

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 March 2002

South Korean utility unions end strikes

Two utility unions in South Korea that began a nationwide strike on February 25 have sent their members back to work after negotiating agreements with the government. The deals allow the government to proceed with privatisation proposals that will see the destruction of thousands of jobs.

Tens of thousands of rail, gas and power workers went on strike to demand the government drop plans to privatise the state-owned utilities and introduce shorter working hours to combat job losses. Most workers in South Korea work a six-day week and the country has some of the longest working hours in the world.

Even before the strike began, South Korea's President Kim Dae-jung directed state authorities to declare the action illegal and ordered the arrest of 37 union leaders.

By the end of the first day of the strike, the Korea Gas Corp Union, representing 2,000 workers, ordered a return to work after the government agreed to include union officials in talks to decide the "timing and process" of the "privatisation of the gas sector".

After threatening that 100,000 workers in manufacturing and the car industry would walk out on February 26 to back striking power and rail workers, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions only organised temporary walkouts at Hyundai, Kia and Ssangyong Motors.

The next day the 25,000-strong Korean Railways Workers Union ordered their members to resume work after 20-hour long talks with railway management produced an "accord".

Details of the agreement have not been made public but Commerce, Industry and Energy Minister, Shin Kook-Hwan, confirmed that "the accord would not alter plans to privatise debt-stricken state firms, a cornerstone of President Kim Dae-jung's economic

reforms". Over 140,000 state sector workers, including 7,300 railway staff, have been laid off in the past five years.

Public sector strike enters third week in India

The strike by more than 500,000 public sector workers and teachers in the southern Indian state of Kerala has entered its third week, with workers declaring that they will not return to work until the government settles their demands. The workers are protesting against the government's decision to slash benefits as part of a budget austerity plan. The benefits include government loans to purchase homes and cars.

According to media reports, garbage is piling up on the streets, government offices are unmanned and lessons at schools and universities have ceased. The government has recruited some strikebreakers, but in most areas pickets are preventing them from entering buildings.

This week, the Kerala Government Medical College Teachers Association announced that doctors would impose work bans on March 6, in support of the strike. The association has warned it will take further industrial action if the government attempts any disciplinary action against doctors. Several Kerala trade union federations have announced a 24-hour statewide solidarity strike on March 5.

The Chief Minister, AK Antony, is refusing to budge on the government's stand, saying that "the cost-cutting measures are essential to put the state's finances in order".

Sri Lankan postal employees stage a work-to-rule

Workers at the main post office in Matara in southern Sri Lanka staged a work-to-rule campaign on February 25, in protest against the "unjust" management practices of the local postmaster. All the staff joined the campaign bringing sorting, searching and dispatch of mail to a halt. The workers agreed to end the action

after the Deputy Post Master General promised to begin an impartial inquiry into the matter.

Philippines government orders hotel workers to end strike

The Philippines Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE) took control of a labour dispute at the Century Park Hotel in Manila on February 26. The workers have been picketing the hotel since February 8, over the terms of a proposed collective bargaining work agreement.

DOLE immediately ordered all striking workers back to work within 24 hours, while it makes a decision on the dispute. It also ordered the hotel management to take the workers back on the same conditions existing prior to the strike.

Australian steel workers threaten further action

Seventy-five workers at BHP Steel's Wingfield Service Centre in South Australia are still on strike after walking off the job on February 21 as part of 48-hour national strike at 15 BHP site around the country. More than 10,000 BHP workers joined struck last week to demand parity of pay and conditions at all workplaces.

Workers are demanding a 12 percent pay rise over three years but BHP is insisting on a "no strike" clause. Unions are also objecting to BHP assigning its in-house superannuation scheme to Towers Perrin. The union wants the fund to be managed by Superannuation Trust of Australia, which is 50 percent union-owned.

If strike action escalates, sheet steel supplies are likely to dry up within days, impacting on major car companies and manufacturing industries. General Motors-Holden has already indicated that it will stand down 4,000 workers at its Elizabeth plant in South Australia.

Casuals protest dismissals in Western Australia

Young casual workers protested outside Telstra's Stirling Street office in Perth last week after being told that 53 jobs would be cut at the Belmont call centre. During busy periods, Telstra supplements its full-time call centre workforce with contract workers. In most cases, casual workers are not entitled to benefits such as sick leave or redundancy pay.

Many of those laid-off were given only four days notice. Some claim that Telstra had advised them that they would be given permanent positions after two or three month's probation. One employee said that

although she had worked at the call centre for 10 months, doing the same tasks as permanent staff, she was not offered a full time position.

New Zealand university staff to strike

Academic and general staff at five of New Zealand's seven universities are set to strike on March 4 for a pay increase. Tens of thousands of students were due to start classes at Victoria, Massey, Canterbury, Lincoln and Waikato universities next week. Rolling work stoppages will follow at all campuses.

The Association of University Staff (AUS), which represents about 6,000 members, wants an eight percent pay rise. Auckland University is the only campus to reach an agreement. Its staff accepted a pay increase of five percent over two years. The offer by other universities is below two percent. The universities claim they cannot afford to increase the offer because of funding restrictions imposed by the government.

New Zealand secondary teachers renew industrial campaign

Secondary teachers throughout New Zealand walked off the job on March 1 as part of a 10-month campaign over pay and conditions. The industrial action was taken in protest at the lack of progress in settling a collective work agreement.

The country's 13,000 teachers rejected a deal put to them earlier this month by the Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA). The agreement failed to meet the teacher's claims in terms of pay and student contact hours. Teachers will hold meetings at their schools to vote on further industrial action and other proposals from the PPTA executive.



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