Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Asia

Chinese workers strike over health issues

Some 5,000 workers from a jewellery factory in Foshan City in China's southern Guangdong Province went on strike for three days on March 15 and surrounded the plant. They struck after finding out that management had falsified medical examination results hiding the fact that some employees had contracted silicosis.

Suspecting the employer of a cover-up, ten workers had tests at a local hospital and two were found to have the disease, despite having been cleared by a company examination. The outcome prompted a further 212 workers to seek independent tests and 12 were infected. The factory owners fled when the strike erupted.

The workers—who on average work nine hours a day with just one day off every two months—have continuously complained about high temperatures in the plant and the presence of heavy dust, glass and plastic particles from the production process. They say that management refused their requests for basic safety equipment, such as protective clothing or facemasks.

The strikers returned to work after the Health and Labour Bureau agreed to organise medical examinations. By March 19, a further 31 workers were diagnosed with silicosis. Deputy Minister of Health Jiang Zuojun said that at least 580,000 people across the country were suffering from the disease and there were 10,000 new cases every year.

Another 69 killed in China mine blast

A gas blast at the Xishui Colliery in Shouzhou City in Shanxi Province claimed the lives of 69 Chinese coal miners on March 19. Most of the dead were migrant workers from Shanxi, Sichuan, Hubei, Zhejiang and Anhui provinces. While the massive explosion in the Xishui pit killed 50 miners, 19 other perished in the adjacent Kangjiayao mine when the blast caused a wall to collapse.

According to government mining inspectors the Xishui mine, which opened in 1993 and had an annual output of 150,000 tons of coal, was "riddled with problems" such as "outdated technology, haphazard management and the illegal use of explosives". It has now been established that when the explosion occurred the owners were operating the mine in defiance of a November safety order from the provisional coal-mining supervision office demand that they cease production. Four of the mine's owners have now been detained by the police.

In the immediate aftermath of the Xishui disaster China's President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao called on safety officials "to do their best" to save miners who remained trapped. The very public appeal was an attempt to divert criticism from the central government whose pro-market agenda has created the conditions for mounting deaths and injuries in China's mushrooming industries and in its mines.

To further placate growing anger in mining communities, the local government has reportedly drawn up a compensation plan that will provide 200,000 yuan to the families of each dead Xishui miner—a much higher amount than is normally paid to mining accidents victims' families.

The Xishui tragedy is one more in a string of disasters this year in China's notoriously dangerous mining industry. Just two days after the Xishui explosion another 19 miners were killed in an explosion at the Sulongsi Coal Mine in Fengjie county, Chongqing municipality. One month earlier, 214 miners were killed in an explosion at the Sujiawan Coal Mine in Liaoning Province—the deadliest mining accident in China since 1949.

Workers force Thai minister to order reinstatement

Thailand's Labour Minister Sora-at Klinprathum ordered travel bag manufacturer Collection Industrial Associate to rehire 1,192 workers it laid off when the company suddenly ceased business. The decision came after workers from the plant protested outside the minister's office on March 21 demanding he invoke the Labour Relations Act to force the company to reinstate them. According to a union spokesman the closure and sackings were "unlawful".

The company, which had earlier informed the Labour Ministry that it was "heavily" in debt, continued with the closure, giving no prior notice despite having dragged concessions out of the workforce. The union had agreed to forgo overtime pay and had accepted cuts to welfare benefits, such as free travel. The company is owned by a Taiwanese businessman and produces suitcases and accessories for export, mainly to the US.

Million-strong strike hits banks across India

One million bank workers went on strike on March 22, disrupting services at 22,000 branches across India. They were protesting against government moves to merge some of the 27 state-owned banks and to allow higher Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in private banks. The workers are concerned that the merger move will trigger job cuts.

Workers rallied in major centres around the country. Several hundred picketed the State Bank of India's branch on Parliamentary Street in New Delhi watched by detachments of armed police deployed to the area. In Mumbai thousands more workers marched to the business district chanting anti-government slogans. The actions follow a sit-down protest by bank workers in front of the national parliament on March 11 over the same issues.

