

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 March 2003

Transport strike in Philippines

About 49 transport associations from San Fernando City and surrounding provinces launched simultaneous strikes at midnight March 28. The action was scheduled to last until March 31. The strike is being organised by the Kilusan Para sa Pambansang Demokrasya (KPD) and Samahan ng mga Tsuser at Operator sa Pampanga (STOP), and includes drivers and operators of public utility vehicles, such as jeepneys, tricycles, mini-buses and taxis. Strikers are expected to picket key areas in the city.

The drivers and operators are protesting over ongoing fuel increases since the deregulation of oil pricing, and numerous rises in insurance charges by the Land Transportation Franchising Regulatory Board and Land Transport Office. The strike is the third this month.

Indonesia: Mint employees demand 100 percent pay rise

Some 100 employees of the state-owned mint, Perum Peruri, demonstrated on March 24 in South Jakarta, to demand a 100 percent salary increase and subsidised loans for housing, as well as water and electricity allowances.

A rally coordinator said salaries were well below the budget allocated by Bank Indonesia but management rejected the demands as unreasonable and claimed that a salary increase would affect cash flow and the workers' pension fund.

Indonesian workers protest new labour laws

Thousands of workers from Jakarta, Bandung and Semarang demonstrated on March 25 when new legislation became law. Protestors said the new laws allowed child labour and permitted employers to stop making redundancy payments for workers who resigned or were dismissed for committing crimes. The law did not allow women time off during menstruation or following a miscarriage unless they had permission from a doctor.

The protests were organised by the International Labor Organisation (ILO) of Indonesia, and attracted over 2,000 people in Jakarta and 1,500 in Semarang. While government representatives refused to meet the demonstrators, a Jakarta glassworker told the media there would be more protests if the government employee's demands were ignored.

Retired textile workers arrested in China

Protests by retired textile workers at the Tieshu Textile Group in the city of Suizhou, Hubei province, over unpaid pension benefits came under police attack this week with the arrest of two retirees.

The first arrest occurred on March 24 at 10 a.m. outside the factory gates. Police posing as workers grabbed a protestor and held him in detention for over an hour. The second arrest took place two days later when police raided the home of a retiree who had written banners and poems for the picket line. He is still being detained.

Death toll rising in China coal mine blast

At least 50 coal miners have been killed and 22 are missing after a gas explosion in north China's Shanxi Province. The death toll is expected to rise as rescuers continue to search for survivors and bodies.

Official reports say that 87 miners were working underground in the Mengnanzhuang coal mine in Xiaoyi City when the blast occurred on

March 22 in the early afternoon. Much of the mine has caved in, making rescue operations extremely difficult.

According to the *China Labour Bulletin*, many workers tried to leave the mine after they smelt gas an hour before the explosion. They were ordered to remain on the job by a mine manager.

The Shanxi provincial government has ordered all coalmines in the area to cease production but most operators are expected to ignore the instruction. The Mengnanzhuang explosion is the third major accident in the area since February.

Indian oil workers strike against privatisation

Over 30,000 workers from Bharat Petroleum Corporation (BPCL) and the Hindustan Petroleum Corporation (HPCL) began a three-day national strike on March 25 against privatisation of the two state-owned companies. The strike defies a court injunction banning the industrial action.

Sri Lankan workers fight privatisation

Thousands of public sector workers—including bank, hospital, railway, government press, port and municipal council workers—struck on March 26 to oppose privatisation, the dismantling of their pension scheme and changes to labor protection laws. The workers also demanded a pay rise to compensate for cost of living increases. Several hundred private sector employees also joined the strike.

Workers picketed their work places in Colombo before marching to the city's Hyde Park for a mass rally. They carried placards and banners reading: "Hands off pensions", "Raise wages", "Hands off Employees Provident Fund" and "Permanency for casual workers". State sector workers from outstations like Puttalam and Chilaw in the northwestern province and Kandy in central province also joined the rally.

The protest was jointly organised by the "State Service Committee to Gain Pay Hike", which consists of 52 state sector trade unions, and the "Alliance for Safeguarding National Assets and Human Rights" (ASNAHR), an alliance of unions and non-government organisations.

Sri Lankan health sector workers launch protest campaigns

Health workers, including hospital attendants, auxiliary employees and labourers, held island-wide protest strikes on March 28. More than 1,500 strikers demonstrated outside the Health Ministry for a pay rise, a 7,000-rupee (\$US70) annual uniform allowance, a 1,000-rupee risk allowance, permanent posts for substitute and casual workers and the resumption of the attendants' training scheme, scrapped by the ministry some time ago. They also protested against government plans to privatise the public health sector.

Workers first raised these demands last December but have received no response from the government. Several health institutions were totally paralysed by the union action.

Dental surgeons fight for permanent jobs in Sri Lanka

On March 21, about 500 dental surgeons and dental students picketed the Health Ministry in Colombo to demand permanent government jobs for 280 recently graduated dental surgeons and a guarantee of government

jobs for the 450 students currently studying for dental degrees.

