

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 March 2006

## Asia

### Indian state government workers strike

Three hundred thousand state government workers in the south Indian state of Karnataka walked out on March 9 to demand a 10 percent interim allowance backdated from January 1 this year. The payment is to be made pending the implementation of salary increases awarded by the Fifth Pay Commission.

The state government employees also want legislation to regulate government transfers, pension benefits based on the last drawn salary and the provision of time-bound promotions. Strikers demonstrated in city centres and held protest rallies throughout the state.

While union officials called off the strike after two hours, a government warning that stringent action would be taken against strikers under the Karnataka Civil Services (Prohibition of Strikes) Act had little impact on workers. There was almost total participation in the protest by state employees in Mysore, Mangalore, Hubli-Dharwad, Gulbarga, Belgaum, Bellary, Udupi and Bijapur. Attendance at government offices in the state's capital Bangalore, including the Secretariat, was extremely low.

Work in village councils also came to a standstill during the protest. Government and aided schools remained closed in Udupi district while some private colleges in Bangalore postponed the first year pre-university examinations. Only emergency services operated in the state's hospitals, including the Victoria Hospital and Lady Curzon Hospital in Bangalore and the Government General Hospital in Gulbarga city.

### South Indian workers fight for pension benefits

State Bank of India employees in the south Indian state of Kerala protested outside local branches on March 10 to demand improved pension payments. The bank workers are planning to observe March 18 as a protest day and will wear black badges at work. An indefinite strike is planned from April 4.

In a separate dispute, power workers from the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board demonstrated on March 10 in Tiruvannamala district against the state government's stand on pension benefits. Until recently workers who had served 30 years of service were eligible to receive a pension based on 50 percent of their last drawn salary but this has been cut by the state government. Workers also want 50 percent of their Dearness

Allowance merged with their basic pay.

### Indian Telecom contract workers protest for wage hike

Telecom contract workers and their families in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, protested on March 9 in support of a six-point charter of demands. The protest follows demonstrations on February 27 at local Telecom branches over the same issues.

The charter includes a minimum daily wage of 92 rupees (\$US2) for 430 contract workers involved in housekeeping; the compulsory provision of Provident Fund (PF) and Employment State Insurance (ESI) benefits in line with the Central Government scheme; prompt salary distribution to contract workers involved in laying and maintenance of cables; and compulsory overtime payment.

The demonstrations were organised by Telecom Contract Workers Union together with Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited Employees Union. Contract employers last month ruled out any wage increase.

### Strikes continue to erupt in Vietnam

The number of workers on strike at Taiwanese-owned shoe factory Pou Chen Vietnam in the country's southern Dong Nai province reached 8,000 on March 13. Employees are demanding improved wages and working conditions.

The strike is the latest in a series of wildcat walkouts since December by thousands employed in foreign-owned Asian plants in Vietnam. The country's strictly-controlled cheap labour workforce is the main attraction for overseas investors with unskilled workers in footwear, textiles and other export factories paid about \$US2 a day.

The government and the state-controlled unions have opposed the strikes. Under Vietnamese law union members are required to seek official authorisation 20 days before even considering any strike action.

A letter in January to the government from the European Chamber of Commerce in Vietnam voiced concerns that the escalating strike action could spread to European-owned plants. It pointed out that one of the main attractions for foreign investors in Vietnam was that the workforce was "not prone to industrial action".

Senior Labor Ministry official Pham Minh Huan warned this week that action was needed "to limit the spread of strikes" because they created "an unstable environment for foreign investment".

### **Guest workers in Taiwan end strike**

Guest Thai workers in Taiwan ended a two-day strike over pay deductions on March 14. They returned to work after their employer CTCI, Taiwan's largest engineering consulting firm, agreed to stop charging brokerage fees for employees but only if they worked more than 22 days a month.

CTCI recruited the Thai workers for a construction project in the Formosa Plastic Group's naphtha cracking complex in the coastal town of Mailiao. CTCI deducts \$NT4,300 (\$US132) each month from every employee's salary for accommodation, meals and brokerage fees. The strike began after CTCI workers learnt that Thai employees at a South Korean company on the same site did not have any deductions.

Before returning to work hundreds of strikers blocked roads to the construction site and protested outside the company's management centre.

The strike was the latest in a series of protests by guest workers over poor working conditions and wages in Taiwan. In August last year, 300 Thai workers protesting poor accommodation and food, broke up a construction site in the southern city of Kangshan and clashed violently with police.

### **Australia and the Pacific**

#### **ATM technicians strike**

Striking automatic teller machine (ATM) technicians from National Cash Register returned to work on March 15 after a two-day strike across three states. Around two-thirds of the company's 150 technical staff walked out on March 13 after management refused to increase a 3 percent pay offer. The workers, who are members of the Australian Services Union (ASU), also want the company to drop plans to introduce adverse changes to working hours and eliminate an allowance paid to technicians using their own cars for work.

The strike affected ATM servicing in New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland and other computerised equipment at Qantas, KFC Corp and Apple computers. An ASU spokesperson claimed that the workers had a pay increase in the last five years.

#### **ACT teachers stop work over wages**

About 3,000 public school and Institute of Technology teachers in Canberra attended a four-hour stop-work meeting on March 14 and then marched to a rally outside the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Legislative Assembly.

The protest was in support of a new wages and conditions agreement, including a 12 percent pay rise over three years to bring ACT teachers' wages in line with those paid in the neighbouring state of New South Wales.

Despite negotiations for the last eight months, the ACT Labor government has refused to increase its 9 percent pay rise offer over three years. The government claims that it has a budget deficit and cannot afford the extra \$15 million per year needed to meet the teachers' claim.

#### **Electricians strike over safety**

Electricians at Energex in Queensland went on strike on

March 16 over safety, wages, working conditions and other issues. The Electrical Trade Union (ETU) claims that the company is allowing the employment of unskilled labour in its new vegetation-management contracts.

An ETU spokesman said the union had complained to the Electrical Safety Office about "non-electrical workers, who do not have the necessary training, qualifications or experience, cutting vegetation that was touching live 11,000 volt power lines". He also said that Energex had dismissed the allegations as "unfounded", despite documentary evidence from a live-line auditor.

The union said that Energex was forcing contractors to offer the lowest price to gain work. This was impacting on wages, working conditions and "putting workers lives at risk," he said.

#### **New Zealand hospital workers discuss pay campaign**

On March 8, hospital orderlies, cleaners and food service workers, together with home support employees, attended stop-work meetings across New Zealand to discuss a campaign for a national collective work contract, including improved wages. About 100 workers from Waikato Hospital demonstrated in Hamilton during the stoppage.

A spokesman for Service and Food Workers' Union (SWFU) said some of the employees were being paid rates as low as \$9.75 an hour and claimed that the move by District Health Boards over the past 15 years to contract out services had left wages lagging. To date, the SFWU has not announced the pay increase it will seek.

#### **New Zealand meat inspectors end industrial action**

Meat inspectors in New Zealand this week called off industrial action on the recommendation of the Public Service Association (PSA) after the union reached an agreement with the employer during two days of mediation. The inspectors want a 5 percent pay increase for the next two years and an extension of annual leave and sick pay provisions for inspectors employed since 1998.

The 750 meat inspectors are employed by state-owned enterprise Asure in freezing works and meat processing plants nationwide. All stock killed in New Zealand plants must be inspected before being sold.

For the past two weeks inspectors have been working to rule, refusing to trim meat, conduct external training, or disease and infection testing. The PSA has yet to release details of the proposed settlement but will hold a series of meetings with inspectors over the next two weeks.



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