

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 March 2020

India: Thousands of contract teachers strike in Bihar state

More than 350,000 contract teachers from Bihar state government and government-aided schools have been on strike since February 17 over long-standing pay and entitlement demands.

The contract teachers are demanding a salary rise and equal pay for equal work, which the state government claims has been rejected by the Supreme Court. The current monthly salary of a contract teacher is between 18,000 rupees (\$US245) and 30,000 rupees compared with a permanent government teacher's salary of between 60,000 and 90,000 rupees. The contract teachers are also demanding a pension scheme and service conditions.

There are only 73,000 government teachers so most schools with Class 1 to Class V111 depend on underpaid "regular" contract teachers. Contract teachers also fill headmasters positions.

Over 40,000 high school teachers have joined the strike in solidarity with middle-school teachers and put forward their own demands for a salary rise and education leave. The teachers are organised by the Bihar Rajya Shikshak Sangharsh Samanvay Samiti.

Sugarcane cutters in Gujarat strike for better wages

Nearly 150,000 sugarcane cutters from South Gujarat struck work on February 28 as part of a five-year campaign for higher wages, improved working and living conditions, and social security. The tribal migrant workers, who are members of Majoor Adhikar Manch union, cut cane for 15 sugar mills.

A union leader told the media that the cane cutters work for 12 to 14 hours a day but are only paid 250 rupees. The workers want their daily wages increased to 400 rupees. Protesting cane cutters outside the sugar mills have been threatened with dismissal and harassed by police.

Andhra Pradesh transport workers in Kakinada protest against tax increase

Transport workers in Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh, demonstrated in front of the Collectorate on March 1 demanding that the state government immediately withdraw the increased tax on petrol and diesel. The protest was organised by the Transport Association and CITU. They raised slogans denouncing the central and state governments for the frequent increase in prices of petroleum products. Workers said the price increases had made life difficult for transport sector workers.

Maharashtra: Head-load workers protest in Aurangabad

A group of head-load workers—low-paid labourers known as Mathadi who carry heavy goods on their heads—demonstrated outside the district collector's and labour commissioner's offices in Aurangabad on Monday. They were demanding the immediate implementation of the Mathadi wages and conditions law.

The protesters submitted a memorandum of their demands which was submitted to the Maharashtra state government. They want a day off each week for warehouse workers, fixed hours, payments for off-day duties or overtime hours, proper notification of duty hours and holidays on notices board. They also want basic work facilities, such as drinking water, restrooms and toilets at warehouses and increased wages. They warned that if the demands are not met before March 15, they will intensify their agitation.

Former Comtrust textile factory workers in Kerala continue hunger protest

Fifteen former employees of the closed Commonwealth Handloom Weaving Factory or Comtrust have been holding a relay hunger strike protest since October 22 to demand reopening of the factory. The protest is being held outside the Kerala State Industrial Development Council (KSIDC) office in Thiruvananthapuram.

Comtrust produced high-quality textiles for the international market and upholstery for leading Indian airlines. When the business was wound up in 2009 a group of employees launched a campaign demanding the government acquire the business. The property is now under the KSIDC and the employees receive a monthly honorarium.

After the state government took over the company in 2012 the displaced workers were paid 5,000 rupees (\$US68) per month as compensation. These payments were stopped in 2016.

The textile workers want the factory reopened and updated and all remaining former employees reinstated. They are also demanding that until the plant resumes normal production workers are provided temporary jobs and all retired employees, and the families of those who have died, be paid their full benefits.

Bangladesh truck drivers and depot workers strike in Chittagong

Drivers and other employees from 850 prime mover-trailers at 19 private inland depots at Chittagong walked out on strike on February 26

and 27 over several demands. The walkout stopped the movement of over 4,000 containers at Chittagong Port and 60,000 containers at inland wharf facilities.

The workers want employers to issue them appointment letters, identity cards for new recruits and licenses for all heavy vehicle drivers.

According to the Prime Mover-Trailer Sramik Union, there are 8,000 prime mover-trailers across the country, employing about 16,000 workers. Most of these workers do not have a license for driving heavy vehicles. The unions threatened to continue the strike after discussions between by union officials and the Bangladesh Inland Container Depot Association failed.

Bangladeshi garment workers protest in Ashulia over closed factory

About 200 garment workers from the closed Ducati Apparels factory in Ashulia demonstrated on Wednesday calling for the factory to be reopened and for a pay rise. The workers marched along the Nabinagar-Chandra highway and to the Ashulia Press Club where they held a sit-down protest for over an hour.

