

Workers Struggle: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Asia

Striking Hacienda Luisita workers fear another bloodbath

Heavily armed soldiers were mobilised on March 11 to threaten 5,000 sugar plantation workers on strike at the Hacienda Luisita in the Philippines. The workers have been involved in a four-month bitter dispute over pay, reinstatement of union officials and demands for genuine land redistribution. The Conjuangco family, which is related to former Philippines president Cory Aquino, owns the plantation.

Military spokesman Lt. Col. Preme Monta admitted that troops from the Army's 69th Infantry Battalion and 703rd Infantry Brigade had been deployed but claimed that several armed men believed to be guerillas from communist-led New Peoples Army (NPA) had been sighted at villages inside Hacienda Luisita.

Leading union official Ricardo Ramos rejected Monta's claims that the troops were "to protect the community" and said that the soldiers had harassed villagers "purposely to dissuade them from joining and supporting our collective struggle".

The strikers fear another bloodbath, similar to the one that occurred on November 16 when the government of President Gloria Arroyo ordered 1,000 troops and police to disperse pickets at the main gate of the Hacienda Luisita sugar mill. Twelve workers and two children were killed and 39 picketers suffered serious injuries requiring hospital treatment. The government and the army attempted to blame the NPA but this has been disputed in evidence to a Senate inquiry that heard that government troops had carried and fired weapons on the day.

Indian transport workers end strike

Around 45,000 transport workers of Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport Undertaking (BEST) in Mumbai, India, began an indefinite strike March 10 for a pay increase. The strike paralysed the city's 3,200-strong bus service, which is used by an estimated 4.5 million people daily. According to BEST Workers Union general secretary Shahard Rao, the workers have not received a pay increase for the last five years.

The strike ended on March 12, after the company agreed to provide a monthly interim arrears payment for the period April 2001 to March 2005. Employees with more than 10 years service will receive an additional 1,000 rupees (\$US20) per month others will be paid 800 rupees per month. The settlement also includes the appointment of an arbitrator to work out a final wage settlement within three months.

Construction workers campaign for charter of demands

Nearly 300 construction workers from Tiruvallur, Kancheepuram and Chennai in Tamil Nadu, demonstrated on March 14 as part of a state-wide campaign for a 22-point charter of demands.

The charter, which was drawn up by the Construction Workers' Panchayat Sangam, includes an extension of medical facilities, lowering of the pension age to 55 for men and 50 for women, provision of a provident fund, accident relief, and maternity benefits under the state's

social security scheme.

Workers also want crèches established near work sites and residences to assist female construction workers. These can be provided under the Construction Workers' Welfare Board scheme. They are also demanding welfare fund grants for equipment and transport for construction workers opting for self-employment.

Building workers have called on the government for improved assistance to "unorganised" workers affected by the tsunami, including the provision of land identified by the Tamil Nadu Housing Board to meet their housing requirements.

Aluminium workers strike for pay increase

Aluminium workers at the Bharat Aluminium Company Ltd (BALCO) in Korba, Chattisgarh in India held a one-day strike on March 10, after negotiations for a new wages agreement broke down. They are members of Sanyukta Morcha, the umbrella union body in BALCO.

Teachers march on Indian parliament

Hundreds of university teachers marched on parliament in New Delhi, on March 10 to demand restoration of an abandoned promotion scheme and an increase in the retirement age to 65 years. They also want reestablishment of pay parity between librarians, directors of physical education and teachers, in line with the Career Advancement Scheme made effective January 1996.

The teachers are members of the Delhi University Teachers' Association, All-India Federation of University and College Teachers Organisation, and the Federation of the Central Universities Teachers' Association.

Airport workers fight privatisation

Mangalore airport employees in Karnataka state began a protest campaign, including relay fasting on March 13, as part of an all-India agitation against privatisation. They are members of the Authority of India Employees' Joint Forum.

According to an airport workers' spokesman, the Airport Authority of India (AAI) had submitted feasibility reports to the government in the early 1990s recommending the development of the Mumbai and the Delhi airports. While both reports had the approval of AAI, the Ministry of Civil Aviation ignored the proposals. This decision was in line with moves in 1998 by the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to privatise both airports.

Power workers strike for safer working conditions

Two power workers V. Subrahmanyam and V. Sasidhar Reddy began a three-day relay hunger protest on March 14 at the office of the Divisional Engineer (Operations) in Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh. The protest followed three days of lunchtime demonstrations by power workers and a three-day campaign of non-cooperation with management. The workers are calling for definite measures to reduce occupational risks and hazards on the job.

They accuse management of failing to provide basic safety equipment, such as raincoats, gloves and torches to field staff, increasing the risk of electrocution. Workers also allege that management carried out illegal transfers and that promotions were unduly delayed. A mass rally in

Tirupati is planned if the demands are not met.

Sri Lankan postal workers on sick note campaign

Sri Lankan postal workers held a national sick note campaign from March 15 to 17 for a 25-point list of demands for improved working conditions and benefits and in protest against government privatisation plans. All employees, from leading supervisors through to minor staff, reported in sick with all post offices throughout the country, including in the main cities, such as Colombo, Kandy, Galle and Badulla, were affected. The protest included postal workers from the North and East, the first time this section of the working class has participated in joint national action in 25 years.

Australia and the Pacific

Miners rally to support fines over Gretley deaths

About 100 coal miners from pits across New South Wales (NSW) protested outside the Court of Appeal in Sydney on March 14. They were opposing a legal challenge by Swiss mining giant Xstrata to overturn a \$1.4 million fine imposed by the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) against two of its subsidiaries for the death of four miners at the Gretley underground mine, near Newcastle, in 1996.

