

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 February 2004

Sri Lanka rail strike enters second week

The indefinite strike by Sri Lankan railway workers that began on January 26 has entered its second week. Strikers are demanding reestablishment of the Railway Department, which was replaced last July by the Railway Authority, a new corporate body. Workers believe the change is a step towards privatisation.

On February 3, more than 1,000 strikers demonstrated at Maradana railway station in Central Colombo and later marched to the nearby Railway Authority headquarters. A similar number of workers also protested in the Colombo suburb of Ratmalana, where a major railway workshop is located.

The rail union claims that 16,000 out of the 17,000-strong workforce have joined the strike. Daily train journeys have been reduced from 320 to 20, despite the government hiring retired rail workers to operate the lines. Union leaders have been forced to continue the strike after failing to convince the government at talks on February 2 to suspend the Railway Authority and revert to the old system for the next two years.

Sri Lankan health unions call off hunger strike

On February 2, the Health Services Trade Unions Alliance (HSTUA) in Sri Lanka called off a hunger strike by 12 union members following a settlement offer by the Ministry of Health. The workers had been on a "fast-to-the-death" protest outside the ministry headquarters in Colombo since January 26. Four of the protestors became seriously ill and doctors had recommended that they be put on saline drips.

The health workers are campaigning for a 44 percent salary increase. While their original demand was for an immediate salary rise and payment as arrears owing since 1997, the ministry has promised to only pay 60 percent of the increase, with the remainder paid in stages by January 2005. Payment of arrears has been ruled out.

Indian doctors demand pay increase and work improvements

Six hundred junior doctors attached to the Patna Medical College and Hospital (PMCH) in the Indian state of Bihar, went on strike on February 2 demanding a salary increase and improved accommodation facilities. Some 500 junior doctors from the Darbhanga Medical College Hospital joined the strike.

Although hospital authorities tried to downplay the strike, it has seriously disrupted services. Surgeon Dr Anil Singh said, "The junior doctors are the backbone of this hospital. Their absence creates a lot of problems, especially during operations." Another surgeon Dr Bijay Kumar added, "All departments will be paralysed without them."

Akhilesh Prasad Singh, Bihar's minister for health, medical education and family welfare, alleged that the striking doctors had not discussed their grievances with the government. He claimed that the doctors' claims had been sent to the state's finance department three

days prior.

Junior Doctors' Association president Dr Gauhar Alam said that the government had never shown any interest in the doctors' problems, even when they staged a two-day hunger protest. "We were never called in for any discussion," he said.

Pakistan court clerks strike in defense of colleague

Lower district court clerks in Hyderabad walked out on January 30 in protest against the detention of Zulfikar Memon, a court record keeper. Senior civil judge Naeem Siddiqui directed Memon to be seized, handcuffed and locked up for allegedly failing to carry out a directive. The judge claimed that he had failed to retrieve the records and proceedings of five cases. Memon claimed to have assigned the task to a subordinate. After court staff took industrial action, another judge ordered Memon's release.

Three charged over murder of Cambodian union leader

Three men have been arrested and charged with the murder of 36-year-old Chea Vichea, leader of Cambodia's 30,000-strong Free Trade Union of Workers. Vichea was shot three times in the head and body at point blank range on a street in Phnom Penh on January 22. According to earlier reports, only two assailants were involved in the killing.

Those arrested are Born Samnang, 23, Sok Sam Oeun, 36, and Men Vatana, 44. Samnang said the police beat him in order to force a confession. Union leaders and Vichea's friends have said that the men were not the real assassins.

Cambodian Independent Teachers Association president described the arrests as "a cheating story" and said: "The real killers have not been arrested yet. The workers are not satisfied with the arrests."

It is yet to be established who ordered the assassination and whether Vichea was targeted for his union activities or his involvement in the country's main opposition Sam Rainsy Party. At least three of the party's members have been assassinated in recent weeks. Sam Rainsy, leader of the opposition party, insisted Vichea "was a target of the current regime", and a spokesman for the Free Trade Union of Workers said the killing was politically motivated.

Australian print workers strike over plant closure

Workers at newspaper group John Fairfax Holdings in Melbourne walked out for 48 hours on February 5 after the company announced that it was planning to close its Spencer Street printing operation by March 12. The closure will destroy 86 printing and maintenance jobs.

The strike, which involved 210 print workers from Spencer Street and the company's Tullamarine plant, will affect the production of the *Age* and a number of other regional newspapers, including the *Dandenong Journal* and *Werribee Banner*.

Fairfax, which announced the closure without any prior discussion with employees or the union, is refusing to relocate Spencer Street

workers to the Tullamarine plant where printers are working 20 to 30 hours of overtime each week. Management has branded the strike “illegal” and threatened legal action.

