

Thousands of Indian construction workers demonstrate; Australian Jetstar workers strike

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

21 December 2019

### Asia

#### India: Cooperative bank workers in Kerala strike against merger

Workers from 54 branches of the Malappuram District Cooperative Bank (MDCB), including its head office, held a three-day strike on December 16. Strikers protested outside their branches to oppose the proposed merger of MDCB with the newly formed state-owned Kerala Bank. All the branches were closed during the strike.

Workers denounced the merger and said it would impact over 400 workers. Banks unions have threatened to call an indefinite strike on January 1 if the merger proceeds.

On November 3, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) approved formation of the Kerala Bank, which involves the merger of 13 District Cooperative Banks (DCBs) with the Kerala State Cooperative Bank. The Kerala Bank will be the second-biggest bank in the state after the State Bank of India (SBI) in terms of deposits.

#### Uttar Pradesh school teachers protest

Over 1,000 teachers from schools under the Ministry of Human Resource Development Department in Varanasi and Allahabad, demonstrated after school hours on December 13 over several demands. Teachers wore black ribbons while performing routine duties during work hours. The protest was organised by the All India Kendriya Vidyalaya Teachers Association.

Teachers want an assured career progression scheme, Death and Gratuity and Provisional Family Pension, and increased government funding of the national pension scheme—from 10 percent to 14 percent per individual—provision of central government's health scheme facilities to all staff members and other long pending demands.

#### Factory fire deaths sparks angry protest in New Delhi

Hundreds of workers marched to the Delhi Labour Commissioner on December 10 in protest against government negligence which caused the recent death of at least 43 workers in a four-storey factory fire in New Delhi two days earlier. At least 20 others were injured. The protest was organised by the Mazdoor Adhikar Sangharsh Abhiyan.

Demonstrators carried placards demanding legal action against factory owners and administrative officers, accusing them of violating labour laws. Most of those who died in the fire were young workers, and many of them minors.

Protesters demanded the families of all the workers who died be paid 5 million rupees (\$US71,500) each in compensation and that government jobs be provided to dependants of these workers. For those who were injured, they demanded 2 million rupees each as compensation, along with free healthcare.

Workers said fires in similar factories were frequent and no government action has been taken to improve safety following fires in Bawana, Narela, Sultanpuri and Peeragarhi areas of the city. They claimed that many employers lock workers inside their factories, making it impossible to escape in the event of a fire. They accused factory owners of not following any labour laws, only paying half the minimum wage and not adhering to basic safety regulations.

#### Thousands of construction workers protest in New Delhi

Around 15,000 construction workers demonstrated at Parliament Street, New Delhi on December 5. Protesters included workers from Kerala, Assam, Tripura, Maharashtra, West Bengal and other parts of India. The workers were protesting against the merger of the Building and Other Construction Workers Act, and another existing welfare act, which they claim will restrict or abolish current benefits and entitlements for registered workers.

Workers also demanded a proper pension scheme, accident compensation, children's education allowance and other welfare entitlements. The workers are organised by the Construction Workers Federation of India.

#### Punjab: Powercom contract workers protest

Contract workers from the technical services wing of Punjab's state-owned power distribution company Powercom demonstrated in Bathinda on December 9 over various demands.

The workers want permanent jobs for contract workers and reinstatement of retrenched employees. They have threatened to hold a state-wide protest, along with family members, on January 6.

### **Tamil Nadu railway workers oppose privatisation**

Indian Railways employees demonstrated at the Saidapet railway station in Chennai on December 11 to oppose the Modi government's plan to run 150 private trains in 50 routes in India. While police stopped a planned march from Saidapet station to the governor's home, workers protested the next day, marching from Egmore railway station to Saidapet railway station.

The protest was organised by a collective of 10 railway unions, led by the Dakshina Railway Employees Union, which is affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions. In October, railway workers and students held mass protests across India opposing privatisation.

### **Andhra Pradesh: Visakhapatnam Steel Plant workers demonstrate against privatisation**

Visakhapatnam Steel Plant (VSP) workers in Andhra Pradesh protested on December 14 against the proposed takeover of the steel plant by POSCO, a South Korean firm. Demonstrators marched through several towns, including Aganampudi, Anakapalli and Tallapalem, and reached Eluru in West Godavari district in the evening.

Union representatives had no real answer to the Modi government's privatisation plans and, instead, made a useless appeal to the state and national governments to stop the venture.

### **Bangladesh university employees demand unpaid wages**

More than 170 employees from the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science & Technology University in Gopalganj, Dhaka demonstrated on Thursday over three demands.

