

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 March 2007

Asia

Strikes hit foreign-owned firms in Vietnam

Foreign-owned companies in Vietnam's southern Dong Nai province continue to be hit by strikes over pay and working conditions. About 300 workers at the Hong Kong garment company Epic Designer II went on strike on March 13, demanding higher pay and better meals.

In talks that followed with local government authorities, the company rejected the claim, contending that salaries are higher than the minimum wage. The workers are paid just VND845,000 (\$US52.79) a month, slightly higher than the minimum salary of VND710,000.

Nearly 400 workers at the South Korean garment company Uihwa also walked out on March 13 but returned to work when the company agreed to a 6 percent pay increase and to double an attendance bonus.

The Japanese-owned Haranda Company and Hong Kong's Peaktop this week threatened to fire workers on strike over pay if they refused to return to work. A strike by workers at Japanese-owned chemical factory Mitani is continuing.

Meanwhile, workers at the Taiwanese-owned textile company All Super returned to work after the company agreed to reduce overtime, end Sunday work and raise wages by 3-3.5 percent.

Local authorities and the state-controlled labour union have formed a joint mission to attempt to head off strikes in the province.

Indian auto workers strike over pay delays

Thousands of workers at the Hindustan Motors Uttarpara plant near Kolkata began an indefinite strike on March 12 against the non-payment of salaries for the past two months. Workers allege that management is attempting to establish delayed payments as an "accepted practice" and using financial problems as an excuse to implement restructuring. The plant is expected to suffer an operating loss of 2 billion rupees in 2006-07.

In another auto industry dispute, thousands of workers at Pricol Ltd, a parts manufacturer in Coimbatore, Tamilnadu blocked a main road in the city on March 9, halting traffic for several hours. The workers had been on strike for five days.

They are demanding management withdraw a decision to transfer six workers involved in setting up a new union in the plant. Pricol was established in 1972 and became a joint venture with Japan's Denso Corporation in 1997.

Municipal workers demand outstanding wages

On March 12, municipal workers held a sit-down protest in front

of the Proddatur Municipality building in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. They were demanding the payment of salaries outstanding for the past three months and pensions for retired employees. Around 17,000 municipal employees across the state have not been paid for three to eleven months.

Workers are calling on the council to push the state government to issue salaries through the state treasury rather than from the Municipal General Fund. They are planning to picket the council and hold a protest march early next month if their demand is not met. The Proddatur Municipality Employees and Workers Union handed a memorandum containing the demands to council officials.

Goa government workers strike for pay increase

Government employees in the Indian state of Goa began an indefinite strike on March 11, demanding pay scales on par with government secretariat employees and a uniform retirement age for all state employees.

Strikers held a sit-down protest near the old Customs House in Panaji and vowed to continue the strike until their demands are met. The state government has threatened to invoke the 1988 Goa Essential Services Maintenance Act, which prohibits strikes in all government departments. The workers are members of the Goa Government Employees Association (GGEA).

Indian bank workers oppose suspension

Federal Bank workers at Kochi in Kerala, went on strike on March 7 against victimisation. They are demanding the withdrawal of the suspension of a union secretary who has opposed the bank's outsourcing policy.

Sri Lankan university staff strike over pay

Universities in Sri Lanka came to a standstill on March 13 due to a strike by the non-academic staff demanding the rectification of long-standing salary anomalies.

University authorities postponed examinations and academic activities were also affected. The Inter-University Trade Union Joint Committee is threatening an indefinite strike next month unless the salary anomaly is addressed.

The issue is just one of the many grievances of non-academic staff. On March 1, non-academic workers at Sabaragamuwa University held a five-day protest against the introduction of an electronic finger scanning attendance machine.

In another dispute, hundreds of graduate workers recruited in 2005 to the state sector began a countrywide protest campaign on March 13 over 17 demands. They demonstrated in several major city centres, including the busy Lipton Circus in Colombo. The

demands include better pay, systematic promotions, the introduction of a transfer scheme and improved work classifications.