The United Forum of Bank Unions, an umbrella group comprised of nine bank unions, called the strike. Further industrial action is planned in the next months.

According to the Reserve Bank of India, the country's banks have about 50,000 branches and 19.75 trillion rupees ($US451 billion) in assets as of March 2004. The government is attempting to radically reduce state-ownership of banks. India's third largest lender, the state-owned Punjab National Bank, has offered to sell 80 million shares, and the Alahabad Bank, India's oldest state-owned bank, will announce on April 6 how many shares it plans to offload.

Government workers demand salary increase

Some 200,000 government workers—including 125,000 grade III

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employees, 60,000 grade IV employees and 15,000 gazetted officers—in the Indian state of Chhattisgarh walked out last week. They are demanding a 50 percent hike in the Dearness Allowance. Services at all government offices were crippled by the strike.

The Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led state-government used the Essential Services Maintenance Act and threatened to take legal action against the strikers. Chhattisgarh Employees-Officers Federation convenor A.K. Vajpayee said that the strike was a warning and that "if the BJP government does not concede our demands" there will be an indefinite strike.

Apparel workers strike for better pay and conditions

More than 500 apparel workers at the Victor Fashion factory in Reginawatte, Dodangoda, in Sri Lanka's Southern Province, struck on March 16 in support of a salary increase. The basic salary at Victor is less than 3,000 rupees ($US30) and had not been increased since the factory began operations 12 years ago.

The workers have presented eight other demands including the provision of transport for the night shift, an end to unpaid overtime, allowance increases and that supervisors cease using foul language when speaking to employees.

Teachers picket over transfer methods

Around 500 teachers in the Gampaha education zone in Sri Lanka's Western Province picketed the Gampaha education office on March 16. They were protesting against the haphazard transfers of teachers which resulted in some schools with an excess of staff while others have shortages. The teachers were also opposing the government's denial of salary increments, promotions and loans.

Health workers demand job confirmation

Hundreds of health workers picketed the Ministry of Health in Colombo on March 16 demanding confirmation of 1,900 casual heath workers' jobs. At the end of the protest workers handed a memorandum to ministry officials containing their demands. They warned that if the government failed to respond they would step up the campaign.

Medical Laboratory Technicians (MLTs) at four hospitals went on strike on March 23 in opposition to the proposed introduction of a shift-based service system. The hospitals affected by the strike were the National Hospital in Colombo, Colombo South Teaching Hospital, Ragama Hospital and Central Blood Bank. If the proposal is not withdrawn the MLTs plan to withdraw labour through a "sick note" campaign from March 28.

Paper factory workers protest factory sell-off

Around 500 paper factory workers from state-owned Embilipitiya National Paper Factory in Sri Lanka's Southern Province marched to the Embilipitiya city centre on March 22. The marchers chanted slogans denouncing the government over the sale the factory to private owners.

Residents in the area and the several local and trade union organisations joined the factory workers on the march convened by the United Alliance of the Unions inside the factory.

Australia and the Pacific

Hospital staff strikes over jobs and working hours

More than 300 staff at Melbourne's Austin Hospital went on strike for 12 hours on March 21 in protest against cuts to working hours and over the lack of job security. The strike involved theatre technicians, pathology assistants and orderlies.

A spokesperson for the Health Services Union said that the problems were caused by the merger of the Mercy and Austin Hospitals in May. "On one hand the hospital will be increasing capacity and on the other hand it's saying it wants to reduce the number of staff," he said.

Hospital management has taken the dispute to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission in an attempt to force the workers back to work. Health workers say they will not rule out further action if the matter remains unresolved.

In a separate dispute, public hospital nurses on the north coast of New South Wales (NSW) are threatening an industrial action for improved wages and working conditions. This week, the NSW Nurses Association rejected the latest offer from the NSW Labor government of a 12 percent wage increase over 4 years.

