

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 February 2006

Sri Lankan health workers demand reinstatement

Hundreds of health workers from Sri Lanka's central province demonstrated in Kandy on February 1. They were demanding the reinstatement of retrenched health employees, including ambulance drivers.

According to a member of the Association of Retrenched Workers, 319 contract workers were retrenched after completing one year's service. They were from Kandy, Matale and Nuwaraeliya.

Association member R.M. Lionel Ratnayake said that protestors want the many existing vacancies filled by retrenched workers. "Before the presidential elections they [the authorities] promised reinstatement. But they have not yet responded to our demands," he said.

The demonstration ended after about an hour but workers pledged to step up their campaign if the issue is not resolved.

Sri Lankan postmen demand bicycles

Postmen at Central Post Office of Panadura, 27 kilometres from Colombo, went on strike on February 1 to demand new bicycles. They decided to bring letter distribution to a halt after the Postal Department failed to respond favorably to their request. The department has not only refused to provide new bicycles but does not maintain or repair the old ones.

The strike follows industrial action by postal workers at Anuradhapura and Ponnaruwa in the North Central Province who stopped work in December last year over illegal construction near their workplace which impacted on the work environment.

Sri Lankan university workers oppose privatisation

Non-academic workers at the University of Colombo demonstrated outside the administrative building on February 1 over management's decision to privatise all administrative functions at the institute's hospital.

According to a spokesman for the 24-union alliance, the ruling coalition promised during the elections not to privatise state-owned enterprises or any work, but it had reneged on this commitment.

University hospital cleaning and security have already been handed over to the private sector and authorities are now trying to introduce attendance machines that will identify the workers by their fingerprints.

Punjabi teachers press for demands

Hundreds of teachers and other education employees in Punjab's Ludhiana District rallied outside the mini-secretariat of state on February 3. They want the state government to withdraw plans to merge primary schools with high or other secondary schools, a move designed to avoid employing extra primary school staff.

The demonstrators called on the government to fill 20,000 vacancies in primary schools and 10,000 vacancies in senior schools on a

permanent, not contractual basis. They also demanded that salaries be paid by the first of every month, formal work duties established during examination periods and the regular checking of examination centres during sessions.

Indian sanitation workers fight for permanency

Contract sanitation workers at the Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation in Andhra Pradesh held a sit-down protest outside municipal offices on February 7. They want permanency with increased wages and other benefits, including provident fund coverage, the payment of wage arrears and the provision of uniforms and footwear.

A union spokesman said that although sanitary workers were vulnerable to injuries and other health problems when clearing garbage they were not given free medical care.

Hong Kong workers push for minimum wage laws

The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions organised demonstrations in front of Government House during the January 28-February 4 Spring Festival holiday to demand a minimum wage standard and better working conditions.

The Hong Kong government and employers have long resisted workers' demands for a minimum wage.

Wine workers strike for pay increase

On February 7, workers at Hardy Wines MacLaren Vale and Reynella wineries in South Australia went on strike for 24 hours. The strike is part of an ongoing campaign by about 450 members of the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union at Hardy Wines for an 18 percent wage rise over three years. The company has offered just 10 percent and is refusing to increase the amount. On January 30, workers at the company's Berri Estate winery south of Adelaide walked out for 24 hours over similar pay claim.

This week the Evans & Tate wine group retrenched 20 staff and outsourced back-office functions to save \$2.5 million. More cuts are expected to slash another \$10 to \$12 million from operating costs during the next month.

Victorian firefighters strike over conditions

More than 1,500 firefighters employed by the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) marched to Parliament House in central Melbourne on February 8. They were protesting the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board refusal to continue negotiations on a new workplace enterprise work agreement and the provision of new firefighting uniforms.

The workers, members of the United Fire Fighters Union of Australia, are angry over the management's intention to buy new protective uniforms that do not meet Australian standards. They claim that the Nomex brand uniforms, which both MFB and CFA management favour, could disintegrate while fighting fires. The

uniforms have already been rejected by firefighters in several other Australian states.

The union also wants a fail-safe digital radio service, the retention of wages and conditions, a decent career path and the strengthening of manning levels at the temporary fire station in the athletes village during the upcoming Commonwealth Games. The dispute has been taken to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission by management.

