

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Asia

Thai airline workers rally against restructure

More than 300 Thai Airways (THAI) employees rallied outside the company's Bangkok headquarters this week to protest the government's decision to turnover four key routes to Thai AirAsia. Thai AirAsia is half-owned by Shin Corp, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's family company.

THAI workers were also opposing the airline's recent decision to use Siam Rachathanee Co Ltd to recruit 509 casual staff on its behalf. A THAI director declared that, "outsourcing helps us cut costs".

The workers are also demanding to know why a pay rise already approved by Cabinet has not yet been authorised by the airline.

Rail workers strike for pay increase

More than 8,000 railway workers in Sri Lanka went on strike over an eight-point log of claims on February 20. Engine and shunting drivers, technologists and their assistants, shunters, pointsmen and signalers were involved. The main demands are for a 2,500-rupee wage increase promised in the government's budget and payment of three increments already due to railway workers.

The strike halted almost all the 362 daily services across the country, including the Colombo to Matara line, which was previously put out of service by the tsunami. Sri Lankan rail workers had repaired the tsunami-damaged tracks within 58 days. The strike ended on February 22, after the transport minister promised to meet the pay increase and the increments.

The rail workers are members of the All Ceylon Railway Employees' General Union, which is affiliated to the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna), the second largest partner in the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance. The JVP condemned the strike as "baseless and pointless".

Hunger strikers denied water by police cordon

More than 300 laid off health workers in Sri Lanka's Central province began a sit-down hunger strike outside the health ministry in Kandy on February 16 to demand reinstatement. Six workers climbed to the roof of the ministry on February 18 and began a fast-until-death campaign. Their condition rapidly worsened after the police cordoned off the premises and prevented hunger strike supporters providing the protestors with water. The sacked workers were recruited on a contract basis by the former government.

Indian port workers threaten strike

A go-slow begun some two weeks ago by Chennai Container Terminal Limited (CCTL) employees is still in progress. The action began when terminal management suspended four workers, including the president and general secretary of the CCTL Employees Union. Workers are now threatening to strike from February 27 over unfair labour practices.

The union officials and workers were sacked for "disrupting a management meeting" when they tried to meet with the employer after their port entry passes had been withdrawn. The withdrawal of the passes was aimed at disrupting union activities at the port.

Addressing a Chennai news conference on February 18, a union spokesman said the decision to strike was made after management took an "adamant stand" and refused to lift the suspensions. The terminal, which was privatised in August 2001, is managed by P&O Ports (Australia). There have been about six strikes over the past six months.

Salt workers strike for cost-of-living increase

About 750 salt-industry workers in Tuticorin in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu went on strike on February 22 for a pay rise. Their current salaries do not meet the basic cost of living index.

Tuticorin salt workers suffer many occupational illnesses and disabilities, including sight impairment and blindness caused by sun reflection on the salt crystals. They are also afflicted with painful skin ulcers and stomach problems. Because the salt pans are only open for eight months a year many workers have to borrow money from local moneylenders to survive and are charged 10 percent interest per month.

Indian communication workers demand pay and promotions

Executive-level employees at the state-owned telecommunications company Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) launched a nationwide protest on February 22 over the non-implementation of pay scales and promotions already agreed to by the company.

BSNL executive employees at Kochi, in the south Indian state of Kerala, protested outside a senior manager's office. Speakers at the rally said that promotions promised in 2000 had not been implemented. Around 300 BSNL executives demonstrated in front of the BSNL office in Salem, Tamil Nadu. Further protests are planned for March 5.

Australia and New Zealand

Plastics workers fight for entitlements

Families and supporters of 110 workers from ABM Plastics continue to picket the company's Braeside plant, 26 kilometres

southeast of Melbourne. Employees went on strike three weeks ago after the company was placed in receivership owing an estimated \$2.7 million in holiday pay, long-service leave, superannuation and redundancy pay.

Workers blocked the removal of equipment until the Federal Court ordered them to end the protest. Police are now expected to break up the current picket. Much of ABM's assets have already been sold off to other companies, such as Acor Fibre Packaging. The receiver Grant Thomson told the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union that the company's owner, Abe Waisman, had sold the buildings and land at Braeside some time ago for \$30 million.

