

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

4 February 2022

Asia

India: Power distribution workers protest nationally against privatisation

Thousands of workers from state-run power utilities across India demonstrated on Tuesday against the Modi government's privatisation plans and for other demands. Workers and engineers have called for withdrawal of the Electricity (Amendment) Bill 2021 which would allow private companies to enter the sector and compete with state-owned power companies.

Workers fear for their jobs and that there will be a concentration of private, profit-focussed utility players in the lucrative urban-industrial segments while poor and rural consumers would be supplied by the run-down public sector.

Other demands are for integration of all unbundled power utilities, restoration of a previous pension scheme for all power employees recruited after the unbundling of State Electricity Boards and for all outsourced power employees to be made permanent.

The All India Power Engineers Federation (AIPEF) and National Coordination Committee of Electricity Employees & Engineers (NCCOEEE) threatened to call a nationwide two-day strike of 1.5 million power workers on February 23.

Puducherry power utility workers on indefinite strike

On Tuesday around 2,000 workers from the Puducherry Electricity Department (PED) began an indefinite strike against the Modi government electricity privatisation bill. Police blocked strikers from marching to the PED head office but they protested nearby.

The workers were joined by union members from power companies in Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Strikers have said they will not attend to any fault and not participate in bill collection and payment duties.

BEML workers in Karnataka protest against privatisation

Workers from the government-owned Bharat Earth Movers Limited (BEML) demonstrated outside their factory in Mysuru, Karnataka on Tuesday in opposition to the Modi government's moves to privatise the company. BEML is an Indian Public Sector Undertaking headquartered in Bengaluru, Karnataka.

BEML, which employs nearly 8,000 workers, manufactures heavy equipment, such as that used for earth moving, transport and mining.

Since 1964 it has been manufacturing equipment for defence, mining, railway and metro sectors. Workers said they will continue protests outside the plant's main entrance until February 5.

Delhi medical staff demand payment of overdue salaries

Doctors, nurses and paramedics at the Delhi-East Corporation-run Swami Dayanand hospital protested at the hospital campus in Delhi on Tuesday over four months' outstanding salaries. They said they will maintain the protest until salaries are paid.

Childcare workers in Delhi protest for job security

Childcare (anganwadi) workers from childcare centres in Delhi protested near the chief minister's residence on January 31 to demand government employee status. Protesters raised slogans and displayed placards demanding roll back of the National Education Policy (NEP).

While presently anganwadi workers teach children from 3-6 years of age, there are plans to absorb children in the 4-6-year age group into the preparatory classes under the NEP. The Delhi State Anganwadi Workers and Helpers Union said workers fear that unless they are employed as teachers in the education system, under the NEP their anganwadi professional existence will end.

Terminated telecommunications manufacturing workers in Karnataka protest

Terminated workers from the government-owned telecommunications equipment manufacturer Indian Telephone Industries (ITI) Limited, have been protesting for over two months outside the company's facility in Bengaluru, Karnataka. Workers began a hunger strike protest on January 31.

ITI laid off more than 80 workers after they formed a union. The workers were notified that they had been terminated when they arrived for work on December 1 and have since been refused entry.

Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government workers demand pay rise

Workers from various Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government departments

demonstrated in the province's capital Peshawar on January 26 demanding an immediate 25 percent pay increase. The large protest march and demonstration outside the provincial parliament blocked many key roads in the city.

Workers accused the government of not honouring a February 2021 agreement for a pay and pension increase. The government also failed to consolidate various allowances to the base pay also agreed at the time.

Thousands of teachers from Islamabad government schools demonstrated on Tuesday over the same issues. They protested outside the government's finance division and marched to parliament.

The All Government Employees Grand Alliance, an umbrella union, called the protests. It told the Peshawar workers that it would organise a protest march to Islamabad on February 10 if the government failed to meet their demands by February 5.

The union alliance has played a key role in bailing out the government as it continues implementing a severe austerity program. The union lied to the Peshawar workers that the federal government increased pay for Islamabad workers, falsely presenting the issue as limited to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government, even as it was organising another limited protest to placate the growing anger among the teachers in Islamabad for not receiving a pay increase.

Karachi vaccination workers end eleven-day strike

Over 200 health workers and support staff at the Karachi Expo Centre, which serves as the largest COVID-19 vaccination hub in the Sindh province, called off their vaccinations boycott on Wednesday after the government agreed to pay wages withheld for the last nine months. Vaccination staff at Dow University Ojha campus and Khaliq Dina Hall were also not paid.

