

Indian primary school teachers demonstrate; Sri Lankan police attack sacked public sector workers

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 February 2020

### India: Primary school teachers protest in New Delhi

Teachers from across the country gathered in New Delhi on February 21 for a week of demonstrations demanding a salary increase and to oppose the Modi government's planned National Education Policy (NEP) measures. Teachers from primary schools in Punjab, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh joined the protest on February 23.

According to the All India Primary Teachers' Federation (AIPTF), teachers are unhappy at the lingering anomalies of the 6th Pay Commission which have hindered implementation of the 7th Pay Commission's recommendations.

The government claims that the NEP will standardise universal pre-primary education by 2025. The teachers reject this, saying that it will not address major issues, including outdated syllabi, poor or even non-existent infrastructure, poorly trained teachers with abysmally low pay and very harsh working conditions and political interference in syllabus setting, teacher appointment and administration.

### Bihar state-school teachers protest against sackings

Hundreds of Bihar state government school teachers demonstrated at the district education office in Patna on February 19 protesting against the issuance of "show cause" notices to contract teachers and the termination of regular teachers. Teachers blocked education authorities from entering the building, declaring that they would not end their protests until the termination order and "show cause" notices were revoked.

Around 450,000 teachers of government and government-aided schools have been protesting across the state over a series of long-standing demands. These include equal pay for equal work and a pension scheme and service conditions for contract teachers. The protest was organised by the Bihar Rajya Shikshak Sangharsh Samanvay Samiti.

### Construction workers in Assam protest

Around 500 construction workers demonstrated on Monday in Guwahati against the Indian government's anti-labour policies. Organised by the All Assam Construction Workers Union, they submitted a memorandum to

Prime Minister Modi through the labour commissioner.

The workers' major demand was for the strengthening of Welfare Board Funds and a percentage of the country's GDP to be allocated to the Construction Workers' Welfare Boards. They also demanded a 1,000-rupee (\$US14) minimum daily wage, free housing, education and health, withdrawal of labour codes, particularly the code on social security, and bonuses, leave, gratuity and other benefits equal with permanent Indian government workers.

### Uttarakhand government employees hold second strike

Following a strike and protest march on February 14, thousands of state government employees walked out again on February 20 and marched from the Parade Ground to the chief minister's office in Dehradun demanding the unfreezing of promotions. Workers want the departmental promotion committee re-established, in line with a recent Supreme Court ruling. The government froze promotions in all departments in September.

The protest was convened by the General-OBC Employees' Federation and involved a dozen government employee associations. The unions threatened to call an indefinite strike if their demands are not granted soon.

### Punjab child care workers demand pay increase

A large group of anganwadi (child care) workers and helpers organised by the Anganwadi Mulazm Union-Punjab, demonstrated outside the District Administrative Complex in Tarn Taran on February 20. They presented a memorandum of their demands to the district revenue officer, along with their blood in phials.

The workers want three- to six-year-old children allowed into anganwadi centres, promotions and 24,000-rupee monthly salaries (\$US335) for anganwadi workers, and 18,000 rupees for their helpers.

### Punjab state government employees demand permanent jobs and higher wages

Hundreds of Punjab state government workers protested in the grounds of the Patiala Urban Development Authority on February 23 for permanent jobs, better pay and other demands. They later marched to the chief minister's office denouncing the state government for failing to provide full-time employment, health facilities and better education, and failing to implement the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations.

They also called for improved pay and conditions for Accredited Social Health Activist workers and midday meal workers and for reinstatement of a previous pension scheme. The union called off the protest after the chief minister claimed that he had accepted workers' demands. No specific details were released by the unions.

### **Bangladesh: Garment workers in Savar demand wages**

About 3,000 garment workers from two factories—Raquef Apparels Washing and Packaging Industry and Passion Jeans—in Savar near Dhaka, demonstrated on the Hemayetpur-Singair road for four hours on February 20. Police were mobilised to disperse the protesters.

The National Garment Workers' Federation (NGWF) said workers were supposed to receive their January monthly salaries in the first week of February, but later, the authorities said wages would be paid on February 20. When workers arrived at the factories that morning there was a notice stating that the companies could not pay.

After discussions with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association and government officials, the factory owners declared that they were closing the factories.

### **Sri Lanka: Sacked protesting public sector workers attacked by police**

Sacked workers from the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA) who have been demonstrating for two weeks at a special police-controlled "agitation site" near the presidential secretariat in Colombo were viciously attacked on Tuesday. Police officers violently manhandled the workers and then forcefully dragged them back to the "agitation site" after they moved towards the presidential secretariat for discussion with government.

