

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 February 2007

Asia

Indian railway workers protest over staff cuts

Workers from the South Western Railway Workshop Division of Indian Railways (IR) held a sit-down protest outside the Hubli workshop in the southern state of Karnataka on February 15. Railway workers in Mysore also demonstrated at the local railway office as a part of the national “mass campaign day”.

Employees complain that staff levels have been substantially cut and that 183,000 posts are now vacant, with 60 percent of these in the safety division. They want the government to grant rail workers interim relief and end downsizing. They also oppose the appointment of a high-powered committee to extend duty hours.

The state-owned IR is one of the largest and busiest rail networks in the world, transporting near six billion passengers and almost 750 million tonnes of freight annually. It is also one of the world’s largest commercial and utility employers with more than 1.6 million employees. The National Federation of Indian Railway Men and South Western Railway Employees’ Sangh organised the protests.

In a separate campaign, hundreds of railway workers in Tiruchi in the southern state of Tamilnadu on February 12 held a lunch-hour demonstration near the divisional railway manager’s office. They want interim relief of 1,000 rupees (\$US22), backdated to January 2006.

Others demands include, immediate release of a rent allowance, removal of an upper ceiling on bonuses, abolition of the contracting out of passenger amenities’ cleaning, pension benefits for casual workers, and the filling of existing vacancies. Employees from the Golden Rock Workshop held a separate demonstration on similar issues.

Indian municipal workers protest

Anantapur Municipal Corporation (AMC) workers in Andhra Pradesh marched on the AMC’s office in Andhra Pradesh on February 19 to demand the state government

fulfil its pledge to revise wages and give permanency to contract workers. Employees also want payment of wages in the first week of every month, allotment of house sites and the corporation to supply work implements and cleaning toiletries.

The workers are members of the Municipal Udyoga Karmika Sangham, the Garbage Workers’ Union and Public Health Contract Workers’ Union of the AMC.

Indian telecom workers demonstrate in two cities

Around 50 telecom employees from Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) held a sit-down protest outside the general manager’s office in Tuticorin on February 15. They want cancellation of conduct, discipline and appeal (CDA) rules that discriminate against workers and place restrictions on union office-bearers.

Workers want BSNL to take compassionate grounds into consideration when employing people, permanency for casual workers and transport allowances. BSNL workers in Nagercoil, in the same state, protested in front of the company’s office on the same day for similar demands. The United Forum of BSNL Unions, a consortium of various telecom employees’ unions, organised the demonstrations.

Sri Lankan cooperative workers strike for allowances

Workers at the Educational Employees’ Cooperative Society affiliated to the National Cooperative Council in Sri Lanka began an indefinite strike on February 16 to demand cost-of-living and other allowances agreed by management several months ago. Employees say that the strike will continue until management honours its pledge and factor the allowances into the society’s operating budget.

In separate dispute, volunteer casual health workers at the Kantale hospital near the country’s war-torn eastern region began a hunger strike on the hospital roof on February 13. They are demanding confirmation in their posts. There are currently 20 volunteer casual health

employees at the hospital.

Australia and the Pacific

Australian ballet dancers threaten strike action

Dancers employed by West Australian Ballet met on February 22 to discuss possible strike action over a new work agreement.

The 21 dancers want a 20.5 percent pay rise over 18 months but the company has only offered a 14 percent increase over three years. The dancers, who are members of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), are currently paid between \$34,000 and \$43,000 a year.

The Australian Industrial Relations Commission this week granted a MEAA application to allow strike action during the agreement bargaining period. Any action must take place within the next 30 days.

Lawyers for the ballet company opposed the application, claiming that the union was not genuinely trying to reach agreement on a new pay deal. The company's claim was rejected by the AIRC. The ballet company is the oldest in Australia.

New Zealand manufacturing workers meet over pay campaign

Over 1,000 manufacturing workers in New Zealand attended a stop-work rally in New Plymouth on February 21 to launch the beginning of the 2007 pay campaign. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union organised the meeting to announce demands for a 5 percent pay increase. The demand, however, includes employer contributions to the government's KiwiSaver retirement scheme.

The claim follows last year's "Fair Share" campaign, which achieved a 5 percent pay rise in 70 percent of agreements across the sector. While the union claimed the outcome was "real pay rises into the pockets of real working families", the increases were minimal when set against an inflation rate of 2.6 percent.

EPMU secretary Andrew Little said the union was again taking "a mature approach" by giving employers advance warning about how bargaining and negotiations may proceed.

New Zealand cleaners win pay increase

Cleaners employed by Total Property Services, New Zealand's largest cleaning contractor, gained a 50-cent an hour pay increase last week. On February 14, the workers held a 24-hour St Valentine's Day vigil outside buildings cleaned by Total Property in Auckland and Wellington to draw attention to their low pay and poor working conditions.

The Service and Food Workers Union claimed that the

50-cent an hour settlement, which is the biggest annual increase any company has paid to its cleaners in the last 16 years, was a major victory. Total Property Services workers, however, will still be paid just 25 cents an hour above the new statutory minimum hourly wage of \$11.25.

New Zealand newspaper workers walk out

Christchurch Star and Oamaru Mail employees walked off the job on February 15 after rejecting a company pay offer that included grocery vouchers. Off-shift Progressive Enterprises supermarket workers, who had been locked out last year during a pay dispute, joined Star workers on the picket line in a show of solidarity. The strike action came after the two APN-owned newspapers refused to meet workers' claims for a pay rise that meets cost of living increases.

The Oamaru Mail is refusing to budge from its offer of 3.5 percent plus \$200 worth of grocery vouchers while the Christchurch Star is offering its workers 2.8 percent plus a \$100 once off cash payment. A spokesman for the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) said the company's offer was insulting. The EPMU is currently taking legal action against APN for using strikebreakers at the Oamaru Mail earlier this month.

Fiji public sector unions to vote on strike

The Fiji Nurses Association (FNA) and the Fiji Public Service Association (FPSA) are expected to vote for strike action when the Confederation of Public Sector Unions (CPSU) conducts a ballot next month. Union members have indicated that, despite warnings from the military-backed government that a strike would be illegal under the country's state of emergency, they intend to support the action.

The ballot follows the breakdown of talks on February 19 between the CPSU and the Public Sector Commission over the government's proposal to cut civil servants' wages by 5 percent and reduce the retiring age from 60 to 55, a measure that will cause financial hardship for older workers. The PSA says while Interim Labour Minister Bernadette Ganilau can declare any strike illegal she must still follow arbitration court procedure.



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