

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 April 2006

Indian bank workers on strike

More than 200,000 bank workers, officers and senior executives began a national indefinite strike on April 3 shutting down 9,000 branches of India's largest bank, the government-owned State Bank of India (SBI).

The strike erupted after discussions between India's Chief Labor Commissioner and bank unions for increased pensions stalled on April 1. SBI workers' pensions have not been increased since 1992 when they were fixed at 4,250 rupees (\$US95) a month. Unions want the pensions brought into line with those paid by other banking organisations, which set them at 50 percent of the last salary drawn by retiring employees.

The walkout not only hit banking services at SBI but also impacted on India's call money and foreign exchange markets where the bank is a major player. SBI handles 30 percent of all customers in the Indian banking industry and has offices in 34 countries.

Bank management petitioned the Delhi High Court for a "stay" on strike action. The unions, however, rejected a court recommendation not to strike with a union spokesman stating: "We had given sufficient notice to all the concerned authorities before proceeding on strike. The revision in the pension scheme has been pending for the last 14 years."

High school teachers boycott evaluating examination papers

On April 2, Chickballapur high school teachers in the south Indian state of Karnataka refused to mark Secondary School Leaving Certificate exam papers. They are demanding payment of an ex gratia 200 rupee monthly payment for schoolteachers recently announced in the Karnataka state assembly. So far the payment has only been made to primary school teachers.

The teachers also rallied in Chickballapur and marched to the local state administration building to present a memo with their demands.

Workers blockade Indian port

Workers blockaded the Rajiv Gandhi Container Terminal at Kochi Port in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala on April 3, bringing operations to a standstill. The port workers had been on strike for a week demanding salary revision and better working conditions. The last pay revision was 10 years ago.

The strike action and protest forced container terminal and shipping companies to transfer their business to neighbouring ports, such as Chennai and Tuticorin in Tamil Nadu and Mangalore in Karnataka.

The joint strike by seven unions began on March 26 but some of the unions withdrew after reaching an agreement with the Cochin Container Carriers Owners Welfare Association, which promised that workers' demands "would be addressed within 15 days".

Non-clinical contract workers demonstrate

Non-clinical contract workers at McGann Hospital in Shimoga city in Karnataka, India demonstrated outside of the deputy commissioner's office on April 1 over the abrupt termination of 77 contract workers. After the demonstration they presented a petition addressed to the state's medical education and higher education ministers demanding reinstatement.

Workers claim that the contractor, Vishnu Anegundi, has been harassing

the 77 workers for the past seven years, withholding salaries and registering false cases against them with the police.

Jammu and Kashmir electricity workers protest

Jammu and Kashmir electrical workers rallied in Srinagar and cities throughout the state on March 29 to demand payment of daily workers' wages, the processing of promotions and the sanctioning of ex-gratia payments to employees who die while on duty.

In Srinagar workers demonstrated outside the chief engineer's office. Jammu and Kashmir Central Non-Gazetted Electrical Employees Union officials met with the Divisional Commissioner after the demonstration.

Casual paramedical workers demand permanency

Casual paramedical employees held a sit-down protest in Jammu on March 27 to demand the Jammu and Kashmir state government make all temporary paramedical workers in the state's health and family welfare department permanent.

Speakers at the protest said that while permanent casual employees had been working in the department for more than 15 years they had not been made permanent.

Tamil Nadu domestics stage sit-down protest

Hundreds of Tamil Nadu Domestic Workers Federation members held a sit-down protest in Chennai, the state capital, on March 28. They were demanding the state government establish a minimum wage, set guidelines for employment, conditions and safety, and legislate social security provisions for domestic workers.

Sri Lankan transport workers strike for back pay

Thousands of transport workers at the Ceylon Transport Board (CTB) in Uva and Sabaragamuwa provinces walked out on April 3. The strikers, including drivers, conductors, mechanics and other staff, were demanding the immediate payment of 9,500 rupees (\$US95) in arrears from a salary increase promised by the 2005 budget and 1,000 rupee cost of living allowance promised in the 2006 budget.

They also want salaries to be paid on time and an advance payment for the forthcoming Sinhala-Hindu New Year festival. While it is customary in Sri Lanka to pay workers an advance for the New Year celebrations, transport depot management has refused to do so this year, claiming the government had stopped the necessary funds last December.

The strike brought operations at 20 depots to a standstill and workers in Uva province formed a committee to coordinate the action. Authorities encouraged private bus operators to increase services to counter the strike but this was largely unsuccessful.

The strike ended on April 6, after management promised to pay 4,500 rupees (\$US45) salary arrears and a 2,000 rupee festival advance. Management also promised a salary increase.

Radio therapists strike for improved conditions

Around 350 radiotherapists in Sri Lankan hospitals went on strike for two days on April 5. They were demanding compensation for work-related accidents and illnesses, action on delayed promotions, and the provision of a diploma for X-ray technicians who complete the relevant professional study course.

The strikers were also seeking retirement after 15 years of work, life insurance, monthly medical examination and staff increases. Many are now required to work for up to 15 hours because of the staff shortages.

According to reports, almost 23 percent of the therapists in hospitals are suffering from occupation related illnesses. Eight workers are currently being treated for cancer while others have had operations to remove thyroid glands. Workers also claim that radioactivity exposure has led to a number of therapists' children being born with deformities.

In a separate dispute, health workers laid-off from the Anuradhapura base hospital in Sri Lanka's North Central Province began a fasting sit-down protest outside the hospital from March 29. They are demanding reinstatement. More than 120 workers were suddenly laid off one month after having been employed on the basis of their "political affiliations".