ABM's accountant Martin Cox has confirmed that the company owed about \$10.5 million to GE Finance and had other smaller debts. Waisman, who is a director or secretary of more than 10 other companies, is reportedly financing another plastics venture to be named ABM Sealpak across the road from the old plant.

Bus drivers demand continuity of employment

About 600 bus drivers at Serco went on strike last weekend because the company has not renewed any contracts in the Adelaide metropolitan area. Rival bus companies, Torrens Transit and SouthLink, will be taking over the bus routes in April.

The SERCO drivers are demanding guaranteed continuity of employment after South Australia's Transport Minister Trish White said that they would have to apply for jobs with the new companies. A union spokesman condemned White for her "ham-fisted attitude" saying that SERCO drivers demand to know "that their jobs are not at risk".

Torrens Transit managing director Neil Smith will begin meeting Serco employees next week but would only say: "It's highly likely most of the people there will be offered a job, either with ourselves or SouthLink."

Union rushes to end shipbuilding strike

Some 200 Australian Workers Union (AWU) members at the Australian Submarine Corporation in Adelaide, South Australia walked off the job on February 21. The strike, which was not authorised by the AWU, erupted when management hired a storeman without first offering the position internally.

The strike ended on February 23, after the union convened a meeting and pushed through a return-to-work recommendation. AWU state secretary Wayne Hanson later admitted that the meeting was "spirited" and the union's recommendation was only accepted after "some protracted debate".

Workers at refinery site walkout

About 450 maintenance sub contractors on the Worsley Aluminium refinery site in Collie, in Western Australia's south, have been on strike for three weeks. They want equal pay rates with construction workers, an increase of approximately \$200 a week.

Contractors have threatened the workers that they could face individual fines of up to \$2,000 for breaching the on-site maintenance agreement. Giant mineral resources company BHP Billiton owns the site.

About 150 strikers and their families have been campaigning in the nearby town of Bunbury, distributing leaflets to win support. On February 17, BHP Billiton announced that its first-half year

profit had doubled to a record \$2.8 billion.

University student union employees strike over pay

Staff at the Otago University Students' Association (OUSA) in New Zealand took industrial action—including a strike—during Orientation activities this week, following the breakdown of pay negotiations.

OUSA is currently offering staff a 3.5 percent pay increase for two years from January 2004 to January 2006, with a further cost of living increase from January 2006. The workers have rejected the offer saying that it fails to adequately meet cost of living increases or compensate for significantly increased workloads due to burgeoning student enrolments.

The Association of University Staff (AUS) is claiming a 3.5 percent pay increase from January 2004 with a further 3.2 percent from January 2005. An AUS spokesman said that while OUSA has been calling on the government to ensure that student allowances keep pace with the rising cost of living, it was not prepared to apply the same principle to its own staff. He said that many OUSA staff are repaying student loans, as well as facing increasing mortgages, childcare, and other living expenses.

Solomon Islands public servants call off strike

On February 17, the Solomon Islands Public Employees Union (SIPEU) withdrew a strike notice it had lodged last month after signing a MOU (Memorandum Of Understanding) with the Department of Public Service.

The MOU, which allows union participation in public service "reform", provides an additional 8 percent Cost Of Living Adjustment on top of an 8 percent increase at the beginning of the year, plus a 2.5 percent wage increase for 2005, pending cabinet approval.

SIPEU General Secretary Paul Belande said that the deal would "change the way the union does business with the government". He claimed that the union would no longer be "submitting log of claims... because wage and salary increases and matters affecting the general workers will be taken forward by the union representative in the reform group".

The "reform group" is not a vehicle to improve workers conditions and secure jobs but the opposite. In July 2004, the government allocated \$8 million (\$US2.7 million) for public service retirements and redundancies. Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Finance and Treasury Shadrack Fanega admitted that this would affect 500 public servants. John Garo, minister responsible for the public service, told parliament on January 31 that the government expects to lay-off more than 170 public servants from eight departments this year.



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