Schoolteachers oppose lack of government funding

Teachers at the state-run Eltham High School in Melbourne’s northeast held a half-day strike on February 4 in protest against state Labor government’s funding changes. The changes mean that schools like Eltham High, which employs 44 senior teachers and 15 leading teachers, will be unable to pay the higher salaries required to retain them. The school claims that under the new arrangements it will have a budget shortfall of \$102,000.

The school’s principal, who is also an Australian Education Union convener, said that he might have to use parents’ funds or cut back on student programs and classroom resources unless the education department helped to meet costs.

Andrew Blair of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals said he had received reports from about 50 schools struggling to meet salary costs, with some shortfalls as high as \$300,000. “They are either having to beg the department for top-up funding or sign off on a repayable loan when there’s no certainty about what their funding will be next year,” he said.

Miners walk out as negotiations stall

More than 200 workers at Wesfarmers Premier coal mine in southwest Western Australia remain on strike after walking off the job on February 3 after negotiations stalled on a new workplace agreement. Employees rejected an Industrial Relations Commission recommendation on February 4 to return to work.

A union spokesman said that the company was refusing to negotiate in “good faith” and continues to reject the union’s proposals and options. He did not specify the issues involved.

New Zealand nurses to strike

More than 4,000 nurses across New Zealand’s North Island will strike for four hours on February 13. The NZ Nurses Organisation served strike notices on seven district health boards (DHBs) last week after protracted pay negotiations broke down.

The nurses, midwives and health assistants from Taranaki, Hutt Valley, Whanganui, Wairarapa, MidCentral, Hawke’s Bay and Capital and Coast DHBs want pay increases of between 9 and 15 percent to give them pay parity with Auckland nurses.

They are also objecting to an employer demand for a two-year gap between pay rises, which would mean that nurses’ salaries in the region will fall even further behind. A NZ Nurses Organisation spokesperson said that talks were due to resume this week and the strike would be called off if the union received assurances that the Auckland rates will be paid sometime this year.

Some 20,000 nurses employed under a series of collective regional contracts are also expected to begin campaigning for a national collective agreement. They have signaled they are prepared to take industrial action. Meanwhile, talks on a national collective contract for senior doctors, which started late last year, have stalled.

New Zealand metals agreement ratified

The Engineering, Printing, and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) announced this week that the major manufacturing agreement in New Zealand has been ratified. “The Metals”, as the agreement is known, is the largest private-sector industrial agreement, covering more than 2,000 workers at about 214 companies. Some 92 percent of workers covered by the agreement voted to accept a three percent pay rise. The agreement sets a benchmark that will be foisted on other general manufacturing industry workers.

The agreement falls way short of the original log of claims endorsed by workers over a year ago at mass meetings. It was based on demands for a five percent pay increase and improved leave and working conditions. The EPMU’s national “campaign” consisted of negotiations between union officials and key employers. No industrial action was called.

PNG teachers protest over non-payment of wages

Protesting casual teachers in Papua New Guinea’s Southern Highlands forced the closure of the provincial education office last week. Angry teachers stopped staff entering the building during the demonstration, which was called because they have not been paid for several months and are still waiting payment for travel allowances.

PNG nurses stone union officials

Port Moresby nurses walked off the job and stormed National Nurses Association offices on January 28 over ongoing delays in back pay and inaction by their union. The back pay has owed since 2000. When union officials told the angry nurses that there had been no progress made on the issue, they were pelted with stones and forced to retreat into their offices.

After the incident National Nurses Association president Susan Haroe told the *Post Courier* that the union had now given the Health Department 14 working days to show progress on the issue or there would be strike action.

Fiji Labour Minister intervenes to stop national strike threat

Unions have dropped the threat of national strike action by over 3,000 public servants after Fiji’s Labour Minister Kenneth Zinck referred the dispute to arbitration, thereby making industrial action illegal. Zinck intervened after last minute talks between the Fiji Public Service Association (FPSA) and the Public Service Commission over demands for a four percent increase in the cost-of-living allowance (COLA) became deadlocked.

Over 97 percent of FPSA members approved a national stoppage in a secret ballot last week. Two other unions, the Fiji Teachers Union and the Fiji Nurses Association, are holding ballots for a strike proposal on the same issue and had been expected to join the FPSA’s action.

Solomon Island teachers strike over non-payment of award

Solomon Islands National Teachers Association (SINTA) members in Malaita have refused to resume duty after the Christmas holiday break. The teachers are protesting over the non-payment of travel allowances and other employment entitlements over the past 10 years.

Provincial Education Minister said that he “sympathised” with the teachers but gave no assurances that their demands would be met and urged them to return to work. SINTA branch chairman Jeffry Liju accused the provincial government of misappropriating provincial service grants.



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