

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 March 2000

Indian power workers threaten strike

Workers at the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB) have warned that they will begin an indefinite strike unless the state government abandons a restructuring plan that will divide the board into three separate corporations, handling power generation, transmission and distribution.

State power minister Padamsinh Patil announced the restructure last month. Workers were infuriated by Patil's claim that the move was needed to increase efficiency and was the first step toward full privatisation. At rallies of workers, speakers from the MSEB Action Committee condemned the government and called for Patil's resignation.

Meanwhile, the MSEB Engineers Association leaders have offered to collaborate with the government and announced that it had drawn up its own plan to cut costs. The plan to be discussed at the Association's convention in April includes the "removal of redundant and inefficient officers".

The move to privatise MSEB follows the defeat of a protracted strike by thousands of power workers in Uttar Pradesh last month after union leaders capitulated to government demands. As a result both the national and state governments are pressing ahead with plans to restructure and privatise the public sector.

Indian Airlines sacks 800 staff

More than 800 Indian Airlines (IA) workers were sacked en masse on March 1. Many of the workers had more than 30 years service with the company. The shock dismissals were the result of a policy shift recently endorsed by the IA board to reduce the retirement age of its employees from 60 to 58. The retired workers will receive a severance payout equal to only three months pay. The airline is looking to save 1,900 million rupees over five years through the staff cuts. Workers in Hyderabad, Chennai, Calcutta and Delhi have initiated legal action against the airline on the grounds they were not given the mandatory three-months notice.

Strike brings Karachi to a halt

Pakistani workers belonging to two ethnic-based organisations—Jeay Sindh Qaumi Mahaz (JSQM) and Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM)—conducted a united strike last Monday in the city of Karachi against job cuts by

state-owned companies. Most shops and markets remained closed and public transport stopped running in support of the strikers.

The strike followed the sacking of 400 workers by Pakistan Steel Mills and statements by the recently installed military regime that it will act against "over-staffing" throughout state-owned industries. Pakistan is currently implementing an economic restructuring program dictated by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

The MQM represents Mohajirs, or Indian Muslims, who settled in Pakistan's Sindh province after the partition of India in 1947. The JSQM represents indigenous Sindhis. The organisations warned the strikers to be on guard against any attempts to use the job cuts to foment ethnic divisions between Mohajir and Sindhi workers.

Pusan port workers continue strike in South Korea

Dockworkers at the South Korean port of Pusan are continuing a five-day strike over job cuts despite legal action by the port authorities. At the Shinsondae Pier alone, more than 3,000 containers have been held up, with only four out of 11 unloading cranes in operation. The port's Wooam Pier all but ceased operations mid-week, causing eight ships to leave for other ports. The Shinsondae Container Terminal Company has filed a suit against 30 port workers seeking damages and charging them with illegally hindering operations at the port.

Call to investigate murder of Indonesian union activist

The Federation of All Indonesian Workers Union (FSPSI) announced on Wednesday, during their anniversary celebrations, that it would organise nationwide work stoppages and protest rallies to demand that the government investigate the murder of a female union activist in May 1993. A FSPSI spokesman said that the action would begin from June 14 if the police had failed to conduct investigations.

Marsinah, a worker at the PT Catur Putra Surya watch factory in Porong, East Java, was brutally slain in the Nganjuk industrial area, only days after she led a rally to demand better pay and working conditions.

Teachers plan strike in New Zealand

Around 200 teachers, belonging to Christchurch-based Concerned Teachers (CT), announced they would organise nationwide industrial action beginning later this month to oppose Achievement 2001—the new qualifications system introduced by the previous government to replace the present School Certificate system. The first stage of the system, affecting Year 11 students, is due to be implemented early next year

Peter Calvert, a spokesman for CT, said that the new system was too complex and “would not work”. Industrial action would begin with teachers refusing to take part in so-called professional development, a standards-based assessment, and would escalate to full strike action. “The depth of opposition is that strong,” he said.

Calvert said that CT decided to organise the campaign because the Post Primary Teachers Association refused to oppose Achievement 2001. Although Education Minister Trevor Mallard is expected to announce next month that the new Labor government will delay the scheme's implementation, CT has warned that the industrial action will go ahead unless it is dropped altogether.

NZ meat inspectors fight for pay increase

Export meat inspectors in New Zealand began industrial action this week to press for a wage increase. The 150 inspectors are employed by the Ministry of Agriculture, but their salaries are paid by meat processing companies belonging to the Meat Industry Association (MIA).

The inspectors are demanding a 12 percent pay increase, but the employers have offered only 6 percent, and are demanding changes in working conditions to boost productivity.

The inspectors refused to work the usual 11-hour day for two days last week, working only eight-and-a-half hours. Next week they plan to go on strike for three days if the MIA does not improve its offer. An MIA spokesman said that it would not restart negotiations until all industrial action ceased.

The New Zealand meat industry has been hit by a number of strikes over the past weeks, including an ongoing dispute at Progressive Meats plant in Hastings. Around 170 striking workers established a 24-hour picket at the end of February, demanding improved pay and conditions.

Australian teachers face fines

Teachers and school principals in New South Wales (NSW) have defied orders by the Director General of Education's office and the Industrial Commission to supervise a literacy test for Year 7 and 8 students. Less than a quarter of high schools, mostly in country areas, have gone ahead with the English Language Literacy Assessment (ELLA), and only 10 percent of the 120,000 students have taken the test.

The teachers imposed bans on the tests to protest government moves to use the results to determine where special support teachers should be allocated across the NSW school system.

Some schools have lost their full-time complement of learning difficulties support teachers, as they were transferred to other schools under the pretext that last year's ELLA tests indicated there was a greater need. Teachers claim the transfers are designed to divert attention from the shortage of trained teachers in the system.

The NSW Labor government is seeking to have the Teachers Federation fined up to \$10,000 a day by the industrial courts.

Australian airline workers oppose job cuts

More than 500 members of the Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association will stage a series of three-hour rolling strikes at airports across the country next week. They are protesting conditions in a new enterprise agreement that the union says will “radically change work practices”.

The industrial action by the engineers, who are involved in carrying out final checks and certifying aircraft as safe to fly, is the first in more than 10 years. A spokesman said: “We believe if the new conditions are accepted they will only result in a savage reduction in our numbers and they will remove very important layers of airline safety.”

The strikes follow the \$680 million takeover of Ansett by Air New Zealand. Air New Zealand managing director Jim McCrea has confirmed that “jobs would be lost initially” and those to be affected “would be identified after an integration study was completed”.



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