally rejected the company's offer of 3 percent annual increases, but the AFAP has now agreed to the 3 percent offer and said other demands can be funded by productivity offsets.

Victoria: Hobsons Bay City Council workers stop work

Over 100 members of the Australian Services Union (ASU), including administration and field staff from Hobsons Bay City Council, a seaside suburb south of Melbourne, walked off the job for an hour on Wednesday and protested outside the city's town hall. They are demanding council management resume negotiations for a new enterprise agreement. Workers said they want a "fair" pay rise, retention of leave entitlements, and a respectful workplace.

After nine months of fruitless negotiations, workers decided to take low level protected industrial action. Commencing Thursday, they implemented a vast range of minor work bans in administration and field work.

Management responded to the industrial action by threatening to lockout workers without pay for an indefinite period.

Workers want 3 percent annual pay increases but the council has offered just 2 percent and wants to remove three days leave entitlement from some workers on upper pay levels. The council has applied to the Fair Work Commission to mediate future negotiations.

Sydney building materials manufacturing workers continue strike action

Around 70 production workers from Stramit Building Products at Erskine Park, west of Sydney, are maintaining rolling strike action on alternate shifts and an overtime ban begun on August 5 in their dispute for a new enterprise agreement. Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members want to roll over the existing agreement with improvements and a pay increase. Stramit want to trash the existing agreement and reclassify workers in a new enterprise agreement.

According to the union, workers stand to lose hundreds of dollars in wages and entitlements if they are reclassified. Negotiations are in progress under the supervision of the Fair Work Commission (FWC).

Meanwhile, the FWC has approved an application from the AMWU-Victoria branch to conduct a protected action ballot to decide on strike action at two Stramit facilities in Melbourne. Negotiations supervised by the FWC between Stramit and the AMWU over the company's proposed new agreement have stalled. Stramit wants to discontinue two existing agreements covering workers at two different sites and have one agreement covering all workers, which the union is opposing.

New Zealand bus drivers' strike shut down

The New Zealand Tramways Union and First Union shut down strike action by nearly 800 Auckland bus drivers on Thursday after the Auckland Council voted to "get involved" to find a solution to a deepening pay dispute. The drivers had voted on Tuesday to remain on strike in the lead-up to Christmas after rejecting a standing offer from NZ Bus.

Nearly 50 percent of bus services contracted by Auckland Transport were not running over four days after workers intensified their action last Saturday. The previous week, the drivers had refused to collect fares. On

Monday, many drivers protested through the Auckland CBD, gaining important support from the public.

NZ Bus' pay offer included a paltry 44 cents increase per hour. The main issues centre on drivers' pay, broken shifts and unpaid down time between shifts. On working days which can span 14 hours, the drivers often end up being paid below the legal minimum wage, set at \$17.70 an hour.

Last Saturday the company suspended 100 drivers for refusing to collect fares, with hundreds more threatened with suspension this week.

A First Union spokesman admitted the vote to cancel the strike faced "tough" opposition from "a lot of people who felt strong about continuing the action." He falsely claimed the council's move was an "important win" for the suspended drivers who would be back at work on Friday. "There's no point in the public, our drivers, or the company suffering. At this stage we have to try and sort this out," the spokesman declared.

Local councils have been instrumental in imposing a contracting system which favours those companies which impose low wages and brutal working hours.



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