

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 February 2002

Indian police arrest strikers in Kerala

Police have arrested more than 100 workers this week in an attempt to break the ongoing public sector strike in the Indian state of Kerala. The arrests were made under the state government's Essential Services Act.

Public servants and teachers launched the indefinite strike two weeks ago to demand the restoration of working conditions slashed as a part of an austerity plan. The action has paralysed government offices and education institutions. Nearly 5,000 workers and their supporters blocked the road outside the State Secretariat building in Thiruvananthapuram on February 20, bringing city traffic to a standstill for three hours. The government has refused to negotiate with the unions until they call off the strike.

Indian railway employees stage sit-in strike

Employees at the central railway station in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala, staged a sit-in-strike on February 18 and secured the release of an arrested worker. Railway police detained a fitter, C. Ravindran Nair, while he was rolling down shutters on the Kerala Express. The police claimed that they had acted on suspicion that he was not a railway employee even though he had a railway identity card.

Air India engineers threaten industrial action

Air India Aircraft Engineers Association (AIAEA) members have threatened to go on an indefinite strike from March 6, if the authorities fail to address their demands. The engineers have sought improved compensation payments, incentive bonuses and improvements to the existing promotion system for the past six years.

Air India authorities have issued a statement declaring that the AIAEA strike threat is illegal because the engineers' demands have already been forwarded to the regional labor commissioner, a claim disputed by the union. According to management, the company is

considering plans to retrench staff and reduce wages to cut costs. The airline has suffered a downturn in business since the September 11 attacks in the US.

Indonesian garment workers oppose attack on conditions

About 850 workers at garment manufacturer PT Hyun Indonesia in Tangerang struck on February 18 over company attempts to eliminate transportation and food allowances. The company move follows a recent increase in the minimum wage from 426,000 rupiah (\$US40) to 490,000 rupiah per month. Management initially agreed to pay the wage rise, but then announced it would cut the benefits to offset the increase.

Indonesian teachers protest sackings

Teachers, parents and students from the Al Azhar School in Kemang, South Jakarta, demonstrated on February 19 against the sacking of 11 teachers who asked for a salary increase. Sixty teachers are employed at the Al Azhar kindergarten, elementary, junior high school and senior high school. While pupils' families are charged 250,000 rupiah a month (\$US25) to attend the school, the monthly pay of a teacher with 12 years service is just 800,000 rupiah.

Australian refinery workers walk off again

Contract maintenance workers at the Caltex refinery in Sydney's south walked off the job on February 22 for the second time in a week and have voted to stay out over the weekend. The workers, who imposed bans for several days last week, are striking over the non-payment of tax and superannuation, the payment of casual workers at a lower rate and changes to hours of work without notification. The 350 workers walked off on February 19, but returned to work on the recommendation of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU).

AMWU spokeswoman Jan Primrose said that

workers “were unhappy with the lack of progress” in negotiations. Caltex is seeking a court order for a return to work.

Cleaners protest at Queensland university

Cleaners picketed several campuses of Brisbane’s Griffith University on February 19 to draw attention to their ongoing dispute with Allcorp cleaning contractor. Allcorp has lowered wage rates and introduced roster changes to cut staff numbers. The cutbacks mean that many classrooms and academic staff rooms will not be cleaned daily.

Academic staff are supporting the cleaners. A spokesman said: “Academics and students are not happy that as the year starts there are concerns about cleaning standards. After heaps of protest e-mails the university has started renegotiating the contract.”

Lakes Creek meatworkers step up campaign

Workers are preparing a second march through the North Queensland town of Rockhampton to protest the closure of the Lakes Creek meat works. Management refused to reopen the plant following a Christmas shutdown after the workforce refused to accept a new work agreement. Over 1,350 workers have lost their jobs, severely impacting on the town and region.

A march at the end of last month drew hundreds of locals. The latest march is being organised by an action group formed by meatworkers and residents. The group is winning wide support and has received donations of money, food and clothing. It is also collecting a petition to be served on the local Member of Parliament, demanding action to protect jobs.

Bus drivers stop work over new wage agreement

Newcastle State Transit bus drivers stopped work for four hours on February 20 to discuss details of a new statewide wage agreement between the Rail Tram and Bus Union and the Transit Authority. Bus services were affected by the stoppage in all Newcastle areas. Sydney bus drivers attended stop work meetings for two hours on February 22 over the same issue. The Transit Authority has offered the drivers a 3 percent pay increase. The outcome of the meetings is not yet known.

New Zealand teachers reject pay deal

New Zealand secondary school teachers have voted to reject a proposed settlement of the collective work agreement drawn up before Christmas by government negotiators and the Post Primary Teachers Association

(PPTA). Over 80 percent of PPTA members participated in a nationwide secret ballot over the past two weeks, with 56 percent voting against the agreement.

While the agreement provided a guarantee of non-contact time for preparation and marking, the proposed salary increase of 3.5 percent over two years is below the rate of inflation and significantly less than the \$2,500 per year over three years sought by teachers.

As a result of the vote, the PPTA leadership has been forced to authorise further industrial action, including a one-day strike on March 1. Bans have been imposed on providing relief for teachers who are off school. The government has insisted it will not increase its pay offer.



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