

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 April 2000

Drivers strike cuts Cebu City transport

Over 1,500 drivers of public utility jeepneys, multicabs, taxis and tricycles in Cebu City, the Philippines, went on strike for 24 hours on March 30. The strike cut transport on 17 routes, including Guadalupe, Mandaue-Ouano, Pardo, Bulacao, Consolacion, Oppra, Singson, Banawa, Lahug, Alumnos, Inayawan, Basak and the port area.

The strike is part of a campaign launched by the drivers in early March following the government's announcement of an increase in Motor Vehicle User's Charges ranging from 50 to 800 percent. After drivers took earlier strike action the government agreed to reduce the increase to a maximum of 100 percent, implemented over four years.

But the government has refused to act on many other demands raised by the drivers, including the scrapping of the oil deregulation law and a reduction in oil prices. The drivers are also pushing the Cebu City authorities to write off all outstanding fines for traffic violations and to reduce the cost of fines by 50 percent.

In addition, they are seeking the removal of an ordinance limiting operation of jeepneys that seat less than 18 persons. Ordinance 1663 states that such vehicles shall only be allowed to "operate, ply or pass through secondary streets, thoroughfares or roads in the city".

A spokesman for the Multicab Operator-Drivers Association of Cebu said, "The families of about 5,000 multicab drivers and operators stand to lose their livelihood because of the ordinance."

Japanese pilots strike for wages

Pilots belonging to the 1,330-strong JAL Flight Crew Union at Japan Airlines, the country's largest carrier, went on strike for 24 hours on Tuesday in support of a 3 percent wage increase. The striking pilots also demanded that JAL abandon plans to reduce costs by cutting retirement allowances.

The strike stopped flights departing from the international airport at Narita, just outside Tokyo, and Haneda airport, inside the capital. Other scheduled flights around the country were unaffected because the union allowed higher-ranking senior pilots to replace their striking colleagues.

A union spokesman said pilots would strike again next Wednesday if the company continued to refuse to negotiate on the demands.

Social workers protest in Hong Kong

Hundreds of social workers were joined by housewives, children, disabled people and other welfare recipients in a protest rally outside Hong Kong's Central Government Offices on March 26.

The demonstration was called to oppose the government's new scheme to pay non-government welfare bodies lump-sum payments as from next month. The scheme will cut the government's present level of subsidy to the bodies and lead to worse conditions for 30,000 welfare workers.

Peter Cheung Kwok-che, the president of the Hong Kong Social

Workers' General Union, said the government cut would mean a reduction in employers' contribution to the retirement fund. "It will mean a huge cut in our benefits. More than 25 percent of 30,000 welfare agency staff have worked for the private companies for more than 10 years," he said.

A spokesman for the supporters who joined the protest said welfare recipients were worried that the new policy could undermine the quality of social services. "If the welfare bodies have their funding cut they may cut services or impose new charges on us," he said.

Taegu City Bus workers to strike

Workers employed by private bus operators in Taegu City, South Korea, are threatening to strike on April 4 in support of a demand for a wage increase. The Taegu branch of the Korean Automobile Workers Federation announced the strike threat after negotiations with the companies broke down on March 22.

The bus line owners insist they cannot allow any further wage increases until the government allows an increase in the current bus fares. Hoping to avert the stoppage, the union agreed to meet the management prior to the planned date. Taegu has 32 bus companies, running 1,719 buses and employing 3,948 workers.

Indian postal workers threaten strike

Unions covering postal workers across India are threatening an indefinite strike from May 2 to press for increased wages and improved working conditions. One of their main demands is that all former department employees who have left the postal service maintain their status and be entitled to a pension. The workers are also seeking improved pay grades, additional increments and upgraded job classifications to improve pay.

The government has delayed discussions on the workers' log of claims for over two years. Despite recent promises by federal Communication Minister Ramvilas Paswan that he would begin negotiations with leaders of the All India Postal Employees Union and the National Union of Postal Employees soon, nothing has eventuated.

Maharashtra contract workers demand payment

Thousands of members of the Maharashtra Jeevan Pradhikaran Contractors Association (MJPCA) in the central Indian state of Maharashtra are planning to stage protests, including hunger strikes, over the continued delay by the government in paying money owed to contract workers.

At a press conference last weekend, MJPCA President Shekha Sheth said work on over 2,500 water supply schemes had come to a halt because the payment of thousand of rupees to contract workers had been delayed for several months. Although the Maharashtra authorities promised at the beginning of February to pay up by March, not a single payment has been made since December 1999.