The nurses, together with their colleagues statewide, want a 16 percent wage increase over four years.

Australian teachers strike over pay

Schoolteachers in Alice Springs and Katherine in Australia's Northern Territory (NT) went on strike on March 23, following similar action by their colleagues in Darwin two days earlier. The teachers are demanding an18 percent pay increase over two years and smaller class sizes. The NT Labor government has only offered an 11 percent increase.

Teachers at several rallies voted for a statewide 24-hour stoppage on March 22, while in Nhulunbuy they called for three days of continuous industrial action. The NT government has responded by threatening the union with legal action if the strike proceeds.

New Zealand council staff picket over pay

Christchurch City Council staff picketed civic offices, libraries and service centres this week during a four-hour strike over stalled pay talks. The council and the Southern Local Government Officers' Union (SLGOU), with 1,150 members working for the city, are at loggerheads after negotiations over 10 months failed to produce a new pay deal.

The union wants a 6.5 percent pay increase over two years, 3.5 percent in lump sums and base rate increases this year, and 3 percent on base rates next year. The council recently tabled an offer that included one-off payments of between $NZ1,000 and $1,500, with some staff getting pay increases ranging between 1.5 percent and 7 percent.

A SLGOU spokesman said that mediation with the council last week had failed to avert strike action. The union intends to return to negotiations. Workers will meet in about two weeks to discuss the dispute and decide on further action.

Auckland University attacks staff union

The University of Auckland has stepped up its attack on the Association of University Staff (AUS) attempting to prevent the union from going about its day-to-day business on campus. The university implied that it would cut off access to its email system after the AUS wrote to non-union staff at the University encouraging them to join the union.

The AUS has brought legal action against the university after its vice-chancellor refused to negotiate for national collective employment agreements and offered non-union staff a 4.5 percent salary increase. Following a letter from the AUS to non-union staff, the head of Human Resources wrote saying that the emailed letter was in breach of the union's "duty of good faith" towards the university.

AUS general secretary Helen Kelly said that the letter threatening to stop email access was an attempt to restrict freedom of speech and association and in breach of New Zealand's Employment Relations Act.

Auckland bus drivers vote for strike

Hundreds of drivers employed by the Stagecoach bus company in Auckland, New Zealand voted at a four-hour stop work meeting on March to step up an industrial campaign in support of a pay increase. The drivers are already working "to rule" and as of March 29 will refuse to do voluntary overtime and implement a series of other work bans.

The drivers are demanding an immediate $NZ16 pay increase but the company is offering a 12 percent pay rise over three years; that in the first instance would lift drivers hourly wages from nearly $14 to $15. The unions are also seeking improved working conditions such as morning and afternoon tea breaks.

While a combined unions' spokesman said the industrial action could cause delays, "passengers would not need to make alternative travel plans just yet". He warned that this could change in the coming weeks if negotiation did not produce a satisfactory outcome.

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New Zealand school support staff to attend claims meetings

From March 30, support staff in New Zealand primary and secondary schools will attend meetings across the country to vote on the renegotiation of collective employment agreements. Their claims include a 6 percent across the board pay rise. The NZ Educational Institute (NZEI) will allow for 123 meetings to be held in work time.

The NZEI has 9,600 support staff members working in more than 2,500 schools. They are employed as teacher aides, special education assistants, school secretaries and executive officers, science and IT technicians, physiotherapists, nurses, librarians, sports coordinators and in more than 80 other jobs. They claim that their present pay rates do not recognise the importance of the work they do. The salary for special education assistants who work with students with physical disabilities or behavioural issues starts at just $21,000 a year.

The jobs are bulk-funded from schools' operations grants—the same pool of money used to pay maintenance costs and to buy equipment and other resources. As a result, support staff live with the on-going threat of their jobs disappearing or pay being reduced through a cut in working hours. They are determined to establish a better funding system. Other major claims for enhanced job security, the resolution of the issue of non-payment during term breaks, more equitable leave provisions and attention to health and safety concerns.

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