

India: Punjab government teachers protest against privatisation;
Sacked Sri Lankan government workers demonstrate; New
Caledonia miners strike against long hours

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 February 2020

India: Jammu and Kashmir public health engineers walk out

Around 33,000 daily wages workers in the public health engineering (PHE) department in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir struck for 24 hours on February 8 over long pending demands. The strike affected the water supply in Jammu and other parts of the territory. The PHE Employees United Front called the strike after its 15-day ultimatum on the territory administration was ignored.

Demands include transfer of daily wages workers into permanent jobs, payment of monthly wages to all workers, release of pending wages and wage rates as per the central government norms. Sections of regular employees seeking rationalisation in the promotion process supported the strike.

Punjab government school teachers protest against privatisation

Government teachers in the Indian state of Punjab demonstrated in Sangrur on February 8 on several issues including opposing privatisation of public schools. The Democratic Teachers Front (DTF) alleged that to help private companies to take over public schools, the government has been handing over the control of schools to village councils (panchayats). DTF accused the government of merging schools while permanently closing schools in many areas of the country.

A major concern of teachers is that thousands of teaching posts remain vacant while the Unemployed Elementary Teacher Training (ETT) and graduates of BEd have been protesting for regular jobs. Other demands include release of Dearness Allowance, implementation of the 6th Pay Commission report, job permanency, transfer of 3,582 teachers, cancellation of charge sheets, and promotions.

Andhra Pradesh teachers hold lunch-hour demonstrations in schools

Teachers staged lunch-hour demonstrations in all of Andhra Pradesh state's municipal schools on February 7 to demand the immediate withdrawal of the proposed 'unified service' rules. Teachers claimed that

the rules would deprive them of their seniority, promotions and unsettle their families.

In the present system, municipal teachers' transfers are confined to a particular municipal town or corporation. Unified service rules will allow authorities to shift teachers from one town to another within the district leaving nearly 12,000 families at the mercy of political representatives.

The Municipal Teachers' Federation (MTF) raised concerns that teachers will be transferred from existing towns after completion of eight years of maximum service into other towns, cancelling future promotion due to the unit transfer system.

Punjab state bank workers protest in Ludhiana

Bank employees organised by the United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU) demonstrated in the industrial city of Ludhiana, Punjab in front of the Civil Lines and Fountain Chalk branches of the State Bank of India on February 6 with over ten demands.

The main demands were a 20 percent wage increase with adequate loading thereof, equal pay for contract employees, a five-day week and merger of special allowance with basic pay. Other demands included the scrapping of the new pension scheme, pension update, improvement in family pension, allocation to the Staff Welfare Fund based on operating profits, exemption from income tax on retiree benefits, uniform definition of business hours and introduction of leave accumulation.

Haryana brewery workers remain on strike after two years

Workers from the AB InBev beverage brewing plant in Sonipat, Haryana have been on strike for over two years protesting the sacking of four union members on fake charges. Workers and family members held a demonstration in Sonipat on Monday accusing the company of union busting by the illegal termination of union leaders, withdrawal of union recognition, and management's refusal to discuss the demands of the union.

AB InBev is the world's largest brewer producing beer for Budweiser, Hoegaarden, Corona and hundreds of other labels and employing 180,000

people globally. Its Sonipat unit has 82 permanent employees and around 350 contract workers.

The strike began after AB InBev suspended and then terminated four union members. Over 20 workers rejected the strike and established a company endorsed union. The majority of workers, however, have remained on strike demanding the company recognise their independent union the Haryana Breweries Ltd Mazdoor Union (HBMU).

In an attempt to counteract low wages and poor conditions, in 2016, the workers tried to revive the HBMU which had fallen dormant. The workers completed all the necessary procedures. However, AB InBev's management refused to recognise the union and forcefully removed six people. Four of the six, including the then general secretary and president of the union, were fired and two were suspended.

Bangladeshi garment workers maintain protests over safety and sexual assault

Protesting garment workers formed a human chain around the Ashulia Press Club in Dhaka on February 7 to oppose ongoing sexual assaults in the factories. The action followed a demonstration by garment workers in front of the National Press Club in Dhaka on January 17, followed by a street procession. That protest was in response to the alleged rape of two garment workers in Dhaka's Savar area on January 15 and December 31.

The Bangladesh Garment Sramik Samhati organised the protests. A spokesman claimed that rape incidences have increased due to the culture of impunity. Workers called for the establishment of "anti-harassment" committees at all garment factories to protect female workers.

While a court order is in force allowing the formation of such committees, they have only been established in 4 percent of factories. A NGO report in April last year said about 14 percent of garment workers experience sexual harassment at their workplaces.

