

Indian midday-meal workers strike for higher wages; Australian rail workers strike again

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

25 January 2020

India: Midday-meal workers walk out over poverty wages

Thousands of midday-meal workers in India took industrial action and demonstrated in the past week over wages, conditions and job security.

On January 19, the low paid, mainly women workers demonstrated in all districts across Punjab state to demand a pay rise and permanent jobs. In Bathinda hundreds marched along the Bathinda-Goniana Road and then demonstrated outside the state finance minister's office, stopping traffic.

Punjab midday-meal workers are only paid 1,700-rupees (\$US23) per month. Protesters said that the education secretary had promised increases in salaries and allowances but then claimed that his request was being held up in the finance department.

On Tuesday, midday-meal workers in the south Indian state of Karnataka struck for two days and demonstrated at Freedom Park in Bangalore for their long outstanding demand for higher pay and benefits. The Karnataka workers only earn 2,600 rupees a month. Strikers also called for an end to the recruitment of workers from private agencies, midday meal workers to be covered by official labour laws, their salaries paid on the fifth day of every month and that they receive the same Employee State Insurance, Provident Fund and pension benefits paid to permanent employees.

Contract teachers in northern Sri Lanka demand permanent positions

A group of contract teachers in war-ravaged Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mulaitivu and Mannar in Sri Lanka's Northern Province demonstrated outside the provincial secretariat on January 20 to demand permanent jobs. The protesting teachers complained that successive governments had ignored their long outstanding demand. The teachers presented a letter to the provincial governor's office following the demonstration.

Bangladesh: Garment workers protest over safety and sexual assaults

Garment workers demonstrated outside the National Press Club in Dhaka on January 17 over ongoing sexual assaults in the factories. The protest was in response to the alleged rape of two garment workers in Dhaka's Savar area on January 15 and December 31. The workers held street processions following the rally.

The Bangladesh Garment Sramik Samhati, which organised the protest,

denounced the Awami League government for failing to protect the female garment workers and called on the government to ensure that those found guilty of sexual abuses are punished.

Bangladeshi garment workers demand pay rise

About 200 workers—most of them women—from the Dynamic Fashion factory in Dhaka demonstrated on the Shyamoli to Kalyanpur road on January 16 to demand a pay increase. The factory, which has 450 employees, exports shirts to the Netherlands, Belgium, UK, and the US. Protestors stopped traffic for two hours until police intervened and shut down the demonstration.

Construction workers in Bangladesh demand improved safety

Construction industry workers demonstrated outside Dhaka's National Press Club on January 18 to demand improved work safety and adequate accident compensation. After the rally, which was called by the Imarat Nirman Sramik Union Bangladesh and the Trade Union Centre, workers held a street procession. There are over 3.5 million workers in the harsh and notoriously unsafe Bangladeshi construction industry.

Cambodia: Over 100 hotel workers demand severance pay

Unemployed workers from the recently closed Great Duke Phnom Penh hotel protested on Monday morning for outstanding severance pay, seniority benefits and unused annual leave. The hotel suddenly closed its doors on December 31 after 23 years of operations. Initial reports indicate that the company was not bankrupt.

The demonstration was organised by the Tourism Workers Union, which threatened to take the matter to the Labor Ministry if workers' demands are not met. The union has not opposed closure of the hotel or called for full reinstatement of all workers.

Cambodian garment workers demand outstanding salaries

Nearly 2,000 garment workers in Kandal province demonstrated this week to demand employers pay outstanding wages. Cambodian garment companies have responded to falling export orders by slashing production, withholding pay and shutting plants.

Organised by the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union, the protest was larger than last week's demonstration which involved about 1,000 workers from the Dignity Knitter and Eco Base factories in the Sa'ang district.

This week's event included 600 workers from Kandal's Zhong Yin (Cambodia) B Textile, who have been protesting for a month-and-a-half to demand compensation after management shut down the factory.

The garment workers allege that they have not been properly paid since mid-December—with some not receiving their full wages since October—and cannot pay bills and other basic expenses.

Victorian rail workers continue strike action

About 600 drivers, station staff and train controllers from V/Line, Victoria's state-owned regional commuter rail network, will stop work for 24 hours on January 29 and February 7. They are in dispute with the state Labor government over wages and conditions in V/Line's proposed enterprise agreement. An indefinite overtime ban will begin on January 31.

The Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) members are taking action after 12 months of failed negotiations and a series of 24-hour rolling stoppages in December.

The RTBU is demanding annual 6 percent pay increases with no loss in conditions. The government wants to peg wage increases at 2 percent, remove driver training provisions and end guaranteed shift hours with cuts to public holiday loadings and other penalties.

Maryvale paper mill workers walk out again

About 160 maintenance workers from Australian Paper in Maryvale, southeast of Melbourne, held rolling stoppages Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday this week against the company's proposed enterprise agreement.

Called by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Electrical Trades Union and United Workers Union, the strikes follow several months of limited rolling strikes and work bans begun in September.

Australian Paper is a subsidiary of Nippon Paper, a global company with a net income of \$10.3 billion. It wants a two-tier agreement that would see 15 percent lower wage rates for all new employees. Australian Paper also wants a freeze on existing employees' wages until the pay of new starters catches up. The proposed changes could lead to full-time staff being replaced by contractors, cuts in sick and personal leave and alterations in the way overtime is calculated and rosters devised.

During wage negotiations in 2016 and 2017, the unions used the threat of a total closure by Australian Paper management to force workers to accept pay cuts. Australian Paper workers are now demanding pay increases that claw back what they lost in the last enterprise agreement and have rejected the company's proposed two-tier wage system.

The company has again threatened to close its Maryvale plant and move overseas if workers do not accept its latest enterprise agreement proposal. The unions are continuing closed-door negotiations with the company in the Fair Work Commission.

Dockers in Western Australia stop work

Around 200 members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) stopped work for 24 hours at DP World's Fremantle container terminal in Perth on January 13 after 15 months of failed negotiations for a new enterprise agreement. The strike was followed by further actions, including rolling one-hour stoppages before the end of each shift and a range of work bans.

The MUA accused the Dubai-based company of bad faith negotiations that have included threatened job cuts and stripping away hard won workplace conditions and rights. On Monday, DP World cancelled all approved leave for its terminal workers in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Fremantle. DP World is the largest stevedore group in Australia and employs more than 1,800 waterfront workers.

New Zealand sonographers strike at Auckland hospitals

One hundred sonographers across Auckland's hospitals are taking partial strike action for 12 weeks in a dispute over pay and conditions. Employed by Auckland, Counties Manukau and Waitematā District Health Boards (DHBs), the sonographers began their industrial action on January 18 and will continue until April 11.

An Association of Professional and Executive Employees (APEX) spokesman said it had been in bargaining with the DHBs for more than six months. APEX wants a 10 percent pay rise for sonographers over two years, and an increase in personal development allowances.

The sonographers are refusing to perform scans for all GP referrals and outpatients, as well as banning working overtime. The union predicts record wait times for scans and videos, and potentially delayed diagnoses, during the dispute. The strike follows struggles by nurses, resident doctors and other health professionals since last year, amid ongoing reports of serious underfunding of the DHBs by the Labour-led government.

APEX complained this week that the DHBs had adopted a "take it or leave it" approach and were "not working with us to reach a deal." It has requested facilitated bargaining with the Employment Relations Authority.



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