Factory authorities suddenly shut down the sweater-manufacturing facility on February 24 without any prior notice. The workers had been demanding that the piece rate of 16 taka (\$US 0.19) per product be increased to 22 taka as per an earlier agreement.

The now unemployed workers appealed to the Department of Inspections for Factories and Establishments on February 26 but were ignored. President of the National Garments Worker Federation threatened that if the workers' demands were not met they would protest outside the factory owner's house on March 6.

Sri Lanka audit office workers on indefinite strike

Audit Services workers began an indefinite strike on Monday to demand they be made a part of the state service and that all auditors across the country are integrated into the public service. Led by the Sri Lanka Auditor Inspectors Service Union, the strikers demonstrated at Lipton roundabout in Colombo on the day before the strike.

Central Cultural Fund of Sri Lanka workers demand new pay scheme

A group of Central Cultural Fund (CCF) workers demonstrated this week in Anuradhapura, a major city in the North Central Province, to demand the immediate implementation of the promised new wage scheme and the delayed 2019 bonus.

The CCF workers say the recently Rajapakse government promised it would improve the working conditions and pay state employees but has failed to make beneficial changes. The workers were employed in the sacred ruined city of Anuradhapura, which is maintained by the CCF.

Pakistan: Teachers from rural government schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa protest

Teachers at government-run Basic Education Community Schools in Bajaur, Mardan, Kohat and Karak districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa demonstrated on Wednesday over several months of unpaid salaries and ongoing delays in making their jobs permanent as ordered in 2018 by the Peshawar High Court.

Some teachers have not been paid since 2018, whilst salaries for others, which are just 8,000 Pakistani rupees (\$US52) a month, have not increased in 25 years. The community schools are mostly in rural areas where no other government school is available. In Bajaur, 6,318 students study in 206 community schools, whilst there are 250 such schools in Mardan.

The teachers have threatened to expand their protests if the government refuses to address their demands.

Burma: Employers use coronavirus outbreak to restructure and slash jobs

On Wednesday, the Myanmar Labor Ministry released figures that showed 13 factories in the Yangon and Bagon regions had either shut down permanently or temporarily or reduced their workforces since January. Most were garment factories, as well as shoe, steel, wood, paper and print plants. At least 3,000 workers have lost their jobs.

While the government and employers blamed the coronavirus crisis for a lack of raw materials and orders, ten unions and labour rights organisations issued a statement on Tuesday claiming that employers were using the coronavirus as an excuse to break workers' factory organisations.

Two hundred Hua Meng garment factory workers in the Ayeyarwady region refused to accept redundancy payments when 1,000 were sacked last Saturday in the midst of a dispute over forced overtime and work on public holidays. The protesting workers said they were fired, not made redundant.

The Federation of Commerce and Industry is exploiting the virus crisis to ban strikes at factories hit by the virus, reduce redundancy payouts and to call for delays in minimum wage increase due in May until September.

Thai Airways maintenance workers protest over job cuts

One hundred aircraft workers from the Thai Airways International maintenance facility, located at U-Tapao International airport in Rayong, marched to the Thai government's complaints office on Monday to demand Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha scrap plans to relocate the facility.

Airline officials were told by the government that the facility must be moved to make way for the expansion of the airport and the Airport City project by the end of the year. Workers are concerned that 1,500 workers at the maintenance depot will be adversely affected, including the loss of over 430 jobs.

Taiwan workers' organisations demand greater virus protection for migrants

Various workers' organisations demonstrated outside the Legislative

Yuan on Wednesday to demand an amnesty for migrant workers deemed illegal, declaring that excluding them from the epidemic prevention system, amid the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak, is dangerous and undermining efforts to stop the spread of the virus.

Those involved in the protest included the Taiwan International Workers' Association (TIWA), the Taiwan Association for Human Rights, the Green Citizens' Action Alliance and the Global Workers' Organization, Taiwan. They urged the government to grant legal status to undocumented workers and protested any possible deportations. There are about 50,000 migrant workers deemed to be illegal in Taiwan, with 290 being held in detention centres. A TIWA spokesman said any legal action against migrant workers should be cancelled and immediately included in epidemic prevention measures.

Hong Kong medical workers strike over government mishandling of coronavirus

A five-day strike of medical professionals began Monday to demand the closure of all entry points to China in order to stem the spread of the coronavirus.

A thousand workers are believed to have participated in the strike. The walkout was organised by the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance. The strike began after planned negotiations on Sunday with Chief Executive Carrie Lam failed. Lam did not attend negotiations.

