

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 March 2006

Korean railway workers strike

More than 16,000 workers across South Korea went on strike against the government-run Korean Railroad Corporation on March 1 for improved wages and working conditions.

The strike, which went ahead in defiance of the government's National Labor Relations Commission 15 day strike ban, caused widespread delays and cancellations with only 44 percent of services running. Freight and passenger train service were disrupted as was the Seoul subway.

The strike emerged over four major issues—opposition to further rail commercialisation, the reinstatement of 67 workers sacked after an earlier strike, the demand for 3,200 new jobs and improved conditions for non-regular employees.

The government responded to the strike by invoking special powers restricting strikes in industries deemed to be vital to the national economy while management recruited retired workers, non-unionised staff and military personnel to provide a skeleton staff.

Bangladeshi garment workers protest factory deaths

Hundreds of garment workers protested in Dhaka on February 24 condemning authorities over the death of 55 workers in a fire in a Chittagong garment factory. The protesters carried black flags as they marched in the city.

The 55 workers perished and 100 more were injured when flames engulfed KTS Textile Ltd at Kalurghat BSCIC industrial area on February 23. Many of those killed or badly injured were prevented from escaping because factory guards had locked the main entrance and other gates to prevent theft and to monitor the 600, mainly young women, working the night shift.

The protesters demanded an inquiry into the tragedy and the laying of charges against those found to be responsible. They also called for 500,000 taka (\$US7,142) compensation for each of the families of the workers who died and 300,000 taka to each injured worker.

A spokesman for the Bangladesh Garments Sramik Trade Union Kendra told the Dhaka rally that the government had three ministries and laws that were supposed to safeguard the rights of workers “but none of the ministries carry out their duties” or “take steps to prevent the recurrence of such tragic incidents”. Industrial fires, mainly resulting from owners' negligence, have claimed the lives of 338 workers during the last 15 years.

The Garments Sramik Oikya Forum also held a protest over the recent deaths and the Jatiya Sramik League, Samajtantrik Sramik Front and Bangladesh Students' Union issued press releases demanding compensation for the fire victims.

Punjab National Bank Officers in sit-down protests

Punjab National Bank officers held sit down protests at the bank's regional offices on February 23, including the head office in Chandigarh the state capital.

The officers, members of the All-India Punjab National Bank Officers Association, are protesting delays in promotions and want compensation for working late hours and full reimbursement for medical expenses. They are also calling for improved customer services in core banking branches,

better manpower planning and improved accountability at all levels. The union has threatened a one-day strike on March 31 if these demands are not met.

Protesting Lucknow university worker has heart attack

A hunger strike by a group of university workers outside the King George's Medical University (KGMU) in Lucknow in northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh is continuing.

On February 26, the fifth day of the action, one of the workers Suresh Mishra, president of Lucknow University Employees Association, suffered a heart attack. The health of the remaining seven workers has sharply deteriorated. They are protesting the harsh treatment of employees by university administration and want it to cease.

Bank workers rally over non-payment of salaries

Primary Agricultural Co-operative Bank (PACB) workers in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu rallied on February 27 in the state's capital Chennai. They were protesting the non-payment of salaries for more than a year for more than 2,000 workers in hundreds of bank's branches.

The workers demanded the Tamil Nadu state government intervene and pay an interim subsistence allowance to each bank employee equal to 50 percent of their last drawn salary until the bank is revamped. They also called on the government to revise the pay-scales of PACB workers in line with an agreement it made with the banking union.

Toyota union issue strike notice over sackings

The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) issued notice of strike this week after management at Toyota Kirloskar Motor (TKM), near Bangalore in Karnataka, announced it will sack 27 suspended workers. The suspensions were imposed after Toyota workers struck on January 6 over the dismissal of three colleagues who were involved in forming a union at the plant.

A spokesman for the CITU told the media that it would call a one-day strike on March 7 and an indefinite strike starting the third week of March if the sacked workers were not reinstated. Unions in Bangalore, together with the TKM union, also plan to rally at the Chief Minister's office to demand the state government intervene and oppose the TKM sackings.

Sri Lankan pharmacists strike over staff shortage

Pharmacists at Polonnaruwa Hospital in the North Central province of Sri Lanka struck on March 1 to demand the filling of all job vacancies at the hospital's pharmacies. The strike disrupted most hospital services, including surgical operations and some of the patients had to be transferred to other hospitals.

Although there should be 28 staff employed in the pharmacies there is only 11. While workers are forced to do overtime because of the staff shortages overtime payments are not made on time. This has already led to several strikes at the hospital.

Indonesian security guards protest for severance pay

Dozens of former security guards employed by city-owned PT Pulomas Jaya demonstrated outside the Jakarta City Hall on February 23 demanding severance pay. They also called on the governor to act against the company directors for violating labour laws.