Xstrata currently owns the Newcastle Coal Company and Oakbridge, the companies operating Gretley when miners Edward Batterham, 48, Damon Murray, 19, John Hunter, 36, and Mark Keiser, 30, drowned 150 metres underground after they drilled into an old abandoned flooded shaft. The IRC last week ruled that both companies, as well as two mining managers and a mine surveyor, were guilty of breaching the Occupation Health and Safety Act.

If Xstrata succeeds in its challenge, it would effectively undermine the IRC's ability to apportion blame in cases of workplace death and injury. Rallying miners voted for a state-wide strike if the Court of Appeal overturns the IRC ruling.

Rail manufacturing workers fear for jobs

About 300 workers from private rail manufactures Goninan, EDI Rail and Varley in Newcastle, NSW, walked off the job in March in protest over job security. The workers, mainly members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), demonstrated outside the Hunter Water Corporation building in the inner city after learning that their jobs were threatened after rail contracts were awarded to an overseas company. A 20 percent local content requirement applies to all contracts for railway rolling stock.

Building worker narrowly misses death

A building worker was seriously injured this week at Multiplex's Regent Plaza project in Sydney's CBD. A piece of steel reinforcing was embedded in the man's neck after he fell while working as a dogman assisting crane handling. A union spokesman said the injured worker, an experienced dogman, "was lucky to be alive" because the steel "missed a major artery by millimetre".

While the construction union, which is investigating the accident, claims to be fighting "tooth and nail" to improve safety in this industry, there have been six deaths in the NSW building industry over the past 12 months.

Mine workers defy return to work order

Sixty mineworkers defied a Coal Industry Tribunal order this week to disband their picket line outside Wesfarmers Premier Coal in Collie, Western Australia. The trades workers have been on strike for two weeks over the company's refusal to negotiate a new enterprise bargaining agreement.

The union claims that the tribunal order does not apply because the strike is "protected" under federal jurisdiction, which allows industrial action during an enterprise bargaining period. The dispute is due to go to arbitration. The company wants to impose roster changes and increase its use of contract labour.

In a separate dispute, more than 400 striking maintenance workers at

Worsley Alumina, also in Collie, returned to work on March 15, after contractors agreed to increase their pay rates in line with construction workers at the site.

Call centre workers rally to defend jobs

More than 100 workers from call centres operated by betting agency TABCORP rallied outside the Victorian state parliament in Melbourne on March 16 to protest over the possible loss of hundreds of jobs at TABCORP. According to a union spokesperson, the company is considering relocating its call centres to NSW, a move that would affect 500 jobs.

A delegation of employees presented a petition to parliament calling on the state Labor government to ensure that TABCORP maintained the Victorian-based jobs.

Strike by Filipino crew holds up wheat shipment in Australian port

On March 12, the Filipino crew of Flecha, a Maltese registered-ship, went on strike at Wallaroo Port on South Australia's Yorke Peninsula. The 23-year-old bulk vessel, which is owned by Cardiff Marine in Piraeus, Greece, had been chartered by the Australian Wheat Board to transport 50,000 tonnes of wheat to Iraq.

The 16-member crew demanded pay and improved working conditions on the ship. Some of the crew had been at sea for 13 months working up to 18 hours a day and living in extremely cramped cabins. They complained about the lack of clean drinking water, dirty bed linen and a diet of mainly stale or canned food. Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members refused to load the wheat until the dispute was settled.

When representatives of the International Transport Workers Federation (ITWF) attempted to board the ship, the captain used an international security alert as an excuse to raise the gangplank and block entry. The crew ended their strike on March 16, after the ITWF and MUA brokered a deal under which the ship's master signed an agreement to comply with pay and working condition requirements for the next 12 months.

The workers, however, will receive back pay and then be flown home to the Philippines and a new crew mustered after water and food problems are resolved. Cardiff Marine is yet to sign off on the deal. ITWF coordinator Dean Summers said: "We're disappointed that it (the strike) happened, because we do have a good relationship with the Australian Wheat Board and this doesn't happen often."

New Zealand metal workers vote to strike for pay

Metal industry employees in Christchurch and Auckland held a half-day stoppage on March 18 as part of a national campaign over pay. Earlier this week workers from a dozen South Island companies covered by the metals manufacturing agreement voted to join about a thousand Auckland workers in the stoppage that had been called by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU).

The strike vote came after the employers' refusal to continue negotiations to renew the key metals agreement. Talks broke down on February 24, the first day of negotiations, after the EPMU rejected the employers' 3.2 percent pay rise "final offer".

The union had originally entered the negotiations for a 7 percent pay rise but retreated in the face of employer opposition. It then launched a national campaign for an across-the-board 5 percent rise under its so-called "Fair Share 5 in '05" campaign, which has been endorsed by the NZ Council of Trade Unions and other major unions.

Recent reports show that New Zealand companies have made record profits for the seven consecutive years while pay rises over have fallen behind inflation, which is currently running at 2.7 percent. The 5 percent wage increase demanded by the EPMU will not make up for the decline in pay suffered by the majority of workers over past five years under the Labour government.

Auckland University staff hold protest rally

Auckland University staff held a two-hour lunchtime demonstration outside the University Registry on March 15 to oppose the refusal of vice-

chancellor Professor Stuart McCutcheon to enter negotiations for new national collective employment agreements. McCutcheon had also offered non-union staff a 4.5 percent salary before beginning negotiations for a union contract.

The Association of University Staff president Nigel Haworth said that the refusal to enter national bargaining undermined attempts to resolve the under-funding of universities and inadequate salary levels. Union members make up about 30 percent of the University of Auckland's 3,500-strong workforce. McCutcheon said that the university would not be part of a multi-employer collective "because all the universities are unique in a competitive environment".



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