Water supply workers strike for increment

Around 7,000 employees at the Water Supply and Drainage Board went on strike across Sri Lanka on March 8, demanding the payment of a salary increment promised in 2006. The strike ended on March 14, after management promised to honour the commitment.

Unions controlled by the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) refused to participate in the strike, but most of their members employed by the board joined the industrial action.

Australia and the Pacific

Australian union calls off strike by school cleaners and gardeners

A strike by cleaners and gardeners at government schools across Western Australia planned for March 14 was called off after the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union reached a pay agreement with the state Labor government.

The government offer includes a 12.5 percent pay increase over three years plus an extra weekly payment of \$53-75. Current pay rates are as low as \$14 an hour. The new rates will apply retrospectively from January 1. Workers are yet to vote on the deal.

Fijian public servants start voting on strike over pay cut

Public servants in Fiji have begun voting on a proposal to strike against pay cuts announced by the “interim administration” established following the military coup in December last year. The 2007 budget, brought down by finance minister and Labour Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry, imposed a 5 percent across-the-board pay cut for 25,000 public sector workers and lowered the retirement age from 60 to 55 years.

Public sector unions are dragging out the process of balloting union members and are appealing to the courts. Public Service Association (PSA) members started voting last week. The Teachers Union held a secret ballot this week while seeking a court order against reducing the retirement age.

The Nursing Association has applied to the interim labour minister for permission to run a secret ballot while the Public Employees Union said it is yet to “take a mandate” on whether to strike. Instead the union has submitted a proposal for its members to work 44 hours but receive only 41.5 hours pay.

Despite the unions’ stalling, public servants are turning out in numbers to vote. A PSA spokesman said 70 percent showed up last week to cast their vote in the Northern division. Members will continue to vote until March 16, culminating in the union’s annual meeting in Suva.

Post Fiji workers stage lightning strike

Workers at Post Fiji held a nationwide wildcat strike on March 9, demanding the board’s resignation and the reinstatement of the managing director. The walkout by 400 staff also protested proposed changes announced by the board, which include the non-renewal of contracts and the restructure of operations.

The Fiji Post and Telecom Employees Union immediately distanced itself from the strike, saying that it had “nothing to do

with the union”. The military regime’s labour minister declared the walkout illegal because it had taken place without a ballot. The striking workers agreed to return to work after a union delegation visited the deputy military commander and claimed they were assured their demands would be met. The Attorney-General said arrests for breaching the state of emergency would “depend on the circumstances”.

Striking Papua New Guinea academics arrested

Police in Papua New Guinea arrested executive members of the National Academic Staff Association (NASA) at the University of Technology following two weeks of strike action. The NASA president and three union executive members were in bed when armed police entered the Lae campus at about 2 am on March 10 and seized them. The four, who have been released on bail, were charged with failing to obey a court order.

University staff are on strike, demanding a full investigation into alleged mismanagement and corruption. The allegations have not been investigated since first raised last year. Instead the university administration went to court and sought orders to force staff to return to classes. The National Court last week found the strike to be illegal, ordered the arrest of the leaders and threatened similar action against other NASA members if they refused to work.

Last week, angry students mobbed university officials and threw projectiles at the main administration building, shattering class windows and walls. The students said the administration had not dealt with the issues raised by staff and was using the courts to protect itself.

PNG health workers strike

More than 150 provincial health workers in Papua New Guinea’s Western Highlands province began a sit-in protest on March 8 and petitioned the provincial administrator to cancel a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) signed in 2003. The health workers gave a 21-day deadline for the administrator to respond and said they would not carry out normal duties until the MoA was nullified.

Workers said the MoA is hindering the delivery of health services. Under the agreement, the health workers were transferred from the provincial administration to the control of the Mt Hagen hospital board. A health workers’ spokesperson said the health services provided in the province were declining.



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