The Indonesian Independent Labor Union (SPMI) claimed the company had excluded the security guards from the Jamsostek insurance scheme (pension fund) and then denied them severance pay after it outsourced their jobs.

In a separate dispute, the Indonesian High Court of State Administration Affairs this week ordered security company Group 4-Securicor to reinstate and pay backdated wages to over 200 employees it had fired illegally. Securicor workers were sacked after they went on strike in April 2005 for improved working conditions and to protest the company's refusal to offer severance packages following the merger of Group 4 and Securicor.

Airline workers strike over jobs outsourcing

Hundreds of maintenance workers employed by Qantas airlines in Sydney and Melbourne protested last week over company moves to outsource aircraft maintenance to Asia.

The workers held on-site meetings and later marched through airport passenger terminals. A spokesperson for the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union claimed that workers are being threatened with unemployment if they do not accept wage cuts in the latest negotiation for a new work agreement.

Maintenance workers picket Sydney Opera House

Maintenance workers and supporters picketed the Sydney Opera House on March 1 opposing pay and job cuts. United Group Services, a new company taking over the Opera House maintenance contract, wants 10 out of 13 workers to accept individual work agreements, cutting pay by \$250 a week. The three remaining workers, including the union delegate, were told that they would be dismissed.

Adriano Juarez, 56, one of the workers facing the sack, said: "I have a family of four children. I have responsibilities to them and all I am asking is for is to be able to keep my job." Juarez has ten-years service but was given only two weeks notice of his dismissal.

Engineering workers strike over wages

Over 80 workers at H&M Engineering plants at Rutherford and Muswellbrook, just north of Newcastle in New South Wales, walked off the job on February 27 for 48 hours. The strike followed a breakdown in negotiations between the company and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) for a new work agreement and a 4 percent pay rise annually for 3 years. According to the AMWU the company is stalling and attempting to drag out negotiations.

Construction workers defend union delegate

Construction workers employed on the Perth to Mandurah railway project went on strike on February 24 demanding the reinstatement of union delegate Peter Ballard. Ballard was sacked for allegedly failing to give a written guarantee to comply with his work contract.

Building contractor Leighton Kumagi claims Ballard breached his contract when he failed to get management permission before sending rail construction workers home on February 21 when the temperature reached 37.5C on February 21.

The workers struck defying the threat of individual fines of up to \$22,000 and a no-strike agreement endorsed by the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union. The CFMEU stated that it did not endorse or encouraged the strike. Workers remain on strike and are due to meet to discuss the issue further.

New Zealand fast food workers' strikes spread

Young workers in fast food franchises McDonalds, Burger King, Restaurant Brands (KFC, Pizza Hut, Starbucks) and Wendy's in New Zealand are continuing a campaign of industrial action in support of a \$12 minimum wage, an end to youth rates and secure working hours.

Over last weekend, workers at two Burger King outlets in West Auckland became the first in the company's New Zealand chain to strike. The workers walked out, defying dismissal threats by management. In Porirua, near Wellington, one of the highest volume KFC stores in the country was closed when the entire crew walked off the job. Twenty off-

duty colleagues and 50 supporters joined them at a protest.

In central Auckland, 60 call-centre workers employed to take phone orders for KFC and Pizza Hut went on strike for one hour on February 24. They called on customers ringing in to leave a message of support. The call-centre is one of the lowest paying in the country. Employees want a training rate of \$11 and \$12.50 after 3 months as well as a 50 percent discount on Restaurant Brands' food.

A spokesman for the SuperSizeMyPay.Com campaign said that the actions were a part of an escalating month of industrial action in the fast food industry leading up to a demonstration and concert on March 18.

Auckland polytechnic staff picket over pay

Staff at West Auckland polytechnic Unitec last week voted to step up action in support of a pay increase. The administrative and support staff, members of the Tertiary Institutes Allied Staff Association, picketed the polytechnic for one week from February 23 and protested at the Unitec council meeting on February 27.

A union spokesman said the aim was to move the council from "an unrealistic and insulting offer". While other institutions in Auckland have reportedly been offered pay rises of 4 percent but Unitec has only offered 2.5 percent. The wage proposal is below the current rate of inflation.

New Zealand kindergarten teachers end six-month dispute

New Zealand kindergarten teachers voted last week to accept an agreement negotiated by the Educational Institute (NZEI) ending a six-month industrial dispute. More than 1,600 kindergarten teachers held the first ever national strike late last year over the government's plan to extend their hours as part of changes to the way early childhood education is funded and structured.

The deal with the Ministry of Education allows kindergartens, in "consultation" with the union, to extend operating hours at a local level. It also establishes a working party to look at kindergarten opening hours and teachers' hours of work. The deal, described by the union as a "compromise", was recommended by the NZEI negotiating team.



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