

Workers Struggles: Australia, Asia and the Pacific

28 February 2004

Millions of Indian workers defy Supreme Court ruling

Over 50 million workers throughout India struck for one day on February 24 calling for an end to the government's privatisation program and demanding that the Supreme Court withdraw a ruling outlawing strikes.

Numbers of government sector workers, including those in transport, ports, oil, mining, plantations, education and IT, joined the strike. More than 90 percent of the country's 1.5 million financial sector employees also participated, as did thousands of workers from non-union sectors, such as construction. Daily services and operations stopped in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura states while Assam, Haryana, Orissa and Jharkhand were also close to paralysed. Workers staged mass demonstrations in many places and there were reports of police attacks on protestors and large-scale arrests in Delhi, Haryana, Orissa and Pondicherry.

India's highest court banned the right to strike for government employees last August on the grounds that industrial action inconvenienced citizens and set back the economy. The court decision followed a strike by 1.2 million state workers in Tamil Nadu last July. Up to 200,000 state workers were sacked and over 5,000 were charged with violence and destruction of public property during the Tamil Nadu strike.

Pakistani teachers protest anti-worker policies

Hundreds of government teachers in Pakistan's Sindh province boycotted classes and demonstrated on February 24 against the education ministry's refusal to negotiate a log-of-claims.

Sukkur district teachers staged a sit-down protest outside the press club, while in Larkana they rallied in front of the district council hall. There were also protests by teachers in Dadu, Khairpur, Mirpurkhas and Naushahro Feroze districts. A union spokesman told a rally outside the Hyderabad press club that if teachers' demands were not met they would disrupt secondary school certificate examinations.

The teachers' demands include an end to contract hiring, repeal of a new insurance policy, which increases the cost for workers, and restoration of a quota for the employment of teachers' children.

Indonesian civil servants demand dismissal of regent

Hundreds of civil servants rallied in Bangkinang on February 24 to demand that the central government in Jakarta uphold a Riau province decision to dismiss regent Jefri Noer and his deputy A. Zakir.

Teachers went on strike last week after Noer expelled Air Tiris High School principal Abdul Latif from an education conference on February 5. Latif was ejected from the meeting after he criticised the regency for only spending 5 percent of the local government budget on education, instead of the 20 percent stipulated in the country's constitution.

Teachers returned to work after the Riau province regency council

voted on February 21 to remove Noer and Zakir. According to Indonesia's regional autonomy laws, however, the home minister representing President Megawati Soekarnoputri must endorse the decision. To date, the central government has only agreed to investigate the issue.

Indonesian workers demand reinstatement

Several thousand workers sacked from aircraft manufacturer PT Dirgantara Indonesia clashed with 400 police when they attempted to force their way into the factory compound at the Husein Satranegara Air Force base in Bandung on February 24.

The protestors are among 6,000 workers who were suspended and then dismissed by the company last year. Workers have challenged the sackings through lawsuits and mass protests. Earlier this month, Bandung District Court ruled in favor of a union lawsuit and ordered the company to reinstate employees.

Despite the court ruling, the Air Force base deputy chief and the West Bandung police deputy chief have refused union demands that the workers be allowed to enter the factory.

Transport strikes escalate in the Philippines

Iloilo City in the Philippines was brought to a standstill for two days this week when 30 public transport groups covering 90 percent of the city's drivers and operators went on strike over increased oil prices and other local issues. The Iloilo City branch of Pinag-isang Samahan ng mga Tsuper and Operators Nationwide (Piston) initiated the strike. Piston is calling for the scrapping of the Oil Deregulation Law and for an oil price rollback. Other driver groups want a fare increase to compensate for fuel price rises.

On February 23 and 24, Angeles City was partially paralysed when 6,000 members of the public transport group Pasada went on strike and demonstrated outside government offices. Thirteen hundred Piston members supported the strike and refused to work the Mabalacat-Angeles route. The drivers and operators are seeking a one-peso fare increase and cuts in fuel prices. The current minimum fare of four pesos was set in 1998 when diesel cost 14 pesos per litre. Today a litre of diesel is 18.30 pesos.

Thai workers continue protests over privatisation

Thousands of workers from the state-owned Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) demonstrated outside the company's headquarters on February 24 in protest against government plans to begin privatising the power industry. Workers attending EGAT's annual general meeting passed a resolution demanding the government cease all moves to further privatise state industries.

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra plans to retain 75 percent of EGAT, with the remainder listed on the stock market by March 12. EGAT has assets worth 300 billion baht (\$US7.7 billion). Energy Minister Prommin Lertsuridej said last year that he expected to raise

around 70 billion baht (\$1.8 billion) from the sale.