Chinese workers protest slave-labour conditions

About 3,000 workers from Ruifeng Timber, a Hong Kong-owned furniture factory in Shenzhen, held a street protest on April 3 against slave-labour conditions. The demonstration was dispersed one hour after it began by hundreds of riot police. No one was injured.

Ruifeng Timber employees are forced to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week with only two days off each month. They are organised in production groups of 200 with only one person at a time permitted to go to the toilet or to get a drink of water. Workers also claim factory security guards beat them when they attempted to complain to management. Their complaints to local labour authorities have been ignored.

The company owns three factories in Shenzhen and has about 10,000 employees under the same appalling conditions. The workers are paid a monthly wage of about 1,000 yuan (\$US225).

Indonesian workers continue protests against new labor law

Tens of thousands of workers protested in major Indonesian cities on April 4 against a pro-business revision of the 2003 Labor Law. Over 5,000 workers rallied in Jakarta causing a traffic jam that lasted three hours. Thousands of others protested in Medan, Pekanbaru, Riau, Bandung, West Java, Semarang, Central Java, Yogyakarta, Surabaya and East Java.

The demonstrations, which are organised by the Confederation of All Indonesian Workers Union (KSPSI), are aimed at forcing the government to drop the revised Labor Law bill which will be submitted to the House of Representatives next week. KSPSI chairman Jacob Nuwa Wea said workers would hold a national strike "to achieve their rights", but only as a last resort.

The revised bill is designed "to revive the investment climate in Indonesia" at the expense of workers' wages, conditions and job security. The changes are aimed at creating greater labor market flexibility by allowing investors to implement five-year contract-based employment, outsource work and hire expatriates for all manager level positions. It also reduces severance and service payments for dismissed workers.

Sanyo workers in Indonesia return to work

Employees at electronics manufacturer PT Sanyo Jara Components Indonesia, in the city of Depok, returned to work on March 31 after a two-day strike. The workers struck to protest the non-payment of a 13 percent pay rise agreed by the company on January 1. They returned to work after the company agreed to pay the increase and offered an additional 3 percent.

Filipino university employees refuse to end picket

Sacked workers from the University of San Agustin this week defied a Philippines Supreme Court ruling in favour of university management and refused to end a picket at the university gates.

The 17 workers, all union officials, were sacked on April 2005 for their involvement in a strike over a collective bargaining work agreement in 2003. The Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court, which claimed that the union had not followed correct procedures before taking action, subsequently declared the strike illegal.

The University of San Agustin Employees Union said the picket would

remain because the 17 workers still have to file a motion for consideration by the Supreme Court.

Workers protest the Australian government's IR laws

Over 20 waterside workers in Fremantle, Western Australia staged a noisy demonstration at a ship launching by Prime Minister John Howard on April 6. They were protesting against WorkChoices, the government's new draconian industrial relations laws which allow employers slash long-standing work conditions, remove unfair dismissal laws for workers in small companies and restrict the right to strike.

A number of employers began cutting working conditions and sacking workers within days of the laws becoming operational on March 27. The Australian Council of Trade Unions, however, wants to prevent any widespread industrial action and is working to contain workers' opposition to limited protests.

New Zealand journalists walk out over pay

Ten journalists at the Fairfax-owned *Timaru Herald* walked out for three days on March 30 over the provincial newspaper's failure to settle a new collective employment agreement.

The workers, which constitute a majority of the newspaper's editorial staff, want a 5 percent pay rise, back-dated to the expiry of the old agreement on October 31 last year, but the company has only offered a 3 percent increase with no backdating. The journalists had previously taken limited industrial action, including refusing to cover court reporting.

New Zealand meat workers strike called off

The NZ Meat Workers Union called off a planned strike by 4,000 workers at the Alliance Group's eight meat-processing plants after the company agreed to begin negotiations on wages and conditions. Alliance had been served notice of a 24-hour strike on April 3 because workers were unhappy with inadequate pay and poor working conditions offered under a national collective contract by the company.

A union spokesman said the strike notice was withdrawn when discussions resulted in a "compromise on the sticking points" and that after some adjustments a settlement would be prepared for ratification.

NZ hospice nurses protest for pay parity

New Zealand hospice staff held protests in two provincial centres last week to achieve pay parity with public hospital nurses who earn up to \$15,000 more per year. In Palmerston North, nurses from Arohanui Hospice collected more than 400 signatures on a letter to the health minister demanding equal pay. One palliative care nurse said none of the workers had ever protested before. Hundreds of people supported a two-hour campaign in central New Plymouth by nurses from Te Rangimarie Hospice.

A Nurses' Organisation spokesman said the union had been in negotiations with 15 hospices for a national collective agreement covering 300 nurses but claimed that sufficient funding "simply isn't there". Eleven out of 21 district health boards have been given some government funding for a wage increase but not the MidCentral Health which covers the area where the nurses protested. Hospices are only partially government funded and rely on private fundraising to try and make up shortfalls.

Auckland polytechnic staff accept pay settlement

The union representing New Zealand polytechnic administration staff, the Tertiary Institutes Allied Staff Association, called off industrial action against Auckland Unitec after reaching a pay settlement this week.

The union recommended workers accept the deal despite not achieving the 4 percent wage rise they were fighting for. The settlement included a 3 percent increase, a one-off taxable payment of \$300 and an extra 5 days holiday. Non-union members who were stood down for a month will also receive the increases.

New Caledonia nickel miners march to save jobs

About 200 employees from the Goro Nickel Company marched on the French High Commission in Noumea on April 4 to demand the

government take action to secure their jobs. The company is set to “temporarily” lay off its 2,000-strong workforce.

Work at the Goro construction site in the south of the territory stopped after local activists protesting environmental damage caused by the company were alleged to have vandalised the site on April 2. The company has informed the government that it will not resume operations until security at the site is guaranteed.



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