

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

25 February 2006

Asia

Workers protest in Philippines for national minimum wage

On February 17, workers wearing red armbands and shouting slogans marched through the streets of Manila demanding a 125 peso (\$US2.41) national wage increase. Clashes had been expected following the deployment of police but no incidences were reported.

Minimum daily wages vary across the country from as low as 105 pesos (\$US2.02) in some rural areas to 275 pesos in Manila. Data from the National Wages and Productivity Commission in December 2005 indicated that the living wage should be set at 613 pesos.

Elmer Labag, chairperson for Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU or May 1st Movement) that organised the protest, said workers were also opposing privatisation, de-regulation, the implementation of Charter Change (constitution reform) and a value added tax increase from 10 to 12 percent.

Filipino media employees prepare to strike

Employees at Philippines' TV station Associated Broadcasting Company-Channel 5 (ABC-5) will meet on February 24 to decide on strike action after management failed to settle a collective work agreement (CBA). The ABC-5 Employees Union filed a notice of strike with the National Conciliation and Mediation Board in January 24 following the company's refusal to negotiate. Union president Carlos Jizmundo said key issues were security of tenure, union recognition and severance pay.

The company filed a petition for "assumption of jurisdiction" with the office of labor secretary Patricia Sto. Thomas on February 10 to block the strike action. If the petition is successful, Sto.Thomas will assume control of the dispute.

Sto. Thomas has a history of anti-worker activity, including ordering the violent dispersal by 1,000 armed police and soldiers of pickets at the Hacienda Luisita in November, 2004. The operation resulted in the death of twelve workers and two children. Hundreds more picketers were badly injured.

Chinese textile workers strike over pay

Over 1,000 workers in the cloth weaving section of the former state-owned Heze Cotton Textile Factory in Shandong, China struck on February 10 over low pay and escalating management remunerations. Managers earn 500,000 (\$US62,500) yuan a year while factory workers get on average 5,000 yuan. The weaving section workers, however, are mostly female and are paid as little as 300 yuan (\$US37.50) a month.

A report in the *China Labour Bulletin* said the official factory trade union and the city level union made no attempt to assist the workers. Management ordered each of the striking employees to sign a form agreeing to return to work. If they do not sign within 15 days they will be deemed to have resigned.

Tamil Nadu bank workers strike for pay

About 3,000 cooperative bank workers from 110 out of the 124 urban cooperative banks in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu struck for one day on February 20. They are demanding a revision of salaries that was due over four years ago. The workers are paid far less than their

counterparts in other cooperative banks.

The Tamil Nadu Co-Operative Bank Employees' Association is demanding a 10 percent increase in the basic salary and in the dearness allowance backdated to 2001. A union spokesman warned that if the state government does not grant the rise, it will intensify industrial action, including a statewide indefinite strike.

Government workers and teachers hold protest fast

More than 700 Tamil Nadu government workers and teachers, including 150 women, protested on February 19 in Coimbatore. They are demanding the reinstatement of computer instructors and other employees, the provision of bonuses and the immediate payment of salary arrears.

In a separate struggle in southern India, thousands of coal miners at the Singareni Collieries in Andhra Pradesh staged a protest in front of the mining company's head office at Kothagudem on February 20. They have several demands including the payment of seventh wage board arrears.

More than 10,000 power workers at the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) held a national sick note campaign on February 22 and stayed away from work. They are demanding a salary increase promised for 2006 and the payment of overtime and wages outstanding—about 60,000 rupees (\$US60) per worker—since 2003. Hundreds of employees picketed the CEB head office in central Colombo at noon on the same day.

While the government issued a last minute assurance that arrears would be paid by March 15. Workers remain skeptical because of similar promises made previously and warned the dispute would be intensified if their demands were not met. Sri Lanka Freedom Party union leaders told their members not to join the protest.

Bank workers in Sri Lanka demand reinstatement

Retrenched workers from the Employee Provident Fund (EPF) section of the Central Bank demonstrated in central Colombo on February 17 to demand reinstatement. Police established barricades preventing demonstrators reaching the Finance Ministry. Workers protested near the barricades for about an hour before five representatives were allowed to present a petition to the finance ministry secretary.

In a separate dispute, workers from the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) protested at the company's head office in Colombo on February 14. They were opposing plans for the privatisation of CPC, the appointment of retired military officers to management and management corruption. The CPC Joint Trade Union Federation called the demonstration.

Health service drivers demonstrate

Around 50 health service drivers, including ambulance drivers, in Sri Lanka's North Central province began strike action on February 13 to demand confirmation of their jobs. The next day, nine striking drivers began fasting inside the provincial health office.

The workers allege that the government wants to recruit politicians' friends as drivers but is refusing to confirm employment for drivers who have been working in the health service for around 10 years. Workers ended industrial action on February 17, after being assured the provincial health ministry that it would attend to the matter.