The government appears determined to push ahead with its privatisation agenda. Airports of Thailand is due to be listed in days, with share sales expected to raise about 17 billion baht. In 2001, the oil and gas giant PTT PCL was traded on the market.

Hong Kong sports board workers protest redundancies

Sports Development Board staff demonstrated in Sha Tin, Hong Kong this week. The one-hour sit-in by about 170 workers outside head office was part of a campaign against company restructuring and impending sackings. One week earlier employees held a rally and burnt letters announcing the restructuring plan.

The current redundancy package provides for one month's salary for every two years of service—far below that paid by other companies to redundant senior staff.

Malaysian hotel workers protest for new agreement

Hospitality workers employed by the Malaysian hotel-casino operator Genting Highland Resort picketed the hotel between February 13 and 15. The Resorts World Employees Union members were protesting against management's refusal to negotiate a new workplace agreement.

Employees want long outstanding health and safety issues added to the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA). They are also demanding extension of the retirement age, improvements in maternity leave, bonus increases and a 10- to 12-percent pay rise. Management is offering only 2 to 3 percent.

Victorian power union lifts bans on maintenance

Talks between Victorian power industry unions and six energy companies resumed on February 24 over a new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement after the unions agreed to lift work bans. Union bans on maintenance and repair last week rapidly resulted in blackouts, affecting many businesses and homes in Melbourne.

Premier Steve Bracks threatened to invoke the Essential Services Act and make further industrial action illegal. His intervention was to guarantee electricity to large manufacturing companies and ensure that there would be no disruption to next week's Grand Prix.

The workers are demanding an agreement that includes a 36-hour week, 15-percent wage rise over three years, more apprentices and trainees, and a reduction in outsourcing.

Striking printers ordered back to work

The Supreme Court ordered striking printers employed at the *Age* newspaper in Melbourne to suspend all industrial action on February 25. The new order follows a previous directive that failed to stop workers picketing the company's Tullamarine plant.

The strike began on February 21, following announcements that the company planned to close its Spencer Street plant and axe 86 jobs. The industrial action partially stopped delivery of the newspaper's Saturday edition.

The workers, members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), claim that the company has breached an agreement not to sack any workers during the life of the current workplace agreement. An AMWU spokesperson said that the *Age* had broken an "iron clad" deal not to make forced redundancies while the three-year agreement was in force.

Sydney ferry workers strike over sacking

Sydney State Transit ferry workers called a snap strike on February 23 over the sacking of a colleague. After holding a protest rally at Circular Quay, 100 strikers marched to Sydney Ferries main office in Pitt Street.

A Sydney Ferries spokesman claimed that the worker was sacked

because "his record... was not compatible with the expected standard". However, the Maritime Union of Australia said the employee was fired for swapping shift rosters, a common practice at the company, and maintained that the dismissal "was completely unjustified."

The union called off the strike after an emergency Industrial Relations Commission ruled that the industrial action was "unauthorised" and ordered a return to work.

South Australian public servants vote for one-day walkout

South Australian public servants held a mass rally on February 25 and voted to strike for one day next month after rejecting the state government's latest wage offer as inadequate.

If the action goes ahead, it will be the first combined strike by South Australian state employees in 20 years. A union spokesman said that all government services would be closed during the stoppage, with only emergency staff in government buildings. The state Labor government approached the Industrial Relations Commission this week to stop prison staff joining the planned action.

New Zealand meat processing workers strike

A group of wool-pullers at the South Island meat-processing company PPCS Finegand held a two-day strike last week to demand improved working conditions and pay parity with their counterparts at other PPCS plants. It was the second strike action by the nine workers who had walked out for three days the week before. The strike came after negotiations between NZ Meat Workers Union officials and PPCS management failed.

A spokesman for the workers said that the Finegand plant manager had sent two letters to the union saying that its claims were "beyond what the company believes it can afford". Workers have demanded the company "open its books" and reveal its real financial position.

The Meat Workers Union has been negotiating with management for 15 months and has not ruled out strikes at other PPCS plants. The union, however, has also indicated that it is prepared to go to arbitration, a move that the company has so far rejected.

PNG nurses union take legal action over award

The Papua New Guinea Nurses Association (PNGNA), representing over 5,000 nurses, has begun legal action to force the Department of Health and the Department of Personnel Management to begin paying the terms of an award that it signed in January 2000. The action was lodged in the Waigani National Court on February 18 and court summons were delivered to department heads the following day.

The 2000 Nurses Award includes overtime claims and shift allowances, together with the reclassification of all nurses' positions. After filing the action, PNGNA president Murray Paiva directed union members at the Mobilon General Hospital to end industrial bans and return to normal shift work. Implementation of the award would cost the PNG government \$US8.8 million.



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