

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 April 2006

Indonesian workers continue protests over manpower laws

On March 29, around 5,000 workers demonstrated outside the Jakarta Regional Legislative Assembly against the government's plan to revise manpower laws. The changes will undermine minimum wage provisions, restrict the right to strike, reduce severance pay and give employers greater freedom to discipline workers.

The protesters carried banners reading, "Reject revision of law on manpower", "Reject modern slavery", "Reject pro-capitalist liberal law" and "Revision of manpower law violates workers' rights." The demonstration was organised by the Indonesian Workers Union Congress (KSPI) and involved 15 labour unions. The rally dispersed after four hours when a number of legislators claimed they sympathised with the demonstrators' concerns.

South Korean truck drivers push for strike

Around 1,000 truck drivers in Gwangju, South Korea, went on strike on March 30 as part of a campaign for higher transportation fees and over the sacking of colleagues. Union officials from the Korean Cargo Transport Workers Federation brought forward the strike, originally set for April 3, after coming under pressure from rank and file workers.

The strikers used hundreds of trucks to block four main roads leading to the Samsung Electronics factory in Gwangju. Following the lead of the Gwangju drivers, others in Busan, Ulsan and a number of major transportation centres also struck. Police were brought in to clear roadblocks.

The strikes erupted after Far East Container Company, a subcontractor of Samsung Electronics, failed to renew the contracts of 30 of 69 drivers in February when they called for transportation fees to be raised. While the company has agreed to reinstate the laid off workers, drivers want to by-pass the subcontractor and are demanding that a new contract be signed directly with Samsung.

Jammu and Kashmir health workers stage sit down protest

Temporary paramedics employed by the Health and Family Welfare Department held a sit down protest at the District Health Service complex in Jammu in the northwestern Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir on March 27.

The protesters want paramedics, some who have worked for the department for 15 years, to be made permanent. Contract workers in other state government departments, including Forestry and Information, have been made permanent.

Indian doctors and health workers protest privatisations

Hundreds of doctors, paramedics and health workers from the

Punjab State Health Department held a sit-down protest on March 23 at Sangur. They were opposing the Punjab government's plan to privatise state hospitals and to hand over 1,310 state subsidiary health centres to local government bodies. They also want the regular recruitment of doctors and other medical staff to government health institutions.

The sit-down at the Sangur Civil Hospital was followed by a march to the District Commissioner's office where protestors handed over a memorandum to the Deputy Commissioner, the local representative of the state government.

Meanwhile, teachers at more than 160 non-government university colleges in Punjab and the union territory of Chandigarh held a sit-down protest on March 24. They are demanding the state government honor its promise to introduce a pension scheme before the end of this month.

Indian workers demand reopening of factory

More than 600 former employees of Ace Glass Containers Limited (AGCL) in Thondamanatham, Pondicherry, held a sit-down protest outside the Labor Commissioner's office in Gandhi Nagar on March 22. They want the Pondicherry state government to demand the glass factory be reopened.

AGCL closed the factory on January 25, after workers began a go-slow demanding a 2,150-rupee (\$US50) monthly salary increase promised by the company's previous managers.

Sri Lankan Prima food workers continue strike

Around 1,600 workers at seven chicken farms and the animal feed production facility of Ceylon Grain Elevators Company (Prima) in the eastern Sri Lankan port city of Trincomalee went on strike on March 23. Around 1,000 Prima flourmill workers have been on strike since March 15.

Some of the workers began a hunger strike opposite the company head office in Rajagiriya, Colombo, on March 23. Strikers also held a protest march from Rajagiriya to Narahenpita and picketted the Labour Relations ministry.

The strikers want a 2,500 rupee (\$US24) monthly pay rise and a 150 rupee increase for daily-hire contractors, an end to management intimidation of union members, and safety gear for employees handling heavy sacks. They are also demanding reinstatement of a fellow worker sacked after he complained to the Labour Department about management harassment. A spokesman for the Inter-company Employees Union at the factory said that company officials had issued death threats against union activists.

The strike has brought all flour production and distribution, and the processing of chickens to a halt. According to the workers,

instead of increasing salaries the company is trying to lay off the workers using the drop in chicken meat sales due to concerns about the bird flu epidemic. Management has now announced an official lockout.

