

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

31 March 2007

Pakistani airline staff strike over conditions

Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) engineers and pilots have been on strike since March 23, demanding improved working conditions and management-staff relations. A spokesman for the strikers said: “Pilots and engineers are fed up with the long working hours, unprofessional attitude of their immediate bosses and the tense environment they work in.”

The strikers allege the work environment deteriorated when state-run PIA decided to engage planes and crews from outside companies on “wet leases”. PIA currently leases four passenger aircraft under the arrangement. Management has also recruited technical staff on special salaries rates. The strike has caused delays and cancellation of numbers of flights, both domestic and international.

Indian pharmaceutical workers continue protest

A strike and fasting protest by workers at Dr Reddy’s Labs in Miryalaguda (Nalgonda) in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh entered its sixteenth day on March 22. Dr. Reddy’s Labs is a medium-sized multinational pharmaceutical company based in Hyderabad.

The workers are demanding the reinstatement of two permanent employees who were terminated on January 13. They are also calling for minimum wage rates and bonuses for contract workers, as well as leave entitlements, along with the provision of other basic facilities.

According to a Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU) district council spokesman, the management has refused to pay minimum wages to contract workers “for a long time”. He also alleged the company collected contributions from workers for the Voluntary Provident Fund (VPF) but did not reimburse those who left. “About 500 contract workers are working in this factory without job security. There are no safety measures to protect them from hazardous chemicals,” he said.

Childcare workers demonstrate for employment status

Hundreds of childcare (anganwadi) workers demonstrated on March 22 in front of the Orissa State Assembly in Bhubaneswar, demanding government employee status. Other demands include minimum wage rates, social security arrangements, compensation for extra work, group insurance, seniority in promotions as supervisors and other incentives.

A spokesman for the demonstrators said childcare workers discharged their duties “with sincerity, irrespective of the heavy

burden” and their demands were “not only reasonable but also quite legal”.

Workers protest threat to jobs

Members of the Hay-stock Workers Association demonstrated in front of the Deputy Commissioner’s office in Madikera, India on March 28. They were demanding the withdrawal of government restrictions on the transportation of hay-stock out of the district. The workers came to the protest from Virajpet taluk with loads of hay-stock on trucks.

They submitted a memorandum to the Deputy Commissioner stating that they had earned a living from loading and unloading hay-stock for the past 40 years and they would be jobless if the restrictions were not lifted. Over 1,000 families would be affected.

Sri Lankan postal workers join sick-note campaign

Thousands of postal workers across Sri Lanka joined a one-day sick note campaign on March 27, staying away from work. Members of a trade union alliance in the Postal Department, they were protesting the government’s privatisation plans, cost cutting measures, staff shortages and the withdrawal of welfare benefits and payment for overtime.

In a separate dispute, a strike by workers in the engineering section of the Sri Lanka Transport Board in the Kirindiwela Bus Depot entered its seventh day on March 27. The workers are demanding the payment of outstanding wages. They received only half the amount due for February. The strike has cut maintenance, reducing the number of buses fit for service from 48 to 10.

Japanese airline unions call off strike

Four unions covering pilots and other workers at Japan Airlines Corp (JAL) called off a 24-hour strike scheduled for March 27 after reaching a settlement in last-minute negotiations. The strike would have affected 26 percent of the airline’s domestic flights.

The unions—including the JAL Flight Crew Union covering 1,154 pilots and the JAL Cabin Crew Union with 1,828 members—were seeking an across-the-board monthly pay raise of 15,000 yen (\$US128). The details of the agreement have not yet been made public.

JAL, Asia’s largest airline by revenue but ranked sixth by market value, is facing financial problems, having just posted a quarterly loss of 14 billion yen. The company is cutting

“unprofitable” routes and looking to slash costs further. The management is due to announce a four-year business plan that is expected to include shedding about 3,000 job cuts and an “overhaul” of its employee pension scheme.

Bridgestone Australia imposes lockout in pay dispute

Tyre maker Bridgestone Australia locked around 450 production and maintenance workers at its Salisbury plant in Adelaide, South Australia on March 27 and suspended production for three days. The lockout came after talks between the unions and management failed to resolve a dispute over a new enterprise work agreement. The dispute began one month ago when workers walked off the job for four hours and then imposed overtime bans.

The workers are seeking a 12 percent pay increase over three years but the company is offering only 6 percent plus a cash incentive and productivity bonuses. They are members of the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU), the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union.

A LHMU spokesman said management had adopted a “steadfast refusal” to negotiate, even though “the pay rise we’re seeking for our members is reasonable and realistic”. Pointing out that for the past six years, workers at the plant had received pay increases marginally close to the cost-of-living index, he said: “The company’s offer is a step backwards as far as the cost of living is concerned.”

New Zealand medical lab staff to strike

Medical laboratory technicians in New Zealand hospitals will strike for the second time in less than five months. The Medical Laboratory Workers Union has given notice that more than 1,000 workers will walk out for 48 hours on April 11.

A union spokesman said contract negotiations with 21 district health boards, the Blood Service and two private laboratories had stalled. The technicians provide blood for transfusions and for test results required by medical staff to identify and treat diseases.

NZ glass workers picket over redundancy clause

On March 23, workers picketed outside the GlassTech glass factory in Auckland, demanding the inclusion of a redundancy clause in a new work contract. Australian private equity firm Catalyst Investment Managers bought GlassTech last year. According to the Solidarity union, 85 workers signed a petition in favour of including the redundancy agreement.

The company denied it had any intention of implementing forced redundancies but a union spokesman said that if there were no restructuring or redundancies planned, GlassTech would not resist including the clause.

Fiji’s military government plans strike-breaking

Fiji Public Service Commission chairman Rishi Ram announced on March 27 he would call in police and soldiers to replace public servants if they went ahead with a national stoppage. The threat came as thousands of unionists affiliated to the Confederation of Public Sector Unions (CPSU)

continued voting on strike action against the interim government’s 5 percent pay cut and reduction in the retirement age from 60 to 55 years. Over 20,000 workers were due to vote.

Not all unions have completed strike ballots, but the overwhelming trend so far is in favour of striking. Still to announce ballot results are the Air Traffic Management Association of Fiji, Fiji Nursing Association, Fijian Teachers Association, Viti National Union of Taukei Workers and the Public Employees Union.

The CPSU anticipates that the Labour Minister will declare any strike illegal and order unions into compulsory arbitration.

In a related matter, the High Court in Suva recently ordered the Fiji Islands Revenue and Customs Authority to reverse a 5 percent pay cut and ordered it to pay employees lost income and negotiate with the union.

Meanwhile, Fiji Posts and Telecommunications Association members are participating in secret ballots for a strike over an 11-point log of claims. Also, the Ministry of Labour has recognised cause for a dispute between the Fiji Electricity Authority and the Allied Workers Union over the union’s 2005 Log of Claims.

PNG trainee doctors walk out over unpaid salaries

At least 36 first-year doctors across Papua New Guinea walked off the job on May 28. They were protesting long delays by the Health Department and Personnel Management in approving employee file numbers needed to pay salaries. The doctors have not received pay for 12 weeks.

The group’s spokesman, Dr Giyo Tosieru, said the health department was aware of the difficulties this caused doctors and accused the authorities of “gross administrative deficiency and neglect”. Doctors allege the problem has been going on for years and affects other resident doctors in the allied health industry.



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