

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 March 2004

Thai government backs off power privatisation

Thailand Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has backed away from moves to privatise a large portion of the country's state-owned power industry. The cabinet decision was made on March 3, after 50,000 power workers and supporters protested outside the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (Egat) headquarters. The massive turnout was one of a series of demonstrations over the past weeks.

Under the plan, Egat was to sell a 24.93 percent stake in Electricity Generating Plc (Egco) to the private firm Banpu, and a 0.48 percent stake to another private concern, CLP Power Projects. Egat would then buy a 14.99 percent stake in Ratchaburi Electricity Generating Holding Plc from Banpu.

Government spokesman Jakrapob Penkair told the media that, "Egat executives have had a serious problem in communicating the deal with the employees". Workers believe privatisation will lead to job losses and the loss of benefits.

Korean management sacks workers by text message

KEB Credits Services, South Korea's third-largest credit card issuer, sacked a quarter of its unionised workforce via mobile phone text messages on February 27. The 166 workers were given until the following day to apply for voluntary retirement packages.

The sackings came after negotiations between the company and the finance union broke down. Union members, who make up 90 percent of the company's workforce, have been on strike since mid-December last year. They are opposing the company's takeover by the Korea Exchange Bank (KEB) because it will lead to further job losses. About 266 jobs have been targeted, with about 100 of these already shed through "voluntary redundancies".

About 300 workers were protesting outside KEB Credit's headquarters in Seoul when the text messages were sent.

Philippines government moves to end transport strikes

Public transport operators and drivers throughout the Philippines are continuing rolling strikes as part of the campaign for a reduction in fuel prices and an increase in the minimum fare from 4 pesos to 5.50 pesos. On March 1, thousands of drivers struck in Manila and a number of regional areas, including Mindanao.

Attempting to calm the situation, Philippines President Arroyo assured public utility vehicle groups this week that their grievances had been noted and that dialogue would continue. She promised an extension of the sale of discounted diesel to selected provincial gasoline stations and a six-month suspension of tariffs on vehicle spare parts. Proposals for a temporary one-peso fare increase were ruled out.

Arroyo, however, has also ordered the Department of Transportation and Communications to "take appropriate action" to break strikes. Police are being mobilised in force against pickets and the government is using military trucks, buses and mass-transit trains to move stranded passengers. The fares on light transit rail to Quezon City will also be suspended.

Indian auto workers evict management

Angered by management's refusal to pay overdue salaries, workers at

the Hindustan Motors (HM) plant at Hooghly in India clashed with about 700 managerial staff and pushed them out of the factory. A spokesman for the Sangrami Sramik Karmachari Union (SSKU) declared the management would not be allowed to return until the outstanding wages are paid.

The workers are infuriated the company because failed to fulfill a promise made in January to pay off all outstanding wages in regular installments by March 1, if workers kept production above 1,300 units per month. While employees agreed to maintain these production targets, on March 3 management announced that it would not make the promised payment. The 6,500 employees at HM have endured irregular or non-payment of salaries for more than a year.

Indian casual workers protest police assault

Daily-wage workers for Gulbarga Municipalities in Karnataka state held a sit-in protest (dharna) outside government offices on March 3 against a police attack on a peaceful procession of 50 workers a day earlier. The unprovoked attack occurred when employees marched to a council meeting to present a petition demanding payment of four months' salaries. Police arrested two workers. Protesting employees have now begun hunger strikes.

Sri Lankan health workers demand new salary scale

Around 8,000 health workers from 150 health institutions in Sri Lanka's Western Province went on a sick-note campaign on March 3 to demand implementation of new salary scales offered last month by the health ministry.

According to the Health Services Trade Union Alliance (HSTUA), the Western, Southern and Sabaragamuwa provincial councils blocked publication of a government circular recommending health services implement the salary amendments. The HSTUA has threatened indefinite strike action if the issue is not resolved by next week.

Health workers in the Southern province have also threatened to strike. Workers in Sabaragamuwa held a two-day sick-note campaign on February 23 and 24 and picketed the provincial health ministry on February 26.

Sri Lankan public administrative officers demand salary increase

Sri Lanka Administrative Service officers picketed the public administration ministry on March 3 to demand immediate implementation of a new salary structure. The picket was organised by the Sri Lanka Administrative Service Association.

The current caretaker government claims it cannot make the decision to spend the 210 million rupees required to fund the salary increase. President Chandrika Kumaratunga dismissed the previous United National Front government on February 7.

Victorian teachers strike over pay

Thousands of Victorian public school teachers were joined by teachers from the Catholic school system in the first-ever coordinated 24-hour teachers strike over salaries on March 3. About 22,000 members of the Australian Education Union (AEU) and 9,000 from the Victorian Independent Education Union (VIEU) were involved in the walkout. After

separate mass meetings in Melbourne, the state capital, the two groups held a protest rally outside state parliament.

AEU members want a 30 percent wage increase over three years but the state Labor government has only offered 9 percent, with 7.75 percent tied to productivity increases. Catholic teachers are demanding wage parity with their government school counterparts.

The AEU mass meeting voted for a series of half-day rolling regional stoppages in seven weeks time, if agreement with the government is not reached. Teachers at the VIEU meeting left open the possibility of further action.