Unions protest new IR laws

About 1,000 union delegates from various unions marched through Melbourne on March 29 to protest the Howard government's workplace reforms. The delegates heard union leaders declare Prime Minister Howard "public enemy number one" and endorsed a campaign for the repeal of the new industrial relations (IR) laws.

Union leaders, however, made no call for strikes or other industrial action but backed the Australian Council of Unions (ACTU) planned campaign of limited demonstrations over the next three months. The protests are aimed at winning support for a Labor government at the next federal election.

ACTU secretary Greg Combet told delegates that the unions did not expect Labor to reinstate workers' rights overturned by Howard government since it came to power in 1996.

He said the ACTU campaign was to replace the new IR laws with a system based on "worker protection through a safety net" and re-establish the unions' right to collective bargaining.

Social workers protest lack of funding and resources

About 40 Department for Community Development workers in Midland, east of Perth in Western Australia, voted this week to close the office for 24 hours in protest over serious staff, funding and resource shortages and increased workloads.

The Community and Public Sector Union members also pledged to maintain a one-day per week office closure until the government concedes to their demands.

ACT catholic teachers vote to strike

One hundred staff from 27 catholic schools in the Australian Capital Territory voted unanimously on March 28 to strike for a pay rise. The territory's 780 catholic schoolteachers want a 13 percent wage increase over three years after their current wage deal expired on March 1.

The Catholic Education Office is refusing to negotiate before the territory's public-school teachers' settle their pay claim. The teachers, members of the Independent Education Union, will strike for half a day next term.

New Zealand fast food workers accept pay offer

Workers at KFC, Pizza Hut and Starbucks in New Zealand voted this week to accept the latest pay offer from employer Restaurant Brands. The agreement will mean that 600 employees aged 18 and under will be paid 90 percent of the adult wage. Until now they have been paid the youth rate, which is 80 percent of the adult wage. The company claims it will move to "phase out" youth rates.

The predominantly young workers have been involved in industrial action over the past five months to demand an end to youth rates and for across-the-board wage increases. The settlement came shortly after a strike and demonstration by 1,000 Auckland school students in support of the fast food workers and a week after BP announced that it would scrap youth rates.

The Unite union, which ran the pay campaign, says it will turn its attention to other restaurant chains employing youth, including

McDonald's and Burger King.

New Zealand hospital workers picket over pay

A meagre 75 cents per hour increase in New Zealand's legal minimum wage this week was marked by protests by disgruntled health support workers. Health support workers picketed hospitals in Hawkes Bay and Wanganui and outside the Wellington offices of cleaning contractor Spotless Services.

Most of the service workers have had to wait until the minimum wage announcement for a pay rise. Cleaners, orderlies, kitchen and food service workers, however, claim that many are still only receiving the legal minimum wage of \$NZ10.25 an hour.

One cleaner said she was paid \$8.87 an hour when she started in 1990 and that the hourly rate had only risen by 80 cents over the past 16 years. She claimed that this week's rise barely covered her increased travel costs.

The pickets also marked the Service and Food Workers Union's campaign for a single national multi-employer collective agreement to cover cleaners, kitchen and food service staff, orderlies and other service workers in all public hospitals. The union has called for "living wages and a fair deal" but has yet to announce what pay rise it wants.

New Zealand university staff meets over pay claim

Academic and general staff at New Zealand's seven main universities met this week to endorse a national pay claim. The employees want national multi-employer collective employment agreements.

It follows union ballots which endorsed university union calls for national bargaining this year. The union leadership in the face of employer resistance, however, dropped a similar claim, during the last pay round. The current enterprise-based agreements are due to expire on April 30. The unions are currently involved in tripartite negotiations with vice-chancellors and the government over tertiary sector funding.

New Caledonia broadcasting staff end two day strike

New Caledonia's public radio and television news station RFO (Réseau France Outre-mer) resumed operations on March 25 after workers ended a two-day strike. The employees, who are members of the USTKE (Confederation of Kanak and Exploited Workers Unions), walked of the job to demand reinstatement of a technician and union activist who was sacked for so-called "misconduct" during a three-month picket outside the radio/TV studio in 2004.

The technician was not reinstated but the union has accepted an RFO offer to move him to another public television group.

Solomon Island teachers threaten to strike

Solomon Islands National Teachers Association general secretary Johnley Hatimoana warned the government last week that if employment conditions endorsed by the National Education Board 15 months ago are not implemented by April 3 there would be a national strike of teachers. Teachers want the salary adjustments backdated to January 1, 2005.



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