Victorian fruit canning factory maintenance workers strike

About 280 members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) at the Ardmona fruit canning factory in Shepparton, Victoria walked off the job for one hour on Friday and said they will not work on Monday, a public holiday. The action is part of a long-running enterprise agreement (EA) dispute with SPC which owns the factory.

After seven months of negotiations SPC is refusing to budge from its original proposed EA. The company wants to freeze wages for 12 months, followed by a 1.8 percent pay increase in the second year. Wages for casuals were to be frozen.

South Australian roadside assist workers strike again

About 60 roadside breakdown assist workers from the Royal Automobile Association (RAA)-South Australia walked off the job for four hours from 11 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. on Wednesday in a dispute over management's proposed enterprise agreement. Workers walked off the job in January after RAA management broke off negotiations after members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) rejected a proposed enterprise agreement which included cuts to conditions and allowances.

The latest walkout was sparked after management came back with a modified regressive offer that included a cut to allowances and wages for new employees, creating a two-tiered system, and dropped its commitment that all new employees be trade qualified.

New South Wales school cleaners protest against offer to clean up after coronavirus in Japan

Around 50 Sydney public school contract cleaners and supporters wearing hazmat suits and face masks demonstrated inside the Parramatta headquarters of services giant Broadspectrum on February 27. They were protesting over the company's "lack of transparency" surrounding recent offers to clean the coronavirus-riddled Diamond Princess in Japan and quarantine areas. The cleaners said they were offered an "all-expenses paid" trip to Japan and up to \$6,000 for the work.

A spokesman from the United Workers Union said workers were concerned about the hours of work required of those who took up the offer, their working conditions, the lack of specific training or health screening of volunteers for pre-existing conditions that may make them extra vulnerable to the virus.

According to the union, several workers have taken up the offer, but the company did not say if these workers would be paid while in quarantine when they returned to Australia.

Jetstar baggage handlers accept inferior offer

Some 250 low-paid and under-employed baggage handlers and ground crew across Australia from Jetstar, a Qantas Airways budget subsidiary, ended all industrial action and accepted the company's proposed enterprise agreement of 3 percent annual pay increases over four years and some improvement to rostering and allowances.

Jetstar threatened that if its latest proposed EA was rejected it would withdraw a previous offer to back-pay the 3 percent pay increase to March 2019. Isolated and worn down by three sets of limited strike action by the Transport Workers Union (TWU), which began late last year, workers voted to accept the deal.

The Jetstar workers had demanded equal rates of pay for equal jobs, improved secure work with a minimum of 30 hours a week, more rest breaks, a guaranteed 12-hour break between shifts and compliance with safety and security. In a survey conducted last year, 80 percent of baggage handlers reported they have suffered injury due to high workload and understaffing, while 90 percent said they want to work more hours. These issues, which workers anticipated would be resolved by the union, remain in place.

Unions cancel Auckland bus drivers' strike

Bus strikes in Auckland were called off Wednesday after NZ Bus and the FIRST Union agreed to resume negotiations. The agreement followed a strike on Tuesday when drivers at the Glenfield and Swanson depots walked out between 4am and 8am. The strike resulted in the cancellation of 144 buses that would have normally operated during morning peak hour.

NZ Bus has offered an extra 68 cents an hour to increase wages to \$22.75 but the Tramways Union and FIRST Union are seeking \$23 per hour and a halt to attacks on conditions. Drivers want changes to 14-hour shifts which are broken up by several hours of unpaid leave.

Around 800 drivers were due to vote this week on further strike action following a previous breakdown in talks, but the vote has now been postponed. The negotiations are "an opportunity for the company to

present a realistic offer for settlement,” First Union secretary Jared Abbott said. Tramways Union president Gary Froggatt last week told the media that the unions didn’t want to take industrial action during March, the busiest month of the year.

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. FIRST Union then turned against migrant workers, scapegoating them for low wages.

South Island supermarket workers protest in New Zealand

Supermarket workers at Pak’n’Save Richmond and New World Centre City in Dunedin took protest action Wednesday as part of a struggle for better wages and employment conditions. The workers issued a notice informing both managements that they would be distributing leaflets to the public during working hours outlining their claim for a standard collective agreement.

FIRST Union said it has been trying to negotiate an agreement with the parent company, Foodstuffs, for three years seeking comparable pay and conditions to the company’s North Island workforce. The union is claiming a so-called “Living Wage,” currently set at \$21.15 per hour, which is marginally above the legal minimum of \$17.70, but is still too low to live on.

FIRST Union Secretary for Retail, Tali Williams, declared that the workers were “losing faith after three years waiting to negotiate a very ordinary collective agreement.” However, throughout that entire time the union has only ever called limited protest activities, but no strike campaign.



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