Sri Lanka: Government workers protest in Colombo

Hundreds of workers from several Sri Lankan government departments protested opposite the presidential secretariat in Colombo on Monday as part of a series of protests that began a week earlier with a group of sacked government employees who were demanding reinstatement. The Rajapakse government claimed that these workers, from various government departments, including the central cultural fund, archaeology department and petroleum cooperation, among others, had been given politically biased appointments by the previous government.

At Monday's demonstrations, laid off contract workers from the Department of Archaeology blocked the road opposite the secretariat demanding reinstatement. Police forced them to the "agitation site" recently set up by the government. A group of dismissed contract workers from the National Housing Development Authority were forced to end their demonstration by riot police.

Sri Lanka Railway workers protested demanding that more than 1,500 temporary workers with more than five years' service be given permanent employment. At the same time, other groups of railway workers protested opposite the Fort and Maradana railway stations with the same issue. Wildlife guides joined the protest at the secretariat demanding their daily wage be increased to 700 rupees (\$US9.8).

Warehouse workers in New South Wales win improved work agreement

About 90 workers from the Onelink warehouse in Yennora, Sydney have won an improved enterprise agreement after walking off the job for 24 hours on Monday. Onelink is a trading name of Symbion, owned by the EBOS group. It provides medical supplies such as sanitary items, IV tubing and gowns to hospitals across NSW.

According to the United Workers Union (UWU) workers at the Yennora warehouse were paid almost \$200 a week less than workers employed by the same company 10 km away. In the improved EA workers will receive a modest pay increase of 10 percent over three years, improved compassionate leave, sick leave and an extra public holiday.

Greyhound bus drivers in Queensland's mining sector remain locked out

The mining sector bus transport company Greyhound Resources is maintaining its lockout against six members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU). The indefinite lockout was the company's response after workers took a 45-minute work stoppage on January 30 as part of industrial action for a new enterprise agreement (EA). The lockout applies to drivers in the Bowen Basin in Central Queensland.

The dispute involves 66 TWU members who are entitled to take protected strike action but the union has not extended industrial action to include all members in the dispute. Instead, it has made a public appeal on Facebook for donations to cover lost wages of the locked out drivers and is picketing the offices of mining companies who contract to Greyhound Resources, making useless appeals to them to take responsibility for their supply chain and take Greyhound to task "for their dodgy actions."

According to the union, drivers receive rates of pay that are not much better than the award. Unlike most other DIDO (drive in-drive out) or FIFO (fly in-fly out) workers in the mining industry, Greyhound Resources drivers receive little or no assistance to fund the costs of travel to and from the mining communities where they work.

New Zealand: Bus drivers vote for more industrial action

The Tramways Union reported on February 11 that 86 percent of its Auckland bus driver members had voted to reject an offer from employer NZ Bus. The workers have approved industrial action, however the union says this will only happen if last-ditch talks with the company next week fail to reach a deal.

Auckland bus drivers, members of both FIRST Union and Tramways Union, have been involved in a long-running and bitter industrial dispute with NZ Bus and the Labour Party-controlled Auckland Council over low wages and poor conditions, including long working hours. Drivers work 14-hour days, with a lot of unpaid downtime between shifts.

Last December both unions called off bus drivers' industrial action, falsely claiming that a council resolution was a step towards resolving the dispute. After calling off strike action, FIRST Union then turned against migrant workers, scapegoating them for low wages.

Tahiti: Social workers' strike ends

A strike by French Polynesia's agency for families (DFSE), which began on Wednesday, was called off on Thursday after Minister of Families Isabelle Sachet and other ministers signed a memorandum of understanding with the unions CSTP/FO and A Tia I Mua.

Dozens of social workers had rallied outside the presidential palace in Papeete on Thursday. The workers say they are overworked and families and children are at risk from under-resourcing. They had also demanded improved wages.

It is unclear if any of these demands have been met. A report on Radio 1 Tahiti did not explain what is in the memorandum of understanding. The social workers' strike follows a wave of industrial action on the French territory, including by teachers and others against the government's planned pension cuts.

New Caledonia miners strike expands

Pickets have been set up at two more SLN nickel mine sites in solidarity with a strike that began at the mine site in Thio in mid-January. The strikers oppose a restructure which includes longer hours on working days but fewer days of work. The company reportedly wants workers to do 10.5 hour shifts and work 147 hours per month. Strikers want a return to 120 hours per month, with no shifts past midnight.

SLN is New Caledonia's biggest private sector employer, with 2,000 workers. It has been beset by industrial action in recent years due to cutbacks following an economic downturn. In seven years SLN has lost \$US1 billion. Meanwhile, in an ongoing restructure of Vale, another nickel company that operates in the French territory, up to 140 employees are expected to be made redundant.



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