

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 February 2006

Asia

Government workers protest in the Philippines over jobs and wages

Thousands of government employees rallied in Manila on February 14 over rationalisation plans which will layoff as many as 420,000 workers, transfer staff from city to regional offices and freeze wages. Several demonstrations were organised, including in the city centre where a number of workers wore black shirts in protest over the job cuts.

Department of Labor and Employment workers gathered outside their office buildings and health employees rallied at Department of Budget and Management offices demanding payment of a long overdue Cost of Living Allowance and a 3,000 peso (\$US58.80) across-the-board monthly salary increase. The government claims that 10,000 health workers must be laid off to fund these increases.

Public school teachers protested outside San Sebastian College demanding that an approved 1,000 peso allowance be included in their basic pay.

The protests were called by the Confederation for Unity, Recognition and Advancement of Government Employees.

Korean rail workers demand job security

The Korean Railway Workers' Union (KRWU) announced on February 14 that it will hold a national strike next month. Workers are opposing the Korea Railroad Cooperation's (Korail) refusal to implement a five-day working week and guarantee job security. The union also wants Korail to withdraw planned job cuts, reinstate around 70 laid off workers and end management discrimination of non-regular workers.

The KRWU will hold a joint rally with three transportation-related unions in Taehangno, Seoul, on February 18 over the same issues. The Seoul Railroad Workers' Union as well as taxi and truck drivers unions will be involved in the protest.

Korail management has threatened to implement emergency measures if the strike goes ahead, including the use of retired workers and military personnel to operate the rail system.

Hong Kong ambulance union opposes outsourcing

The Fire Services and Ambulancemen's Union will hold a 24-hour protest and fast on February 19 to oppose the outsourcing of some ambulance duties. The union has rejected assurances from the Director of Fire Services Kwok Jing-keung that there would be no job losses and that outsourcing would only apply to "second priority hospital transfers".

Union chairman Wat Ki-on pointed out that patients had died during transfers between hospitals. "We need professional, well-trained ambulancemen to do first-aid on all ambulance transfers," he said.

Doctors strike in south India over suspensions

Doctors at a temporary community hospital at Shravanabelagola, Hassan district in Karnataka state, went on strike on February 11. They were protesting the suspension of a contract duty doctor and another doctor for being absent for a day. The hospital was established by the state government for pilgrims attending the Mahamastak Abhisheka—a Hindu temple festival.

One doctor declared: "The two doctors have been suspended arbitrarily

without giving them an opportunity to explain their case. We condemn this unilateral and arbitrary action."

Railway workers in Punjab stage protest march

Hundreds of railway workers carrying torches and slogans condemning the central government marched through Pathank, Punjab, on February 11. They have demanded the government immediately constitute the 6th Pay Commission, abandon a new pension scheme and fill thousands of vacant public sector posts. They also called for the recruitment of more rail employees and the commencement of urgent repairs to rail workers' houses.

South Indian computer teachers strike

Computer teachers at government schools in Tamil Nadu began an indefinite strike on February 10. They are protesting the state government's plans to outsource computer work from the state-owned Electronics Corporation of Tamil Nadu (ELCOT) to the private sector.

A spokesman for the Higher Secondary Computer Teachers' Association said that computer teachers' jobs would be lost if the state government proceeds with its plans. The decision will also affect 2,394 computer teachers who had been working for the past seven and a half years under a contract system.

More than 70 teachers from 36 government, corporation and municipal schools demonstrated near the office of Chief Educational Officer in the ancient Tamil city of Madurai as part of the statewide agitation.

Health workers in Pondicherry strike over wages

An indefinite strike on February 9 by Group D employees in the Government General Hospital and the Maternity Hospital in Pondicherry, India, is continuing. Only major surgery or very serious cases are being attended to.

The strikers include sanitary workers, assistant cooks, laundry and ward attendants, auto clover operators and nursing orderlies. They want revised wage structures and part-time workers made daily wage employees.

Academic and non-academic workers retrenched from government technical colleges are maintaining a hunger strike they began on January 25 outside the Ministry of Vocational and Technical Training in Colombo.

Around 133 employees—principals, instructors, electricians, carpenters, farm managers, masons, store-keepers, welders, sanitary workers and casual workers—were retrenched in 2002 under the previous United National Front government.

The current United Peoples Freedom Alliance regime has not implemented the Human Rights Commission's recommendation that the workers be reinstated.

University workers strike over attendance machines

Non-academic workers at the University of Colombo in Sri Lanka began an indefinite strike on February 10 to demand the withdrawal of attendance machines that identify employees by their fingerprints. They claim that the machines are meant to intimidate workers and were introduced by the vice chancellor without any prior discussion.

Strikers claim that management has threatened to sack contract workers, extend the probationary period of other workers and eliminate employees

over 55 years of age if they join the protest.

