

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 December 2006

Asia

Indian government workers protest over pay

Kerala State Industrial Development Corporation (KSIDC) employees protested in Thiruvananthapuram on December 4 to demand that a state government pay revision be made retrospective to March 2003. The last pay revision in 1998 was to be followed by another in 2003. The latest revision, however, is backdated to April 1, 2006.

Workers are threatening to strike or implement a go-slow if the issue is not dealt with urgently. KSIDC is ranked fourth among the 38 profit-making public sector companies in Kerala.

In a separate dispute, hundreds of Karnataka state government employees demonstrated in Bangalore on December 5 against the federal government's Pension Regulatory Bill. The bill will curtail state workers' pension benefits.

As part of the statewide "Pension Bachao Day" campaign, protestors chanting anti-government slogans staged a sit-down protest on Bangalore's busy Mahatma Gandhi Road. The protestors are members of the Akhila Karnataka State Government Employees' Federation

Municipal workers protest over staffing

Pudukottai District Local Administration Department workers protested outside the Pudukottai municipal office in the south Indian state of Tamilnadu on December 4. They want the administration to regularise the services of daily-wage workers, fill all vacant posts and provide a bonus for the forthcoming Pongal festive season.

Employees claim that staff shortages had impacted severely drinking water supplies and undermined the maintenance of roads, streetlights and sanitation facilities. The protestors are members of the Pudukottai District Local Administration Department Workers' Association, which is affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

Irrigation workers demand pension for retirees

On December 5, employees from the Orissa Lift

Irrigation Corporation (OLIC) demonstrated on Mahatma Gandhi Marg in Bhubaneswar demanding the government pay outstanding pension entitlements.

A spokesman for the Orissa Lift Irrigation Employees' Federation said that workers who had accepted "voluntary" retirement four years ago had still not received their pension. While the Provident Fund Commissioner directed the payment of pensions the state government has appealed this order. To date, 7,300 field staff have been retrenched through early retirements.

OLIC employees are threatening a campaign of civil disobedience, including protests outside the chief minister's residence, if the issue is not resolved by January.

Sri Lankan graduate employees demand teaching positions

Graduate workers protested in front of education ministry offices in Gatambe and Kandy on December 5. The workers, who were recruited as non-academic staff to the Department of Education in Sri Lanka's central province more than a year ago, are demanding permanent employment as teachers.

While there are currently around 800 graduates working as non-academic staff they have not yet been offered suitable jobs with appropriate salaries.

Jakarta ambulance workers strike for wages

Nearly 300 ambulance workers employed by a private agency run by prominent surgeons in Jakarta struck on December 4. The action has cut the number of responses to emergencies by 50 percent and forced the agency to reduce its service hours.

The workers are demanding a pay increase, permanency and dismissal of the agency chairman. One worker said that long-time employees were paid only 2 million rupiah (\$US217) a month, including allowances. Contract workers are only paid between 850,000 and 1 million rupiah.

Twelve employees filed an official complaint at City

Hall and have demanded that the ambulance service be put under city administration control.

Filipino port workers demand work agreement

About 150 port workers at Dumaguete City struck on December 1 to demand the Philippines Ports Authority (PPA) renegotiate a collective work agreement that expired two years ago. The Dumaguete Port Workers Arrastre and Stevedoring Services (DPWASS) strike is disrupting the movement of cargo but passenger services are not affected.

Since taking over the port in September 2002, the PPA has continuously refused to negotiate with the DPWASS because a long-running dispute between the union and the CISAI, a rival union, had caused major disruptions. The PPA, however, may be stalling until a buy-out for stevedoring services by a private bidder is finalised. The union has called for the Department of Labor to assume jurisdiction over the dispute.

South Korean truck drivers return to work

Truck drivers in South Korea ended a five-day strike on December 5 after National Assembly legislators agreed to introduce laws to improve the cargo fee system and recognise labour rights for haulers in February next year.

The Korea Cargo Transport Workers' Federation has threatened further industrial action if the government and the National Assembly "fail to deal with the [labour] bills sincerely" or if law enforcement authorities begin a crackdown against the drivers.

The government has previously refused to legally recognise strikes by truck drivers, claiming they are not employees because they own their trucks. It has also opposed demands for the introduction of a standard transport fee guideline claiming the measure "went against market economy principles".

Australia and the Pacific

Manufacturing workers end strikes at two plants

Australian Manufacturing Union (AMWU) members at two New South Wales companies returned to work this week after the union and management brokered a new collective work agreement. Workers at Trafalgar Building Products had been on strike for four weeks while workers at Australian Aluminum Finishing (AAF) were out for two weeks.

Employees walked off the job at both plants after lengthy negotiations for a collective agreement broke down. According to an AMWU spokesman, the companies have now "backed down" on major issues concerning security of entitlements and working conditions. He claimed that the company had made a "fair

pay offer" but provided no details. Employees at both sites will vote on the collective agreements next week.

New Zealand lab workers end strike

About 1,200 striking laboratory workers employed in public hospitals, the New Zealand Blood Service and three private laboratories ended a one-week strike on December 6 but with no gains. Informal talks between District Hospital Board (DHB) representatives and the Medical Laboratory Workers Union (MLWU) failed to reach any concrete agreement.

The workers are seeking a 5 percent annual pay increase and a starting salary of \$45,000 (\$US28,840). The strike caused major disruptions to hospital services forcing the rescheduling of over 400 operations. Even so, the DHBs refuse to budge from their original offer of 5.5 percent over two years with no increase in the starting salary.

There are no formal negotiations set down and the DHBs have indicated they will not meet with the union unless it modifies its demands. The union has not yet indicted whether it will take further industrial action and is obliged by law to give 14 days notice.

Power maintenance workers take industrial action

At least 36 members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, employed by Australian company United Group in New Zealand, began industrial action on November 30 after pay negotiations broke down. Union members are refusing overtime or do out-of-town work.

According to the union, many of the workers have not had a pay rise for four years and are paid just \$20 an hour (\$US12.80), about \$6 less than other trades.

New Zealand cleaners begin "fair deal" campaign

Auckland and Wellington cleaners began a campaign in support of better pay and working conditions on December 6. The cleaners will protest at city office buildings where some of the worst companies in the contract cleaning business operate.

Api Ielemia, a member of the Service and Food Workers Union, said she gets just \$10.95 (\$US7.03) an hour and is not guaranteed enough hours of work to ensure decent weekly earnings. The New Zealand campaign is being conducted in conjunction with cleaners in Australia where exploitation by contract companies is just as bad.



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