Australia

Auto parts manufacturer to slash wages and conditions

Workers at Dana Australia in Clayton, Melbourne held a stop work meeting on February 21 to discuss cuts to pay and conditions under a new enterprise agreement demanded by the management. The major car parts manufacturer, which has another plant at Cheltenham, wants to reduce the pay of its 350-strong workforce by 5 percent, with pay for future starters slashed by a massive 25 percent.

The cuts are outlined in a 42-page company document that also calls for the axing of 13 rostered days off (RDOs), the halving of redundancy entitlements and an extension to the waiting period before workers can access long-service leave.

These changes will come up for negotiation next month when the Howard government's draconian new workplace relations laws come into force. This will allow employers to slash long-standing work conditions and cut pay.

Television technicians strike over work changes

Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) technicians in Melbourne walked off the job on February 21 for three hours over changes to work practices. The workers, who are members of the Community Public Sector Union (CPSU) and the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, forced management to transfer news bulletin broadcasting to Sydney.

A spokesperson for the CPSU said the 14 staff walked out after floor managers were again directed to operate cameras live-to-air. He said that staff were not being consulted on work changes and that the dispute reflected "broader issues" at the ABC.

Floor managers have been stood down without pay each day for the past two weeks because they refused to operate cameras during news bulletins. They are receiving strike pay from the union.

South Australian meat workers locked out

Meat workers employed at the Teys Bros in Naracoorte, South Australia (SA) were locked out indefinitely on February 20 after refusing to sign non-union work contracts known as Australian Workplace Agreements.

At the same time the company is using 20 guest workers to maintain production in the plant. These employees are on temporary 475 work visas. It is not known whether they are being paid award rates.

The guest workers are in an invidious position because they are miles from home and almost totally reliant on the contracting company that employs them. SA Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union officials, instead of mobilising meatworkers in statewide action, have called on federal immigration minister Amanda Vanstone to "intervene" in the dispute. Rather than assist the locked out workers this could lead to the withdrawal of the overseas employees' visas and their deportation.

Auckland Starbucks workers strike

Two Starbucks stores in Auckland, New Zealand were closed for two hours by strike action and picketing on February 18. The lightning strike by young workers at Queen Street and Karangahape Road outlets were part of a campaign of industrial action for a \$12 minimum wage, secure hours and an end to youth rates.

Before the walkout, the workers sent text messages calling for supporters to join pickets outside the Starbuck stores. Within half an hour 40 supporters and other members of the public as well as striking employees from the Queen Street McDonalds joined the protest.

A spokesman for the strikers said that McDonalds, Starbucks and other fast food companies were not treating their concerns seriously. Work conditions and poor pay at the various food chains are the result of "the entire industry's race to the bottom," he said.

New Zealand power workers still locked out

Electricity workers remain locked out in a dispute between Top Energy and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU). The lockout followed months of stalled negotiations over a collective employment agreement initiated by the union in May last year.

Top Energy locked out 58 workers in early February claiming that strike notices issued over the last four months meant it could no longer rely on union members being available for maintenance work. The company has agreed to a 5 percent pay rise but an EPMU spokesman said that management is attempting to claw-back conditions that would undermine the value of the wage increase.

Wellington Polytechnic staff to strike

Administration and support staff at Wellington Polytechnic (WelTec) voted overwhelmingly this week to take industrial action following a breakdown of collective agreement negotiations. The employer's offer on pay and conditions is significantly less than elsewhere in the tertiary sector. TIASA, the allied staff union, has been in negotiations with WelTec since early December. A union spokesperson said WelTec's intransigence had left workers with no option but to take industrial action.

New Zealand kindergarten dispute settled

The kindergarten teachers' union, the NZ Educational Institute (NZEI), has reached a settlement with the Ministry of Education and kindergarten associations in a dispute over hours of work and other employment conditions.

Under the new collective agreement, which will run for 13 months, kindergartens will "consult" with NZEI about the changes operating hours, working conditions and other matters. During this period both sides will "address major issues" arising from the introduction of 20 free hours of education for three and four year old children in July next year. The settlement also sets up a working party on operating hours and the implementation of the new policy.

The proposed settlement was taken to 1,760 kindergarten teachers at stop-work meetings during the week with a union negotiating team recommending it be ratified.

New Zealand meat inspectors act on pay

Meat inspectors in freezing works throughout New Zealand began a week of industrial bans on February 22 after mediation to settle a pay claim failed. The inspectors, members of the Public Service Association (PSA), are performing only limited mandatory meat inspection duties for the seven days. They are seeking a 5 percent pay increase annually for the next two years and extension of annual leave and sick leave provisions for employees who started after 1998.

More than 10 days of negotiation between Asure New Zealand and the PSA, including four sessions with mediators, failed to produce a settlement.



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