The NHDA workers' protest is part of a series of demonstrations by sacked government employees demanding reinstatement. The newly-installed Rajapakse government claimed that the workers, who are from various government departments, including the central cultural fund, archaeology department, national housing development authority, petroleum cooperation and other sectors, were given politically-biased appointments by the previous government.

### **Cambodia: Factories file for suspension affecting thousands of workers**

The Cambodian ministry of labour announced on Thursday that at least ten factories had filed for temporary suspension due to lack of raw material supplies from China because of the Covid-19 virus. As many as 200 mainly garment factories and other enterprises are running out of raw materials that could affect about 160,000 workers.

The government claims that it has "come up" with a scheme in which employers are required to pay suspended workers 40 percent of the minimum wage, with another 20 percent shouldered by the government. The spokesman did not say if employers had agreed to this.

A factory worker from Kandal province, told the media that he was worried about his future. "The government's scheme is helpful but may be insufficient for many workers who have to repay loans taken out with microfinance institutions" he said.

There are 14,060 enterprises registered with the ministry. Together, they employ over 1.43 million people. Around 1,200 of those enterprises are garment factories.

### **Burma: Bag factory in Yangon closes down after strike**

The Lucky Sky Bags factory in Yangon, with a workforce of 642, closed down without notice on Monday claiming a lack of materials from China due to the Covid-19 virus. A union leader at the factory, however, claimed that the closure was in response to recent strike action.

He said workers went on strike from January 31 to February 11 to protest against unfair labour practices. After reaching an agreement with management on February 11 the strikers returned to work. But 10 days later, the labour union's secretary was fired for no reason, so the workers protested and the plant shut down, he said.

Meanwhile, the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association expressed concern that as much as half of the garment factories in the country could shut down next month due to a lack of raw materials from China. It said that about 90 percent of the fabric, textiles and zippers used in local factories come from China.

### **Catering workers on offshore platforms to vote on industrial action**

Catering workers on offshore oil and gas platforms on the West Australian coast have been granted permission by the Fair Work Commission to participate in a protected action ballot to decide on work bans in their dispute with catering contractor Sodexo Australia over its proposed enterprise agreement (EA). Sodexo has current contracts with the majority of the major players in the offshore market, including Shell, Jadestone, Noble and Ensco.

The proposed bans are part of an industry-wide campaign to lift pay and conditions by the Offshore Alliance, a partnership between the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and the Maritime Union of Australia. Catering workers will consider bans on cooking hot meals, preparing meat, fresh bread, the restocking of vending machines serving all beverages except water, and the collection and delivery of laundry. Voting in the protected action ballot will close on May 7.

The current Sodexo enterprise agreement expired in October 2017 and provides for annualised salaries of between \$85,000 and \$95,000. The AWU want pay rises that amount to about \$25,000 a year.

The dispute comes after 180 workers at engineering company Monadelphous last November won an agreement that included immediate pay rises of up to 20 percent and converted casuals to permanent employment. The deal that lifted pay and conditions in the oil and gas industry followed the first union strike on an offshore platform for decades.

## **Hobsons Bay City Council workers maintain industrial bans**

Over 100 Australian Services Union (ASU) members, including administration and field staff from Hobsons Bay, a seaside suburb south of Melbourne, are maintaining work bans imposed on December 11 over the city council's proposed enterprise agreement. The low-level industrial action includes work bans on mowing sports fields and parks, removing seaweed from the foreshore, processing court documents and fines, issuing infringement notices, cleaning minor plant and refuelling vehicles after 1 p.m.

An ASU spokesman said the council had previously threatened to lock out workers for taking protected industrial action. He said council management has offered an eight percent pay increase over a five-year period including one year backdated, meaning an average annual increase of 1.6 percent. The union is seeking a 7.5 percent pay increase over three years (2.5 percent annual increase).

Negotiations began in March last year and are continuing in the Fair Work Commission with no resolution. Workers said they want a "fair" pay rise, retention of leave entitlements, and a respectful workplace.

## **New Zealand: Auckland bus drivers to vote on strike action**

The months-long dispute between NZ Bus and 800 bus drivers continues in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city. On Friday negotiations between the company and the Tramways and FIRST unions broke down. A union representative said NZ Bus offered a pay increase of only 68 cents an hour and nothing to address drivers' concerns about working 14-hour shifts with hours of unpaid downtime.

Tramways Union president Gary Froggatt told the media that the drivers, who provide 35 percent of services in the city, would now decide whether to take industrial action during March, the busiest month of the year. "We don't want to do this. We wish there was a solution but it is up to the membership," he said. The union hasn't explained why a further vote is needed when members voted earlier this month to approve industrial action if the latest round of negotiations failed.

NZ Bus, which is contracted by the Labour Party-led Auckland Council, has been in discussions with the unions since December, when the unions called off 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.



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