Nurses strike over jail manager's insults

Nurses at Hakea Prison in Canning Vale, Western Australia walked off the job this week after learning that a notebook used by a health service manager contained crude and abusive remarks about health staff. The notebook recorded the initials of the 13 jail health service staff with insulting remarks alongside 11 of them.

The nurses met on February 9 to consider seeking the active support of their colleagues at other jails after the Department of Corrective Services refused to suspend the offending manager. They are refusing to return to work until the suspension is carried out and their official complaint to the department is dealt with.

The director of health services has now initiated a "grievance process" and parties concerned will be called to a meeting on February 14. A union spokesman said the notebook incident is one of many recent problems facing health workers at the jail.

Queensland rail workers strike over retention payment

About 1,000 workers employed by Queensland Rail (QR) in Townsville, Rockhampton and Ipswich walked off the job for the day on February 8. A spokesman for the Australian Metal Workers Union (AMWU) said the strike was sparked by Queensland Rail's decision to cut back skilled workers' annual retention bonus from \$6,000 to \$2,000.

The original amount was part of a recently negotiated work agreement backdated to October last year and a 4 percent annual wage increase over the next three years. The bonus was designed to encourage skilled workers to remain with QR in order to overcome a skills shortage. The AMWU spokesman said that union delegates would meet to discuss further action.

New Zealand electricity workers locked out

Linesmen at the North Island electricity company, Top Energy, have been locked out in a pay dispute. The lockout came after mediation between the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), representing 58 workers, and the company failed on February 3.

Top Energy wants to cut wages and conditions, while the union is seeking a 5 percent pay rise. An EPMU spokesman complained that the company had acted unilaterally, even though the union had been negotiating for nearly six months and had agreed to certain concessions through "modernising" the collective agreement. Linesmen currently earn \$NZ18 to \$21 an hour. Claw backs demanded by the company include the 45-hour week, instead current 40-hour week and the current one-hour lunch by reduced by half.

Wellington meat workers strike over pay and conditions

Over 200 workers picketed the Taylor Preston freezing works plant at Ngauranga, Wellington during a three-day strike that began on February 7. It was the first strike in the New Zealand meat processing industry for six years. The strikers were protesting being paid 20 to 50 percent less than other New Zealand meat workers. The Meat Workers Union said that working conditions at Taylor Preston were among the worst of any in the industry nationwide. Staff are even expected to provide their own teabags.

The company has offered a 10 percent pay increase over a three-year

period but a union spokesman said that management had pushed Taylor Preston employees "too far". Some workers are paid only \$9.50 an hour, the lowest legal adult rate, having had a total increase of about \$0.08 an hour annually over the last 15 years. The union declared it would be "happy to talk with the company" after the strike.

New Zealand meat workers union agrees to pay cut

Boning room workers at the Alliance-owned Smithfield Freezing Works have been persuaded to accept pay cuts to settle a long-running contract dispute. The vote was taken at a union meeting attended by the company's production manager. The Canterbury president of the Meat Workers Union said the union had offered "substantial concessions" to the company.

The union has told workers that unless concessions were given Smithfield could close with the loss of more than 500 jobs. Last year, management asked staff to sign a new contract accepting pay cuts to ensure that a \$NZ11 million boning room upgrade would go ahead. The workers had refused.

PNG laboratory workers threaten to strike

Medical laboratory workers at the Port Moresby General Hospital in Papua New Guinea are planning to strike over overtime payments. Staff from the pathology, chemistry, microbiology, blood bank, labour ward and the operating theatre met on February 4 to discuss a stop work meeting.

Joseph Kivavia, president of the Medical Lab Staff Association, said that hospital management's proposal to cut staff levels and overtime payments was in breach of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). He said the duty roster that management had assigned for assistants was also in breach of the MOU.

PNG Shell workers protest over takeover

Shell (PNG) Limited employees are planning to strike over the proposed takeover of the company's Papua New Guinea assets by the Canadian energy company InterOil Corporation. The decision to strike came after a series of statements by Shell management that the job security of 160 Shell PNG workers could not be guaranteed after the take over.

Employees gave management until 4 p.m. on February 8 to respond to their demands. These include a 12-month payout of their entitlements and for Shell to fund a project in "appreciation" of the profit it has earned in PNG over the past 75 years.



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