

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 March 2020

## Malaysian electronics workers picket for pay rise

About 350 workers from the German-owned transnational Infineon Technologies semiconductor plant in Kulim, Malaysia picketed the factory's main gates on Tuesday. They were demanding management resume negotiations with their union (EIEUNR), which the company broke off on February 25.

Workers were protesting the company's demand for a zero wage increase and reduction of bonuses and benefits. The union demanded wage increases of from 3 to 10 percent based on years of service, full medical benefits, 1,200-ringgit (\$US280) maternity subsidy, a 200-ringgit (\$46) shift allowance and improved safety conditions.

The picket was called off after the company agreed to resume negotiations and complete these in April and settle pay arrears back-dated to January 1.

## Bangladeshi garment workers protest against sackings

Hundreds of workers from the Asian Apparel garment factory in Chattogram, Bangladesh, demonstrated at the Chattogram Press Club on March 11 against unfair sackings. The company has sacked 45 workers between March 3 and 8, for alleged "misbehaviour." One worker complained that the company owed a month's wages and "the management roughens us up over silly mistakes and always looks for a reason to fire us."

Workers said management threatened that at least 400 could be terminated because the plant did not have enough orders to keep them employed for eight-hours work.

## India: Telangana rural public sector workers demand permanent jobs

Around 6,000 contract field staff from the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) demonstrated in Hyderabad on March 12 to demand permanent jobs and a pay rise. Field assistants from various Telangana districts took part in the protest held at Dharna Chowk organised by the NREGS Joint Action Committee. Workers said that most field assistants had worked for the scheme for 14 years but their positions never made permanent.

Workers want monthly salaries increased from 9,000 rupees (\$US120) to 25,000 rupees in line with the Minimum Wages Act and the provision of other employee benefits. They also demanded unconditional renewal of

their contracts and that the government withdraw its circular on reduced working days.

## India: Punjab college teachers demand permanent jobs

Over 1,000 guest faculty teachers at 48 government colleges across Punjab began an indefinite strike on March 12 to demand permanency. Organised by members of the Guest Faculty Assistant Professors' Association, they protested outside the Government Mohindra College in Patiala.

Teachers complained that the Punjab government had issued a communique on February 19 saying that only lecturers with at least 10 years' experience at government colleges could apply for permanency. In Punjab, there are 1,873 lecturers' positions. While 603 lecturers are permanent, 1,000 have been appointed as guest faculty and 270 as part-timers. These guest faculty members are only paid 21,600 rupees (\$288) a month.

## Tripura government school teachers protest against mass terminations

Thousands of teachers from Tripura government schools held a 48-hour demonstration in the state capital Agartala on March 15 in protest against the planned termination of over 10,000 teachers. Over 10,300 teachers with graduate, post-graduate and under-graduate educational qualifications have been inducted into the state schools since 2010.

The Tripura High Court in 2014 terminated all the 10,323 teachers, claiming the selection criterion contained discrepancies. Following a series of court cases the teachers were able to remain in their jobs until March 2020. An Education Department official said although several teachers have been absorbed in other government positions and through separate recruitment processes, including Teachers Eligibility Tests, most of them will lose their jobs.

## Non-teaching university staff in Punjab demand unpaid salaries

Non-teaching staff from the privately-run Shri Guru Granth Sahib World University in Fatehgarh Sahib, Punjab held a sit-down protest outside the university on Tuesday to demand payment of three months' outstanding salaries. The workers said that they have always had to protest

for their wages and benefits over the last three years. The university administrators claim that workers have not been paid because the state government had not released funds.

### **Tata Institute of Social Sciences workers in Maharashtra demand wage rises**

Over 100 contract workers from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) protested at Azad Maidan sports ground in Mumbai on March 13 to demand a salary increase pending since 2014. Protesters said there is a huge discrepancy between contract and permanent workers' salaries.

They alleged that an office attendant on contract only earns 12,500 rupees (\$US166) a month compared to permanent attendant who can earn 28,000 to 35,000 rupees. Other major issues include restoration of a bonus and a five-day week which was arbitrarily revoked and turned into a six-day work week in 2017.

### **Punjab rural workers demand regular work and outstanding wages**

A group of workers employed under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employee Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) blocked the Fazilka-Ferozepur highway in Punjab state on March 17 demanding regular employment and payment of salary arrears.

The workers, who were paid on a daily basis, alleged that they were not being offered continuous work. In Punjab 1.4 million rural workers are employed under the MGNREGA but only 10,000 are hired for more than 100 days in a financial year.

### **Pakistan: Islamabad government employees demand salary increase**

The All Pakistan Audit and Accounts Combined Association (APAACA), which covers workers in the Accountant General Pakistan Revenues (AGPR) and Federal Secretariat, called a "pen-down" strike on March 5 to demand substantial salary increases.

The strike followed an 11-day protest which was called off in late February after negotiations with government representatives, who falsely agreed to a 120 percent pay increase by March 5.

According to the affected employees, the salary revisions were not implemented in their departments. In addition, the AGPR workers demanded a 20 percent allowance on par with Federal Secretariat employees.

The Ministry of Finance announced on Thursday that the salary revision would be part of the budget for 2020–2021 financial year, which will begin in July. On the same day the APAACA announced the ministry has invited union leaders for negotiations. APAACA members said that the strike will continue until demands were met.

### **Workers' protests spike in China after a month of quarantine**

After a month of lockdowns related to the coronavirus, which virtually

erased strikes in China, workers have emerged from multiple industries protesting economic distress.

China Labour Bulletin recorded 25 strike incidents since late February, most in the service and transport industries. This included a strike by 1,000 taxi drivers in Liuzhou (Guangxi), protests over wage arrears by food workers and medical staff, and demands of rent cuts by small business owners who experienced a severe downturn in business.

Construction workers, including those who were tasked with building emergency hospitals, have also been protesting over unpaid wages. Workers at a construction site in Zhoukou, Henan, were attacked by police after staging a wage arrears protest.

### **New South Wales: Rocla locks out production workers**

Concrete pipe manufacturer Rocla has locked out production workers at its Emu Plains plant, west of Sydney, in a long-running dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement. Some 50 members of the Australian Workers Union (AWU) walked off the job twice in November and in January over the issue.

The AWU has been negotiating a pay rise with Rocla since May. The union has called for 3 percent annual pay increases. Rocla's latest offer was just 2 percent, up from its original offer of 1.5 percent.

### **Australian Paper mill workers continue strike action**

About 160 maintenance workers from Australian Paper in Maryvale, southeast of Melbourne, Victoria state, resumed five days of rolling stoppages on Thursday against the company's proposed enterprise agreement. The action follows ongoing limited strikes and work bans in September and January and a four-hour strike on March 7. Work bans are on overtime and not using company phones.

The workers are represented by three unions, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Electrical Trades Union and United Workers Union, who have been trying to reach a deal with Australian Paper for nearly 12 months. Negotiations are ongoing behind closed doors in the Fair Work Commission.

According to the unions, Australian Paper, which is a subsidiary of Nippon Paper, a global company with a net income of \$10.3 billion, wants a two-tier agreement that would see 15 percent lower wage rates for all new employees. The company 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.

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 rises to claw back what the unions agreed to give up in the last enterprise agreement.



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