Victorian nurses consider industrial action

Around 2,000 nursing union delegates met on March 2 in Melbourne to discuss opposition to the state government's plans to replace one-to-four nurse-to-patient ratios with "patient dependency systems". The delegates, who represent more than 26,000 Victorian members of the Australian Nurses Federation (ANF), have given the government one month to change its plans or face widespread industrial action.

ANF spokesperson Lisa Fitzpatrick told the meeting that the "patient dependency system", which relies on computer models to place nurses in wards or hospitals on demand, had been tried in Victoria and had failed. "Patient dependency models are about reducing money to hospitals. They mean less nursing hours and less time for you to offer care to the community," she said.

Labor Premier Steve Bracks, however, is counting on the ANF leadership to use the month's grace to divert nurses away from striking. He praised the ANF this week, declaring that nurses, unlike teachers, were taking a responsible approach to negotiations. "Lisa Fitzpatrick has made it clear that she wants to negotiate through these issues and will only use strikes as a last resort," he said.

Adelaide hospital orderlies demand staff increase

Contract orderlies at the Royal Adelaide Hospital in South Australia imposed work bans this week to demand an increase in staff. This includes bans on routine jobs such as ambulance pick-ups and drop-offs. A spokesman for the orderlies said that the industrial action was designed to avoid inconvenience to patients, while impacting on their employer, labour contractor Tempo.

Tempo is refusing to hire more staff, despite a recent time and motion study that shows seven additional workers are needed.

A spokesman for South Australia's health minister said this week that the dispute was between the private company and its employees but confirmed that the Labor government could intervene if the dispute impacted on patient care.

Australian port workers strike for improvements

Around 130 workers at Port Waratah Coal Services returned to work on March 1 after walking off the job three days earlier. The strike brought the Koorogang and Carrington coal terminals to a standstill. Employees went on strike because management refused to allow a union representative into the port terminal to discuss workers' grievances.

Workers want superannuation and other entitlements provided for casual staff. They also claim that mismanagement is preventing the efficient loading of coal ships and that major coal companies want to take over the operation. The strike ended after management claimed it was illegal and took the dispute to the Industrial Relations Commission.

New Zealand metal workers stop over pay

Some 2,000 workers employed by New Zealand metal shops are taking industrial action after a breakdown in negotiations for renewal of the key metals multi-employer agreement. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) began a round of stop-work meetings on March 1 at the 43 companies which were parties to the failed talks. The workers have announced 14 days' notice of further strike meetings.

Negotiations began last week on claims for a 5 percent pay rise, a 37.5-hour basic working week and longer tea breaks. The union rejected

an employer offer to "meet halfway" on pay but give no concessions on working hours. The wage offer was below average private-sector wage rises, which are running at 2.8 percent.

The metals agreement is the largest multi-employer document in the private sector. It directly covers more than 2,000 workers at 200 firms, and sets a benchmark for the pay and conditions of thousands of other workers. The EPMU has bureaucratically managed the bargaining process over the past 10 years, usually settling below par without any strike action.

New Zealand nurses reject pay settlement

Some 4,000 nurses, midwives and health assistants from New Zealand's seven lower North Island health boards have overwhelmingly rejected a pay settlement negotiated three weeks ago by the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO). A planned four-hour strike had been put on hold while the workers considered the offer. Its rejection now puts strike action back on the agenda.

The NZNO will return to negotiations next week in an attempt to avoid industrial action. The main sticking point is that staff do not believe the proposal, intended to bring the nurses' salaries into line with those paid to colleagues in Auckland, deals with all groups of health workers in a fair and even manner.

New Zealand university staff vote to strike

Staff at six universities in New Zealand voted last week in support of industrial action. Academic staff are demanding pay rises of 30 percent over the next three years. General staff are seeking a 10-percent increase this year, with increases to match the rate of inflation over the following two years. The Association of University Staff (AUS) is attempting to negotiate the first national collective agreement across the seven universities.

The AUS recommended the rejection of university pay offers ranging between 2 and 2.8 percent. However, union plans at this stage are only for a "low-level" industrial campaign in mid-March. Nationwide strikes are promised if "initial tactics" fail to "make an impression on university management".

AUS members at Lincoln, Auckland, Waikato, Massey, Victoria and Otago voted overwhelmingly in favour of action while staff at Canterbury University are still to meet.

Cleaner dies after accident at New Zealand freezing works

A cleaner who suffered serious neck injuries when her scarf became caught in machinery at a Tararua freezing works died in Palmerston North hospital this week. The 42-year-old woman was a member of the cleaning crew at the Richmond freezing works at Oringi. Police and Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) are investigating the accident. The woman had been cleaning under a conveyor belt. The plant was closed temporarily until it was cleared by OSH to allow a resumption of work.

PNG Nursing school staff continue sit-in

Lae School of Nursing in Papua New Guinea (PNG) staff are holding a sit-in strike to demand the school be amalgamated with the nearby University of Technology. Classes for student nurses are presently unsupervised. The 12 staff members, including principal Braka Jekis, are appealing to Health Secretary Nicholas Mann and Unitech officials to take immediate action on the issue.

The amalgamation is needed to overcome overcrowding and the lack of appropriate equipment and facilities to teach new diploma level qualifications. Most of the school's buildings have been abandoned because of termite infestation.

Official ratification of an agreement to amalgamate the school and college has been deferred four times by the government.



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