

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 March 2007

Asia

India power workers strike

On February 27, 14,000 Bihar State Electricity Board (BSEB) employees went on strike in protest over restructuring and privatisation. The Bihar State Electricity Board Committee of Employees and Engineers called the strike, which cut power supplies across the state, after failed talks with the state government.

Police lathi-charged a demonstration of strikers and at least one person was badly injured. Lathis are long bamboo rods that are capable of inflicting serious injury.

Energy Minister Bijendra Prasad Yadav said that the government had discussed plans to break the strike with the Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd, National Thermal Power Corporation and the army. Yadav said that the government would not alter its decision on restructuring and would “deal sternly with strikers”.

Power cuts delayed many passenger and goods trains with traffic on the Grand Chord line between Kolkata and New Delhi paralysed. Patna Junction—a main rail junction in the east—was plunged into darkness, stranding several trains and forcing cancellation of nine regular trains. Hospitals were also hit by the strike.

Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar, who has threatened to respond with “an iron hand”, said that he would not hesitate to invoke the Essential Services Maintenance Act.

Indian airline workers threaten strike

Workers at national airline Indian have threatened to strike on March 12 for a wage increase and other demands.

The Air Corporation Employees Union (ACEU) served a strike notice on Indian’s management and with the Chief Labour Commissioner this week. The union covers cargo, passenger facilitation, ground

handling, security and other workers at the airline.

An ACEU union spokesman said that while the civil aviation ministry had assured the union that wages would be revised, with retrospective effect from January 1997, nothing had occurred. Indian will soon merge Air India.

Sri Lankan bank workers protest

Workers from state banks in Sri Lanka began a protest campaign this week with a demonstration on February 21 outside the Fort Railway station in central Colombo. They are demanding pension rights for all bank workers.

Unions say that pensions for state bank workers were abolished for employees recruited after 1996 and some state banks have partially curtailed pension benefits.

South Korean unions call off bus strike

Unions in South Korea this week called off a strike by bus drivers in Seoul after reaching an agreement over pay and working conditions. More than 16,000 drivers were due to walk out on March 1 over demands for a wage increase and shorter working hours.

While the Seoul Bus Transport Association initially ruled out any wage increase, association representatives negotiated a 5.8 percent hourly rise and an alternating five-day workweek with the Seoul Bus Union of the Korean Automobile and the Transport Workers’ Federation.

The settlement, however, is far less than the drivers’ original demands for a 12.1 percent pay increase and additional reductions in working hours.

Australia and the Pacific

Ballet dancers seek pay increase

Dancers employed by the West Australian ballet voted unanimously on March 2 to strike next Thursday and Friday. The 21 dancers want a 20.5 percent pay rise over 18 months but the company has only offered an average of 5 percent in the first year and 4.5 per cent

for the next three years. Almost half of the dancers earn less than \$40,000 annually and want their pay brought into line with the state's average.

A spokesperson for the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance told the media earlier this week that the company offer was "unacceptable" and that the dancers were not prepared to back down. The union said that less than \$200,000 over the next 18 months "would solve the dispute". The dancers will meet again on Tuesday.

Queensland teachers stop work over shortages

Teachers at the Inala State School, southwest of Brisbane in Queensland, stopped work on March 1 after making unsuccessful requests to Education Queensland for an increase in teaching staff.

The Queensland Teachers Union (QTU) claims that the department's formula of basing teacher numbers on the total number of students enrolled did not work at all schools. A QTU spokesman said that circumstances at some schools warranted an increase in the number of teachers allocated. The QTU will continue negotiations with the government over staffing at Inala.

Strikes planned at NZ burger chain

Lightning strikes over pay and conditions are planned by young workers at the Wendy's burger chain in New Zealand. A spokesman for the Unite union said employees were being consistently forced to work without breaks. While the company allows a break, this is ignored in practice by many outlets. Workers also want more than the minimum wage, which is currently \$11.25 an hour for adults, but only \$9.00 an hour for those aged 16 and 17 years.

New Zealand disability carers cancel strike action

More than 1,000 workers who care for disabled people in residential care homes cancelled strike action over wages early this week on the recommendation of their union, the Public Service Association (PSA).

A PSA spokesman said that disability carers voted to cancel the rolling strike action after employer Healthcare NZ agreed to make an improved offer. The workers want an increase of approximately \$1.50 an hour. PSA negotiators were due to meet with Healthcare NZ later in the week.

Solomon Islands workers strike over claims

Over 150 workers at Kitano World Kaihatsu Kogyo (KWKK) in the Solomon Islands held a sit-down strike halting road construction in the capital Honiara last

week. The workers began their protest on February 21, following the company's lack of action on outstanding grievances and a log of claims.

While the issues were part of a memorandum of understanding signed between KWKK and the Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (SINUW), the company has failed to comply with the agreement.

Papua New Guinea academic staff defy court order

Striking academic staff at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology defied a court order directing them to return to classes this week, declaring that industrial action would continue until authorities investigated the university administration over allegations of mismanagement and corrupt practices.

The National Academic Staff Association (NASA) wants the current senior management team at the university removed. NASA, which has evidence on the misuse of university funds and gross abuses of procedures, has raised concerns about resource mismanagement, the medical levy and the non-remittal of contributions to the Nasfund, the Unitech Savings and Loans Society and to staff entitlements, including domestic market allowances.

A NASA spokesman said staff were prepared to be thrown into jail for contempt of court and were not returning to work until their demands are met. All acting departmental heads have also resigned and joined the industrial action.



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