

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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New Zealand sales staff fight lockout

About 55 sales staff will picket stores owned by the New Zealand national retail chain Farmers this week to fight a management lockout. The workers are refusing to sign a new incentive package and collective contract.

Farmers wants the contract to replace an existing sales commission scheme. Workers say it will mean big pay cuts, but the company maintains that its proposals are "fair and reasonable". It has presented the workers with an ultimatum--either accept its "offer" or take a \$5,000 exit package and leave.

The workers were given until 5pm Thursday to decide. Lockout notices have already been served on just under half of the company's 146 staff who already indicated they will refuse to sign the deal.

Australian nurses impose work bans

Nurses at the Kingston Centre in Melbourne imposed work bans this week, including a ban on new patient admissions, after the centre's management refused to sign a Certified Organisational Change Agreement (COCA).

The Victorian state government plans to privatise the 400 bed residential and rehabilitation centre for elderly people. A spokesperson for the Australian Nurses Federation said that if the management did not sign the COCA then the centre could not be held legally responsible for breaking working and employment conditions after being privatised.

"The department of Finance and Treasury has issued a directive that no COCA will be signed at the Cheltenham facility. If there is no agreement then the status of the workers could be called into question and this could set a precedent for other health care facilities facing privatisation," she said.

Hospital staff stage sit-in

Forty-three kitchen staff and cleaners barricaded themselves in the kitchen of the Box Hill Hospital in Melbourne last Tuesday to protest not being paid their full entitlements when an outside catering company took over

operations. The workers have maintained the sit-in despite a recommendation by the Industrial Relations Commission that they end the action. The Health Services Union says the dispute could go statewide if it is not resolved soon.

PNG bank workers plan strike

Employees of Rural Development Bank (RDB) in Papua New Guinea have threatened to go on strike if management refuses to agree to their log of claims.

The workers are demanding a 50 percent wage indexation increase and a new work agreement to cover terms of employment and working conditions, including a retrenchment package and a housing scheme.

A spokesman for the PNG Banks and Financial Institutions Workers Union said the bank management was deliberately delaying an agreement. However, while workers are pressing for industrial action, the union has given the Bank another three months to respond.

Workers at the ANZ Banking Group (PNG) have also lodged a claim for improved wages and conditions.

Telecommunication workers threaten strike

The PNG Communications Workers Union (CWU) registered a notice of dispute with the Industrial Relations office this week and is considering strike action against PNG Telikom over the company's refusal to pay a 15 percent wage increase.

A CWU spokesman said that at recent membership meetings workers had overwhelmingly supported calling industrial action.

He said workers were angry that the company was refusing to meet their demands when it had made over 26 million kina in profit last year. "The last wage adjustment was in July 1997 and this was made in installments," he said.

Industrial deaths in Fiji

Figures released by the Fiji Ministry for Labour this week show that workers continue to be killed and maimed at a startling rate in Fiji's industries.

This year 26 people have been killed and 154 injured in work-related accidents, while 122 workers lost their lives and 1,303 suffered injury last year. In 1997 the death toll reached 124, and 945 people were injured.

Thai workers join power workers strike

Workers from the state-run Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) have stepped up their campaign to oppose the sale of the 3,645-megawatt Ratchaburi power station and the privatisation of other sections of the country's power industry.

More than 1,000 EGAT workers protesting outside parliament house in Bangkok this week were joined by other state government employees and poor farmers. The farmers fear a drastic rise in the price of electricity if power generation is privatised.

The demonstrators carried banners and placards condemning the government and denouncing the International Monetary Fund restructuring program, which demands the sell off of public enterprises.

Union members also protested outside the EGAT head office in Nonthaburi and surrounded the manager's office for three hours, demanding a halt to the sale of shares in the Ratchaburi power plant.

A union spokesman said power workers will hold further demonstrations on May Day. "Our next plan is to immediately stop production at the lignite mine that supplies coal to the Mae Moh power plant, which provides more than half of all the consumers in the North, the Northeast and part of Central Region," he said.

Sri Lankan university workers out on strike

Operations at all eight universities in Sri Lanka came to a standstill April 27 due to an indefinite strike by non-academic staff. Their demands include effective and honest administration of universities, implementation of the pension scheme promised by the government in 1977 and the correction of salary anomalies.

Even though the Peoples Alliance government issued a warning that workers who failed to report to work would be considered as having vacated their posts, the strikers have defied the threat.

Student associations have urged the government to make arrangements to re-open the universities by solving these problems immediately. Meanwhile the University Executive Officers Association (UEOA) announced a token strike on April 29, demanding that unequal salary revisions between the administrative and academic staff of the universities be rectified. The Secretary of the UEOA said that all requests made by the union over the past ten years to ministers of education in the UNP and PA regimes have failed and therefore the union had to resort to this industrial action.

Midwives Association announces a protest march

Secretary of the Sri Lankan Midwives Association has announced, in a press conference called by the association, that they are organizing a protest march in Central Colombo on May 5. According to the Administrative Secretary of the

Association, more than 2,000 midwives from various parts of the island are to take part in the march. There are about 7,000 midwives working in various parts of the country, of whom 6,000 are members of the Association.

The midwives' demands include total independence to carry out their duties, a separate school for midwifery, the training of midwifery tutors by senior midwives, the extension of that training period to three years from the existing one and a half and the revision of the curriculum to suit modern conditions. The midwives are planning to march from Colombo's Central Park to the Ministry of Health to hand over a memorandum. This protest march will coincide with the international day for midwives recognized by the International Confederation of Midwives.

Struggle of bank workers continues

Twenty-five hundred Sri Lankan state bank workers picketed the central financial district of Colombo April 28, demanding payment of a salary increase and the end to promotions given on the basis of political affiliations. This picketing campaign was organized by Ceylon Bank Employees Union, which was recently permitted by the courts to take industrial action. The bank employers had sought an injunction against strikes, picketing, demonstrations and any kind of protest by the workers on the grounds that agitation would hamper bank work and affect foreign and local investors' confidence.

One of the slogans of the bank workers' picket line was: "We created the profits. Therefore give this payment to everybody." Meanwhile workers at eight private banks, joining the state bank employees, launched an overtime work boycott demanding that the employers sign a new collective agreement.



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