The picket also called for 150 closed dental clinics throughout the country to be reopened. Some placards read, "There only 800 dental surgeons in the country although there should be 3,000". The Government Dental Surgeons Association, the Dental Faculty Students Union, the Union of Dental Surgeons Expecting Government Posts and the Dental Students Parents Union organised the action.

Mine workers strike over jobs and entitlements

About 90 workers from the former Pasminco-owned Eloura mine in Cobar, New South Wales, began indefinite strike action on March 26 over job security and unpaid entitlements. The mine was sold to Consolidated Broken Hill (CBH) after Pasminco went bankrupt last year with debts of \$3 billion.

Plant employees were forced to take industrial action because CBH had refused to talk, a union spokesperson said. Workers fear the new owners will not pay outstanding accumulated long service leave, annual holiday and sick pay.

A Pasminco smelter at Cockle Creek near Newcastle is being closed this year at the cost of over 100 jobs.

Nurses strike over pay deal

Aged-care nurses in New South Wales held stop-work meetings on March 26 to discuss industrial action for a new wage agreement with private sector nursing home and hostel operators. Management has only offered 4 to 6 percent pay rise, which is 14 percent less than increases recently won by public sector aged-care nurses.

Queensland teachers end industrial action

Queensland's 36,000 teachers have been forced to call off rolling stoppages scheduled for this week. Following a ruling by the Industrial Relations Commission that the dispute go to arbitration, the state Labor government declared the planned strike illegal and the teachers union immediately agreed there would be no action until talks were concluded.

Queensland teachers have taken industrial action since February for an 8 percent pay increase, reduced class sizes and 800 new teachers for state schools.

The state government has made a revised offer of just 330 extra teachers over the next three years but only 130 of these would be fully funded jobs. The offer also moves teachers out of a special reading recovery program and into regular classes, and only provides a 3.5 percent pay increase.

Electricians resume strike action

Electricians in Queensland began a four-day strike on March 25, after talks with employers broke down in the Industrial Relations Commission. They are fighting for a \$22 per hour wage rate. Strikes in February stopped work at five major sites, including Brisbane's Suncorp stadium.

24-hour picket at New Zealand paper mill

Striking Kinleith pulp and paper mill workers have established a 24-hour picket to protest against a lack of settlement on their collective agreement after almost two years. The 270 employees, who walked off the Carter Holt Harvey (CHH)-owned site near Tokoroa three weeks ago, have stationed themselves at the rail-line entrance to the mill. They will allow logs to be taken by rail from the site but plan to stop all pulp and paper products.

CHH sacked almost half the mill's 700-strong workforce earlier this year and is now attempting to impose new work practices. Workers have rejected a management bid to remove overtime payments and demanded an 11 percent pay increase. CHH management has responded by warning that the impasse could lead to the permanent closure of the mill.

New Zealand nurses to seek major pay rises

New Zealand nurses have begun a new campaign for a rise in their basic pay. The NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) claims nurses and midwives employed by the country's 21 District Health Boards are "well behind other professions, other countries and even other health professionals".

The NZNO is preparing for negotiations to renew collective agreements

that expire mid-year in the South Island and Canterbury, regions where major strikes occurred during the last contract round. There is a nationwide shortage of nurses. The NZNO claims the gap between current rates and "fair" rates ranges from \$7,000 to \$19,000, depending on nurses' experiences and their location, but the union is already signalling it does not intend to mount any industrial action.

In a statement issued this week, the NZNO said underpayment of nurses was "structural" and "unlikely to be resolved through the usual process of bargaining". Rather, it will divert any campaign into high-level discussions with the Labour government.

Union urges New Zealand doctors to accept pay offer

Senior doctors at Timaru Hospital have been urged by the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS) to accept a new pay offer. The doctors have held four six-hour rolling strikes since February over failed salary claims.

An ASMS spokesman said the offer includes a review of staffing and resources and improved working conditions, but there was no significant change to remuneration. Doctors will vote on the deal in a postal ballot over the next three weeks.

Fiji council workers stage lightning strike

Over 500 Public Works employees at depots in Lautoka, Rakiraki Tavua and Nadi walked off the job for five hours on March 25 over poor working conditions, non-payment of meal allowances and safety breaches.

Union organiser Poasa Manakiwai said the workers, members of the Public Employees Union, took action after a week of meetings with the Public Service Commission failed to resolve the issues. They returned to work after the Lautoka depot management gave an assurance that their grievances would be addressed soon.

Chinese garment workers stranded in Palau

More than 200 Chinese garment workers are stranded in the Pacific state of Palau after a court-supervised sale of Orientex Palau yielded no cash. Instead, a Chinese liquidation committee trying to recover money for the parent company, Orientex Nanjing, used a portion of its claim to take over the Palau factory, where the Chinese employees worked, on credit.

The garment workers, who are owed back pay, have no money for return fares to China. A former Orientex Palau factory manager, who is also suing the company for lost money, is supporting the stranded garment workers.



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