

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 April 2003

Philippine footwear workers ordered to end strike

SM Shoemart employees in the Philippines are continuing strike action despite threats by Labor Secretary Patricia Sto.Tomas that their action will be declared illegal unless they return to work. The ultimatum was issued on April 2.

SM Shoemart workers went on strike in several locations on March 25 for a 120-peso (\$US2.25) per day wage increase over three years. The company has only offered a 14-peso daily increase for the first three years and 15-peso per day increase for the 4th and 5th years. Other workers plan to join the strikers in a demonstration in Quezon City this week.

Indonesian oil workers to strike

Thousands of oil field workers employed by American mining company PT Caltex Pacific Indonesia (CPI) have threatened to strike over management cuts to rostered days off.

For health reasons, oil workers are allowed five days off for every five working in the field. This has now been cut to two. The union has filed a complaint with the Labor Dispute Settlement rejecting CPI's new policy.

Bank employees strike in Kerala

Federal Bank employees in the south Indian state of Kerala struck on March 31 to demand an end to work outsourcing and company restrictions on the use of temporary staff. The strikers are also want bank management to grant outstanding transfers and recruit new full-time workers to overcome staff shortages.

Many Federal Bank branches in Kerala were affected by the walkout, with workers demonstrating in Kannur, Thalassery, Payyannur and Taliparamba. The strikers are members of the Federal Bank Employees' Union (FBEU), which is affiliated to the All India Bank Employees Association.

Pakistani teachers demand training assistance

Teachers demonstrated outside the Hyderabad press club on April 1 in protest against the non-payment of

training compensation. Compensation payments are stipulated under a government ruling. The teachers threatened to hold similar demonstrations outside the Office of Education if the issue is not settled.

Sri Lankan dental surgeons strike

About 400 dental surgeons employed at health institutions in Sri Lanka's Western Province and the Central Province's Peradeniya dental hospital struck on April 2. They are opposing government plans to replace the surgeons with dental auxiliary staff.

The surgeons are also demanding permanent jobs for the 280 dentists who graduated from the country's Dental Faculty and guaranteed employment for the 450 students currently studying at the faculty. Sri Lankan Health Minister, however, has only agreed to recruit 68 dental surgeons.

The campaign to secure jobs has been ongoing. The Government Dental Surgeons Union (GDSU) called a one-day strike on March 31 at Colombo's Dental Institute and the Dental Hospital in Peradeniya. The union plans an island-wide strike on April 5.

Health sector clerical staff strikes in Sri Lanka

Up to 2,000 government health sector clerks began a two-day island-wide strike on April 3 over a series of demands, including a pay increase and improved increments. On March 28, more than 1,000 clerks picketed the Health Ministry in Colombo as part of the campaign.

Australian Pasma workers strike

About 120 workers at Pasma Eloura mine in western NSW remain on strike after walking off the job last week demanding to know their future. Pasma is in the hands of administrators and may sell the mine, which is located in Cobar, to Consolidated Broken Hill (CBH). The company has refused to reveal when the sale will be finalised or how many workers will be retained.

Cobar residents joined the strikers for a demonstration through the town on April 1. Workers have said they will

remain on strike until the administrators provide concrete answers to their questions.

Victorian firefighters protest outdated rules

Up to 400 firefighters protested in Melbourne on April 1 over disciplinary charges against five colleagues by Metropolitan Fire Brigade. United Firefighters Union (UFU) officials said the men were accused of using private email, refusing to take down an allegedly offensive sign and an altercation between two firefighters.

The UFU says the internal disciplinary rules are “outdated” and “biased” and is using a legal challenge in the Industrial Relations Commission to demand the charges be dropped. According to the union, the workers were charged even though there was no investigation into the accusations.

Food workers meet over rationalisation plan

SPC Ardmona employees attended stop-work meetings on March 28 to discuss job security after the canning company announced plans to shut one of its plants for several months each year. The plants are located in Shepparton and Moorooopa in Victoria.

SPC and Ardmona merged 18 months ago to form one of Australia’s largest food companies. It is using the merger to rationalise operations and cut costs. Under company proposals one plant would work only 14 to 16 weeks each year during the peak fruit season.

A spokesman for the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union food division said the meeting was to develop a strategy to secure jobs “for all union members”. The union, however, has already overseen massive job losses and destruction of working conditions in the food industry over the last 15 years. In 1990 it persuaded workers to accept a wage cut at SPC’s Shepparton plant, claiming it would save jobs.

New Zealand bank workers ratify contract

After three days of negotiations, New Zealand financial sector union Finsec reached a contract settlement with the National Bank. The settlement, which came into effect on April 1, includes a salary increment of 3.5 percent and 3 percent allowance increase.

Management, however, has refused to make any major changes to working conditions and claims that present conditions were “the best in the industry”. Bank workers attending membership meetings prior to negotiations reported a high level of stress due to low staffing levels.

Finsec members voted to accept the contract by 1,176 to 161 votes against. About 53 percent National Bank employees are union members.

New Zealand paper mill strike continues

Striking Kinleith pulp and paper workers protested in Auckland last week as their dispute with mill owner Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) over pay and conditions entered its fourth week.

About 30 mill employees traveled from Tokoroa to picket the company’s South Auckland headquarters and were supported by a number of local workers. The 240 strikers are maintaining a 24-hour picket at the mill. This week Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) delegates agreed “in principle” to call in a mediator over the two-year-old dispute.

A CHH restructuring plan has seen 266 trades and 36 production workers laid off and the transfer of mill maintenance to an outside contractor. The remaining employees are fighting CHH attempts to impose new work practices, including the removal of overtime payments. Production workers are also calling for an 11 percent pay rise. Strikers’ families are being sustained by donations from CHH workers at other company sites.

Solomon Islands teachers strike over back-pay

Solomon Islands National Teachers Association (SINTA) members began an indefinite strike on March 31 to demand the payment of salary arrears. The teachers are owed 10 weeks pay, a total of \$10 million (\$US1.3 million).

SINTA called off a strike scheduled for March 3 after the government paid three weeks salary arrears. It also promised to settle the remainder by March 24 but failed to meet this deadline. SINTA general secretary Fred Tayca has offered to end the strike if the government pays one week’s salary arrears and the week to come.

Tahiti airport strike enters fourth week

Strike action at Tahiti airport over working conditions entered its 20th day on March 27. A union spokesman said that while management had agreed to some of the workers’ demands, the strike would continue until employee demands for retirement benefits was settled. Management rejected workers’ claim for a retirement benefit on March 25 and has refused to negotiate the issue.



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