Non-academic workers from Moratuwa University, the Open University of Sri Lanka and Kelaniya University joined strikers demonstrating outside the vice chancellor's office. Non-academic workers are planning a national strike next week if the demands of their Colombo colleagues are not met.

Sri Lankan apparel workers walk out

Apparel workers at KK Garment in Kalagedihena, Nittambuwa, around 40 kilometres from Colombo, began an indefinite strike on February 13. They claim that management is harassing union activists and has failed to deposit money into the workers' provident and trust funds.

Along with other apparel workers, KK Garment employees face an uncertain future. Around 60 apparel factories in Sri Lanka were closed and thousands retrenched when the apparel quota system ended in January 2005.

Australia

Tasmanian bus drivers ordered to end strike

More than 340 bus drivers from the government-owned Metro Tasmania have been ordered by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission to cease industrial action. The drivers, who are members of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union, walked out on January 14, after enterprise agreement negotiations broke down.

The drivers want a 33 percent wage rise over three years but management has only offered 14 percent over two and half years. Striking drivers held a rally outside Metro's headquarters in Hobart demanding a better deal.

Australian steel workers strike over new work agreement

About 500 steelworkers called a snap 24-hour strike at Smorgon Steel plant in Newcastle, New South Wales, on February 15 over a new enterprise agreement. The Australian Workers Union (AWU) is concerned that management is planning to introduce contractors at the expense of full time jobs.

Industrial Relations Commission hearings on the dispute began on February 16. Steelworkers will meet at the plant to discuss the outcome of the hearing and whether to take further industrial action.

In a separate dispute, members of the National Union of Workers at adhesive and chemical manufacturing company Sika, Western Sydney returned to work on February 13 after the company agreed to begin discussions on a new work agreement. The workers walked out on February 10, after management refused to negotiate with the union.

Nurses strike over cost cutting

About 1,000 New South Wales state-employed nurses at the Royal North Shore Hospital held a stop-work rally in Sydney on February 14 over increased workloads and cost cutting by management. According to media reports, the hospital has a budget blowout of \$20 million.

The nurses are considering further industrial action after negotiations between the New South Wales Nurses Association and the NSW Health Department stalled.

New Zealand bank workers accept pay offer

New Zealand Westpac workers last week voted to accept the bank's latest pay offer. The vote ends a three-month dispute which involved walkouts, pickets and a one-day strike on the last business day before Christmas.

Finsec negotiated a 5.2 percent pay rise with the agreement running for 16 months instead of an earlier management proposal of 18 months. The offer also provides for experienced staff to advance up the pay scale and for the development of a new pay progression system which is not based solely on sales targets. A key reason for strikes late year was that performance targets were extremely difficult to meet and often hinged on loading customers up with debt.

New Zealand McDonalds' workers defy company threats

A group of workers at McDonalds in Auckland went on strike on

February 10 in defiance of legal threats by the fast food company. About 12 workers and 50 supporters picketed the Queen St McDonalds for about an hour and half at lunchtime.

The strike occurred after workers planning to attend a Sunday stop-work rally discovered that they were no longer rostered to work for the rest of the day. More than 1,000 people attended the rally at the Auckland Town Hall to support calls to abolish youth rates, raise the minimum wage and secure stable working conditions for youth and casual employees.

McDonalds had earlier issued a letter to the Unite union claiming it was illegal for workers to strike and threatening legal damages. A union spokesman said McDonalds had subsequently backed down. Unite has accused senior managers at McDonalds of regularly intimidating its young work force and rostering union members at particular times to prevent them attending meetings.

About 100 protesters demonstrated outside parliament in Wellington on February 14 to demand an end to youth rates currently at \$7.60 or 80 percent of the \$9.50 adult minimum and for the legal minimum wage to be raised to \$NZ12 an hour.

New Zealand council workers walk out

Almost half of Dunedin's council employees downed tools for three hours on February 13 in their first industrial action in 12 years. The 330 workers, members of the Southern Local Government Officers Union, have been negotiating with the Dunedin City Council since last September over a collective agreement and a wage increase.

The dispute involves workers on lower grades of the council's pay scale and an agreement had been reached at mediation in December for a 1 percent lump sum plus a 3 percent pay increase from July 1. The council's executive management team later vetoed this offer and proposed a 1.5 percent lump sum payment and a 2 percent pay increase.

Fiji teacher graduates to protest for jobs

About 40 graduates from various teaching colleges, including the University of the South Pacific, are threatening to protest if the education ministry does not find them jobs by February 20.

The graduates come from poor families and were only able to pay for their degrees by accepting a government bond. While the education ministry has not provided the graduates with work, if they secure employment at a private school they must repay the bond money.

Fiji Teachers Union general secretary Agni Singh said more than 650 teacher graduates were without jobs and that some have been seeking work since graduating in 2003.



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