The workers want immediate payment of their three months' outstanding salaries, permanent jobs and a permanent guideline for employees to be paid on a daily basis. They have threatened to continue their protests until their demands are met. The university's vice chancellor brushed aside workers' demands cynically claiming that the University Grants Commission had been notified of the matter.

### **Pakistan: Sindh local government workers protest**

Shah Lateef Local Government Employees Federation members demonstrated in Larkana and other cities on December 12 over several demands. They want their monthly wages paid by direct bank transfers, permanent jobs and reinstatement of 320 arbitrarily terminated workers.

Workers accused the government of continuing to delay making permanent workers recruited in 2012.

### **Australia and New Zealand**

#### **Australia: Jetstar baggage handlers walk out again**

For the second time in a week, members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU), covering 250 baggage handlers and ground crew from Qantas Airways budget subsidiary Jetstar, walked out for two hours during the peak morning period on Thursday. The strike was part of their dispute with the airline for a new enterprise agreement. Airports affected were Sydney, Melbourne's Tullamarine and Avalon airports, as well as Brisbane, Cairns and Adelaide airports. Jetstar was forced to cancel 28 domestic flights.

Workers said they were striking against "poverty wages" and underemployment. The TWU wants 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.

In a parallel dispute, members of the Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP), representing around 800 Jetstar pilots, walked off the job for four hours on December 14 and 15 pushing for a new enterprise agreement. Pilots demanded salary increases and changes in fatigue management through improved rostering.

Jetstar is refusing to make a new offer or meet with the AFAP or TWU until the unions provide "clear evidence" they are prepared to discuss a deal that "fits within" the company's wages policy.

#### **Garden Island naval base maintenance workers walk out in Sydney**

Around 200 maintenance workers at the Garden Island naval base in Sydney Harbour walked off the job for two hours on December 12 in a dispute with their employer Thales over its proposed enterprise agreement. The workers maintain the Australian Navy's electronics defence systems and transport.

Members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), the United Workers Union (UWU) and Professionals Australia (APESMA) want 4 percent annual pay increases and improved conditions. The unions claim that Thales' current enterprise agreement pay offer is below inflation.

#### **Boggabri Coal mine workers win improved conditions**

Following three months of industrial action, 350 workers at the Idemitsu-owned Boggabri Coal open-cut mine in north-west New South Wales look set to accept Idemitsu's latest enterprise agreement (EA) offer. It includes annual pay increases of 3 percent for the life of the four-year agreement and 27 new conditions. Some of the improved conditions include arbitration, guaranteed bonuses, all forms of leave paid as at work and a \$4,000 sign-on bonus.

Construction Forestry Maritime and Mining Union (CFMMEU) members began rolling industrial action with strikes in September in an

attempt to win back conditions lost when their employment moved from contractor Downer to Idemitsu two years ago. The company imposed a nine-day lockout in November, after 88 percent of members rejected a proposed EA.

The workers were reportedly paid \$40,000 a year less than Idemitsu's coal miners in Muswellbrook in the Hunter Valley and Ensham in Queensland. Other issues of concern were redundancy entitlements worth half of those at other Idemitsu mines, lack of arbitration to resolve issues and no commitment to training and skills development.

The CFMMEU claims the agreement sets a new standard for coal miners in the Gunnedah Basin, but although it closes the gap in conditions with the Hunter Valley it is well short of reducing the gap in pay rates.

### **New Zealand: Wellington caregivers continue strikes**

Caregivers at the Woburn Masonic Village rest home near Wellington struck for a third time on December 11. Workers picketed the facility during the strike, which ran from 8.30 a.m. until 1 p.m. Similar stoppages were held on December 3 and 6.

The caregivers want an end to precarious hours and their 24/7 availability in case of roster changes, required by their employer Masonic Care Ltd. They are seeking set shifts and hours and liken their conditions to the on-call availability requirements of now illegal zero-hour contracts. The employer had offered to increase weekend rates by \$1 an hour, but only if it could cut the hours of care positions to pay for it.

Nineteen workers are involved in the strike. One of the workers, Mo Tonga, said the unpredictable working hours were very challenging for caregivers with children. "If I don't have enough hours in a fortnight, I have to pick up other shifts and it's hard to plan my life around that, just having to leave my daughter to come to work," she said.

A spokesman for the E t? union said the rosters undermined the "intent" of an earlier equal pay settlement, which was lauded as a major victory by the unions. The settlement was meant to place caregivers on a "professional footing" but instead their hours have been cut and working conditions eroded. The union has lodged an application with Masonic Care to enter into facilitated bargaining after previous talks collapsed.



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