The workers have sent letters of protest to V.P Raja, the secretary of

the state's water supply and sanitation department, and Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh.

Sri Lankan bank workers defend rights

The workers from various Sri Lankan private banks were joined by workers from state banks to stage a demonstration on March 26 in front of the Colombo Fort railway station. The workers were demanding that the private banks cease their suppression of union rights and begin negotiations on a new work contract.

The protest was organised by the Ceylon Bank Employees Union, which covers both state and private bank workers, with the support of the Ceylon Mercantile Union and Union of Postal and Telecommunication Officers.

A union spokesman said: "We held union branch meetings in the bank premises earlier but now they don't permit us to do so. They don't permit union office bearers to meet members."

The last collective agreement covering private bank workers expired on April 1, 1998. The banks have refused to sign a new agreement while a dispute over a wage increment is still before the labour court. The dispute was filed over two years ago. Pay rates will remain frozen until a judgment is handed down.

Drivers fight for improved conditions

Over 1,800 drivers attached to various government departments picketed at Lipton Circle in Colombo on March 27, demanding an eight-hour working day, a pay increase and the provision of uniforms.

At present, government drivers have to work 10 hours or more a day without any extra allowance and are provided only with a shirt, not a full uniform.

One driver on the picket said that after various deductions such as loan installments and the defence levy (a government levy to fund its war in the North of the country) the drivers receive only 2,000 to 3,000 rupees (about US\$26-33) per month. "The price of everything is going up. The cost of living is high and our salary is not enough to live as human beings."

Ansett staff strike

Ansett Airlines had to cancel 21 flights from airports across Australia on March 27 when 1,000 check-in staff stopped work for two hours over a new enterprise agreement. At stop-work meetings they voted to take further industrial action on March 31 unless there was progress in negotiations with the management.

An Australian Services Union spokesman said the dispute centred on job security and improved work conditions, including a reduction in the number of hours to be worked before an employee is entitled to a penalty rate. At present workers are required to work 10 hours, but Ansett wants to increase this to 11 hours.

In February Air New Zealand bought out News Corp's remaining 50 percent share of Ansett, giving it total control of the airline. Ansett workers fear that Air New Zealand will shed up to 3,000 Australian-based jobs as it moves to rationalise the joint operations and cut costs.

At the end of last month Air New Zealand's Deputy Public Affairs Director Alastair Carthew admitted there would be job losses but said it was "too early" to put a figure on them. The company has appointed "integration teams" to examine all aspects of Ansett's operations, paying particular attention to its administration, finance and information technology areas. Air New Zealand Managing Director Jim McCrea said the company sought savings worth \$220 million over the next two years.

Catholic school teachers dispute

More than 5,000 teachers in Roman Catholic schools in the Australian state of New South Wales stopped work for 24 hours on

March 29, demanding an increased pay offer. Some 2,000 teachers rallied in Sydney before marching to the Catholic Commission offices and the state government offices.

The teachers have rejected an offer by the Catholic Commission for Employment Relations of 2 percent backdated to January 1 this year. The Commission claims that the offer is only an interim payment that could be increased when the state government reaches a settlement in the current dispute with teachers in state public schools.

New Zealand meatworkers end strike

Meatworkers at Progressive Meats in Hastings, New Zealand returned to work at the end of last week, ending a month-long strike over pay and working conditions. Only days before, workers picketing the plant had called for other meatworkers to take industrial action in support of the dispute.

The striking workers voted to accept the latest management offer at a membership meeting last Sunday. Meat Union organiser Eric Mischefski said the union and delegates had "strongly recommended" a return to work. To date the union has refused to make public the details of the deal, saying only that union officials "are pleased with the outcome".

Meanwhile, Alliance Meats announced last week that it would go ahead with further restructuring of its meat plants in Nelson, Christchurch, Timarui and Oamaru on the country's South Island, which will see the destruction of about 200 jobs. The plan includes the closure of its Sockburn lamb and sheep slaughtering plant in Christchurch.

Alliance chief executive Owen Poole said the aim of the restructure was to "boost the returns for its 8,000 farmer shareholders".

Plantation workers walk out

About 3,000 employees at New Britain Palm Oil Limited, in Papua New Guinea's West New Britain province, went on strike on March 25 and March 26 over the company's failure to meet their demands for improved working conditions.

Among other things, the workers are demanding a 150 percent wage increase, better housing and redundancy benefits. The workers, mainly members of the Amalgamated Workers Union, walked off their jobs on Saturday morning, bringing one of the country's largest plantations to a standstill. The company employs about 5,000 workers, mainly as labourers.



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