

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 February 2007

Vietnamese garment workers strike

Around 4,500 workers at South Korean-owned garment producer Hansoll Vina in Vietnam's southern Binh Duong province have been on strike since early February over poor pay, bad working conditions and management abuse.

Workers allege that Korean managers regularly insulted employees and demanded that they work when ill. Management also refuses to increase salaries periodically in accordance with Vietnamese labour law. The average monthly salary at the plant is currently VND870,000 (\$US54). Binh Duong province, which is 30 kilometres west of Ho Chi Minh City, has been more successful at attracting foreign investment than any other Vietnamese province because of lower wages.

The Hansoll Vina strike is the largest since a series of walkouts during a two-month period last year involving more than 140,000 workers. The strikes forced the government to raise the minimum wage for workers at foreign-owned companies.

Nurses demand right to wear headscarfs

Around 28 nurses at the privately run Kebonjati Hospital in Bandung, West Java rallied on February 12 to demand an end to a ban on Muslim nurses wearing headscarves (jilbabs) at work.

Nurse Yanti Sumiyanti said: "As soon as we arrive here (at the hospital) we are forced to take off our headscarves and serve the patients using nurse's uniforms as required by the management." Yanti represented the nurses at a meeting with management to discuss the issue. Head of the Bandung police detective unit also attended the meeting in an attempt to intimidate the nurses.

Nurses' calls on management to lift the ban over the past two years have been continuously rejected on the grounds that the hospital does not represent any

particular religion.

A spokesman for the nurses said that management should uphold the right of Muslim women to wear headscarves because it was guaranteed in the country's constitution. Following the protest, three management representatives signed a letter in an individual capacity supporting the nurses' demand.

Indian municipal workers on hunger strike

Eleven municipal employees began a three-day hunger strike outside the Kadapa Municipal Corporation office in Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh on February 13. The protest is part of a campaign by municipal workers for a 47-point log of demands. These include, payment of salary arrears to civic staff, a minimum wage for contractual staff, a provident fund, weekly days off and the supply of uniforms, shoes, towels, soap and oil.

Municipal employees in Putlampalle, Palempalle and Ramarajupalle have not been paid for the last nine months while those in other areas have not received salaries for three months. The workers are members of the Andhra Pradesh Municipal Workers and Employees Union.

Indian railway employees demand better conditions

Hundreds of employees affiliated to the Southern Railway Employees' Sangh held a lunch-hour demonstration near the divisional railway manager's office in Tiruchi in the southern state of Tamilnadu on February 12.

They want provision of an interim relief fund of 1,000 rupees (\$US22), effective from January 1, payment of rent allowances outstanding for 19 months and removal of an upper limit on bonuses. The workers also want the current contract system for providing passenger amenities abolished, pensions for casual labourers and the filling of existing vacancies.

Employees from the Golden Rock Workshop held a separate protest over the same issues.

Qantas baggage-handlers strike at Perth airports

Around 300 baggage-handlers and airport workers at Qantas domestic and international airports in Perth, Western Australia held a four-hour snap strike on February 11 over management abuse and safety concerns.

The workers, members of the Transport Workers Union, alleged that a supervisor verbally abused two baggage handlers who raised concerns with him about unsafe equipment. Workers at both terminals walked out after learning they would be docked four hours pay for attending a stop-work meeting to discuss the issue. The meeting had lasted just over one hour.

The snap strike caused a number of domestic flights to be cancelled and delays to international flights despite managerial staff attempting to load baggage.

Ambulance workers oppose sacking

Members of the Ambulance Employees Association (AEA) in Melbourne, Victoria will ban attending all non-life threatening cases for a period of two hours on February 18. It is the first such action by ambulance workers in the state for 33 years.

The AEA confirmed this week that the ban would go ahead after the Metropolitan Ambulance Service (MAS) refused to reinstate a paramedic. The worker in question was sacked after being accused of raping a patient while on duty. He is due to appear in Melbourne Magistrates' Court on March 2.

AEA state secretary Steve McGhie said that the sacked worker had been denied natural justice because the MAS had pre-empted the result of criminal charges he is facing. He said members were concerned that management had set a precedent and warned that further industrial action could follow. The dispute is due to go before the Industrial Relations Commission.

New Zealand university staff meet over salaries

Academic and general staff at New Zealand universities began the 2007 salary round with a series of meetings last week. Ballots will be conducted later this month to determine whether to initiate bargaining for a national multi employer collective agreement recommended by the Association of University Staff (AUS). Current site-based agreements are due to expire on May 31.

Previous attempts by tertiary sector unions to

establish a national employment contract across the seven main universities were abandoned in the face of employer opposition. Instead, the unions conducted tripartite discussions with vice-chancellors and the Labour government. AUS general secretary Helen Kelly claimed the process "allowed the unions to work constructively with the government and vice-chancellors to address workplace issues ... including funding and salaries".

However, last year's salary increase of between 4 and 7.5 percent was well below the 30 percent the AUS says is necessary to make New Zealand university salaries comparable with international standards.

New Zealand cleaners protest

Cleaners defied threats of a court compliance order this week and joined Valentine's Day protest vigils outside the Wellington State Insurance Tower and the PriceWaterhouseCoopers building in Auckland. The 24-hour demonstrations were held to highlight office cleaners' poor working conditions and low pay.

Workers want higher rates of pay, better opportunities for full-time work and more realistic workloads. A Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) spokesman claimed that Total Property Services (TPS), one of the biggest cleaning contractors in New Zealand with more than 850 workers, had urgently sought the compliance order to prevent its staff from taking part.



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