While holding limited protests, the workers continued to provide services in the last several months. But the continued refusal of the government, despite its increased demand for expanded vaccination services, prompted the workers to declare a complete boycott at the Expo Centre. The government has frequently made such false promises to workers.

Bangladeshi police use firearms against protesting garment workers

Police in Gazipur fired 30 shotgun rounds, 10 stun grenades and 6 tear gas shells against protesting garment workers on Tuesday. At least 13 workers were injured. Workers from the Tivoli Apparels factory at Tongi, in Gazipur were protesting against the closure of their factory.

The workers struck on January 29 over 13 demands, including the removal of a production manager who had harassed a female worker. They attempted to return to work after two days only to discover a closure notice at the factory gate.

The Tivoli Apparels workers began calling on fellow workers at nearby plants to join them. Fearful that the protest would spread, authorities at the nearby Sumi Apparels, RBSR Fashions and Radisson Apparels declared their factories closed. Police were deployed to the area.

Filipino power distribution workers vote to strike

Workers from the power distribution company Central Negros Electric Cooperative (Ceneco) on January 29 voted for strike action. They are alleging that Ceneco failed to comply with the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) approved by management in September last year. Of the 322 who participated in the ballot, which included linemen, collectors, meter readers and tellers, 291 voted for strike action.

According to the Ceneco Union of Rational Employees (CURE), the company failed to pay an agreed 5 percent salary increase and instead demanded that workers should increase efficiency. Workers said the management demand was not mentioned in CBA negotiations. CURE also called on Ceneco to implement the 500-peso monthly allowance, which the company has not paid since July 2019, and release the 15,000-peso (\$US295) sign-in bonuses for workers.

CURE must submit the ballot result to the National Conciliation and Mediation Board (NCMB) of the Department of Labor and Employment (DoLE) and then wait for a seven-day cooling off period before taking industrial action.

Ceneco serves the cities of Bacolod, Silay, Talisay, Bago, and the towns of Murcia and Don Salvador Benedicto. More than 200,000 residential, industrial and commercial consumers could be affected by the impending strike.

Australia

South Australian power utility workers strike

Members of four unions from South Australian Power Networks (SAPN) and Enerven, subsidiaries of Utilities Management Pty Ltd (UMPL), stopped work for several hours across South Australia on Wednesday morning in their long running dispute for an improved enterprise agreement. About 100 workers protested outside the SA Power/Enerven offices in Adelaide holding placards stating, "Same job, less pay, no way" and "Shame SAPN."

The Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union, Australian Services Union, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and Professionals Australia formed a single bargaining unit (SBU) June 2020 and has been in negotiations with UMPL since then. Workers have three times rejected the company's proposed agreement.

UMPL wants to establish a two-tier wage structure which will pay new recruits 20 percent less. It also wants the removal of limitations on the use of third-party contractors—increasing job insecurity for permanent employees. The union has called for pay increases above 3.5 percent in a three-year agreement, no two-tier wage structure and further negotiations to resolve issues pending from the 2018 agreement.

SAPN and Enerven workers are covered under the same enterprise agreement with UMPL. UMPL wants two separate agreements which the unions rejected. The Fair Work Commission (FWC) has ruled in favour of UMPL's demand for two agreements. This is being appealed by the unions.

The unions have allowed the dispute to drag on by holding limited ad-hoc industrial action that commenced in April last year. Responding to members' demand for more concrete action the unions called a "day of action" on February 1 urging all members to strike for 4 or 8 hours across the state. Further daily actions will be ad-hoc and uncoordinated.

New South Wales commuter rail workers resume limited industrial

action

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union, representing workers at the government owned Sydney Trains and NSW Trains, has announced industrial action from February 6 to February 21. Action will consist of bans on working overtime, foreign depot work and working with contractors. The bans are part of four months of limited industrial action in negotiations for an improved enterprise agreement offer from Transport for NSW (TfNSW).

The union wants 3.5 percent annual pay increases, on par with the current official CPI of 3.5 percent, but far short of what is needed to keep up with the rapidly increasing cost of living. TfNSW is only offering a 2.5 percent annual pay rise that includes a 0.5 percent superannuation bump, meaning the actual wage increase would be just 2.04 percent – a pay cut.

Rail is the last mode of public transport to remain state-owned following the sell-off of the state's bus and ferry networks, spearheaded by the Labor Party and enforced by the unions.

In preparation for possible privatisation, TfNSW has rejected demands that the new enterprise agreement retains base working conditions if employees are transferred to a private company, permanent job conversion for contractors after three months service and that any employee affected by a restructure or workplace change be given job priority in the new structure. TfNSW also wants to slash redundancy payments from a maximum of 64 weeks' pay to 12 weeks.



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