

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 March 2004

Sri Lankan electricity workers demand pay increases

Workers at the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) across Sri Lanka went on strike for 10 hours on March 18 over several demands. These included the payment of five salary increments, an across-the-board allowance of 1,200 rupees and the abolition of salary anomalies. All CEB employees, except executive grades, participated in the action.

The walkout took place after talks broke down between union leaders and CEB and Finance Ministry officials. Government officials justified their refusal to grant the demands on the grounds that the present caretaker government could not approve the salary hike as it could be seen as a “bribe” in violation of election laws. General elections are due on April 2.

University staff strike across Sri Lanka

Non-academic staff at all Sri Lankan universities went on strike on March 17 to oppose the suspension of a temporary allowance. About 1,000 strikers travelled to Colombo to picket in front of the University Grants Commission premises. The allowance, which gave primary grade employees an extra 1,150 rupees (\$US11.70) a month and higher grades an extra 1,000 rupees (\$10.25), was suspended this month.

A clerk from the Indigenous Medical Institute in Yakkala, east of Colombo, told the WWSW his entire salary was only 5,000 rupees a month and the allowance was essential to his living standards.

Indian doctors and medical teachers on indefinite strike

Doctors and teaching staff at the Mahadevappa Rampure Medical College at Gulbarga, in India’s southern state of Karnataka, went on indefinite strike on March 17. A hunger strike is taking place on the college premises.

The doctors accuse the college management of not paying gratuities, provident funds and other allowances. The doctors maintain the emergency and casualty services at the Basaveshwar Teaching and General Hospital and the Government General Hospital. The strike has not affected ongoing examinations at the college.

Indonesian electrical workers demonstrate over wages

Over 1,600 striking workers employed by PT Foster Electric Indonesia on the island of Batam, in Indonesia’s Riau province, demonstrated on March 18 in support of a pay increase. The workers are paid only 500,000 rupiah (\$US58.80) a month, well below the minimum wage of 602,000 per month set by the

Batam authorities.

The protesters are demanding a transportation, food and housing allowance as recommended under the country’s Manpower Law. Female workers are also supposed to receive two days leave each month for menstruation.

One protester said the workers had informed the company in February of their demands “but had not received a satisfactory response”. She said the current wages were not enough to meet daily expenses and most workers had to borrow money to pay for basic needs.

Indonesian airline workers demand dismissal of director

Pilots and flight attendants at Riau Airlines in Indonesia struck on March 16 to demand the removal of company director Captain Yunus Hachri over charges of corruption. The airline, which operates two Fokker 50 aircraft on a number of routes around Sumatra, as well as a charter flight service, is majority-owned by the Riau provincial government.

The union representing the airline’s staff claims it has evidence of a transfer of one billion rupiah (\$US117,900) of company money to the director’s personal bank account.

A delegation of 11 pilots and 12 female flight attendants representing all 54 full-time workers, met with Riau provincial governor Rusli Zainal this week. Zainal would not commit to immediately dismissing Hachri and called on workers to resume duties while “proper procedures” were initiated, including an extraordinary shareholders meeting.

ABC staff strike over axing of local programs

More than 100 Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) staff in Victoria and South Australia struck for 24 hours on March 16 over management’s decision to cut nightly state-based sports news reports. They will be replaced by national coverage from Sydney.

The workers, members of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, rallied outside the ABC’s head office in Melbourne. The strike disrupted news and current affairs bulletins on television and radio in South Australia and Victoria throughout the day.

ABC management obtained an Industrial Relations Commission order forcing the workers back to work on the grounds that the strike was illegal under the current work agreement.

Subcontractors strike for improved pay

Subcontractors installing Foxtel's new digital network in Australia's major centres are on strike for improved pay rates. The installers, members of the Electrical Trades Union, have stopped work for a week in Perth, while those in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane are on strike for 48 hours. Industrial action will continue until March 22.

Foxtel contracted the work of installing set-top-boxes on televisions and the provision of a telephone line for digital reception to company ABB, which then subcontracted out the work. The subcontractors are paid only \$30 for each installation, out of which they pay for cable and sockets, as well as covering their own insurance and travel.

The union claims that subcontractors are running close to a loss and is demanding they be paid a minimum of \$80 for each installation. An ETU spokesman said the company is refusing to negotiate.

Charity workers reject cuts to conditions

About 200 crisis workers employed by the Smith Family charity across Australia have rejected a new work contract that will cut take home pay. The organisation has given the workers 14 days to sign the proposed agreement, which gives a 3 percent pay increase but removes overtime, weekend and public holiday penalty rates, leave loading and access to annual safety net pay increases.

The Australian Services Union has accused the charity of "cashing in" on the dedication of its workers. The union has called on supporters of the charity to withhold donations in support of the workers.

NZ manufacturing workers stop work over contract

Hundreds of New Zealand manufacturing workers stopped work this week to attend meetings over the Metals and Manufacturing Industries Collective Agreement. The meetings were called by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) to protest the employers' refusal to settle the contract, which directly affects 2,500 workers in 200 companies.

Major meetings took place in Auckland, Hamilton and Christchurch, with site meetings held elsewhere around the country. The claims for the "Metals" contract, endorsed at mass meetings earlier this year, include a 5 percent pay rise, improved sick and bereavement leave, 15-minute tea breaks (up from 10 minutes), a 37.5-hour basic work week, tool insurance and better health and safety provisions.

The EPMU hierarchy is increasingly nervous over the stalled negotiations. EPMU national secretary Andrew Little complained this week: "For 12 years we've been able to settle the Metals in a straightforward way". This time, despite the claims being "very modest", the employers were refusing to settle.

Air New Zealand maintenance staff to strike

Air New Zealand faces an eight-day strike by 1,200 engineers at its Auckland and Christchurch maintenance bases, in a dispute over shift work. After a vote by workers, the

Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union notified the airline of an overtime ban from March 30, followed by strike action from April 5

The engineers are refusing to accept plans to cut their shift-work pay and drastically change their working hours. Negotiations, which began four months ago, broke down last week. The company is demanding the right to direct workers who had been hired to work permanent day work to do shift hours, and vice versa. It also wants to cut pay.

A union spokesman expressed hope that the overtime ban would "convince the company to get back to the negotiating table" before the strike was due to start.

Death and injuries at NZ meat works under investigation

One worker is dead and three other have been injured in a spate of accidents at the Oringi meat works in Hawke's Bay. Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) officials are investigating four accidents at the plant in the past three weeks.

On February 25, cleaner Kirihiro Chase died in hospital from injuries she sustained when her neck scarf snared in a conveyor belt in a carton room. In two separate incidents during the first week of March, a cleaner's hand was crushed after her arm was caught in a conveyor belt, while a worker on the meat chain severed one of his fingers. On March 12, a worker suffered a head injury with concussion.

A Meat Workers Union spokesman said cost-cutting across the meat industry had led to health and safety being "put on the back burner". Less supervision and training for workers had resulted in a growing number of workplace accidents. The Oringi plant was a major "recidivist offender", he claimed.

OSH has said it has "serious concerns" about safety at the Oringi plant. The plant's owner, Richmond, has been prosecuted by OSH for safety breaches six times in the past decade, including three charges of failing to provide adequate training and supervision.



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