Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 March 2007

Asia

Indian railway workers demand staff increase

Railway staff at Mysore in the state of Karnataka held a sit-in protest outside the office of the Divisional Railway Manager on March 20 for several demands, including the filling of loco-running staff vacancies. There are currently 176 vacancies, including for locomotive pilots and shunters. Staff requirements have not been revised for several years despite an increase in train frequency.

The protest also demanded action to fix unsafe working conditions on the Hassan-Mangalore section. One protester said the section has been opened for the operation of goods trains without a proper trial being conducted by a competent authority. "Not a single day passes without a derailment and the signals have not been commissioned," he said.

The workers called for the immediate withdrawal of penalties imposed on a number of locomotive pilots and assistant pilots in the Mysore division. They described the charges against the staff as "vague and absurd". They are members of the Mysore branch of the All-India Loco Running Staff Association.

Orissa teachers challenge guideline breaches

Wearing black armbands, government school teachers in the northeast Indian state of Orissa began a sit-down protest in front of the State Assembly in Bhubaneswar on March 21. They are opposing non-compliance with government guidelines governing the promotion of teachers to the position of headmaster.

While the guidelines stipulate only trained graduate teachers with seven years experience may become headmasters, the rule was not applied in the promotion of 854 teachers. The protesters are demanding the promotions be withdrawn immediately. They are members of the All Orissa Government School Teachers Union (AOGSTU), which is demanding an inquiry into the guideline breaches.

Sri Lankan municipal workers demand job security

Around 50 casual municipal workers at the Kalmune Municipality Council protested in front of the municipal building on March 14, demanding jobs confirmation. As casual employers, they face job insecurity. They are also working in the country's East, where military conflict is continuing between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and government forces.

Sacked Pakistani bank employees protest

Representatives of over 1,800 sacked employees from the ZTBL bank held a sit-in protest outside the bank in Islamabad on March 20, demanding reinstatement. The workers say the bank dispensed with their services on February 25 without even issuing a charge sheet.

Tariq Farooq Abbassi, secretary of the All Pakistan ZTBL Employees Union (APZEU) confirmed that many of the workers had served the bank for more than 20 years. Three weeks ago, ZTBL management promised to reinstate the employees within three days, but this did not occur.

Korean health workers strike against new laws

Tens of thousands of doctors, dentists and nursing assistants in South Korea went on strike on March 21 over revisions to the national medical law. More than 60,000 participated in a rally at the government complex in Gwacheon. The strike closed some 40,000 medical and dental clinics, 23,000 Western medical clinics, 9,000 Oriental medical clinics and 11,000 dental clinics.

About 5,000 police were dispatched to the protests, which were jointly organised by the Korean Medical Association (KMA), the Korean Dental Association, the Association of Korean Oriental Medicine and the Korean Licensed Practical Nurses Association. A KMA spokesman said the revisions would "severely threaten public health, infringe on the rights of doctors and cause massive increases in medical expenses".

Doctors warned of further action if the government went ahead with the legislation but the Health Ministry has said it would not reverse the decision. If further industrial action occurs, the government has threatened to order doctors to return to work and to "punish" anyone defying the directive. The protests are the first major demonstrations by the medical community since 2002.

Australia and the Pacific

Australian and NZ cleaners rally against contractor

Cleaners marched in Australia and New Zealand on March 20 to protest low rates of pay. Workers in Sydney rallied at the town hall, while New Zealand cleaners protested outside the Auckland and Wellington offices of Spotless Services. A spokesman said Spotless, New Zealand's largest cleaning contractor, paid "poverty wages" which are impossible to live on. Workers are paid $11.30 an hour, just five cents above the adult minimum wage.

The NZ Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU), however, wants to establish a closer relationship with the industry's employers. The SFWU asked Spotless to sign a "responsible contractor policy" similar to those agreed to by other cleaning companies. These involve a pledge to "consult" with the union over workloads and rates of pay. The union's prime complaint is that its approach has been rejected.

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Melbourne car dealership workers continue strike

About 30 workers employed by Preston Motors, a large Australian car dealer in Campbellfield, Melbourne, began a strike on March 14. Members of the National Union of Workers (NUW) say the company has refused to conclude a new enterprise work agreement, even though the previous one expired last September.

NUW officials confirmed that they offered concessions to the company in a bid to avoid a strike but workers voted for industrial action after the management suggested only a $4 a week pay rise. The NUW claimed the company's offer was a "bad business decision" because it caused workers "stress and anxiety" which had "a negative impact on productivity".

National salary bargaining to start in NZ universities

Academic staff at New Zealand's universities voted to support negotiations for a national collective employment agreement in the next bargaining round. A ballot, conducted at individual campuses, endorsed a tertiary sector union recommendation to move from enterprise-based bargaining to industry-wide agreements—one covering academic staff and another for general staff. More than 96 percent of the 1,887 academics who participated voted to support of the proposal. Bargaining will begin in April.

Previous attempts by the unions to secure a national contract were abandoned in the face of employer resistance. Following industrial action last year, the unions engaged in a tripartite process with the government and vice-chancellors, purportedly to "find solutions" to long-standing funding and salary problems facing the university sector. At the end of the process, the Association of University Staff (AUS) says academics' salaries are still at "crisis" point.

Fiji's public servants vote to strike over pay cuts

Over 92 percent of Fiji Public Servants Association (PSA) members voted in a secret ballot at the union's annual conference on March 16 to strike against a 5 percent pay cut and a reduction in the retirement age recently imposed by the military regime's "interim administration".

The PSA, which has 5,000 members and is Fiji's largest public sector union, was the first of the Confederation of Public Sector Unions to complete vote counting. In a separate ballot, members of the Fiji Teachers Union voted by an 80 percent majority in favour of striking. The Nursing Association has begun a ballot and a spokesperson reported an "overwhelming" response. The Air Traffic Management Association is to conduct a secret ballot this month.

While over 20,000 members of the confederation are expected to support industrial action, the unions are hoping to avoid a confrontation with the military regime. A confederation spokesman said that when all affiliates had conducted ballots, "we will have a meeting to discuss the results of the voting and give the required 28-day notice to go on strike to the Ministry of Labour".

The PSA has already stressed it will abide by the Public Order Act, which outlaws strikes. A PSA spokesman said that if a strike were declared illegal, the union would seek arbitration, "which we hope will be fully independent and we can present our arguments and get a good award".

Meanwhile, non-teaching staff of the Fiji Institute of Technology (FIT) voted to strike in a secret ballot last week. The ballot, conducted among 225 Public Service Association (PSA) members, was the result of the FIT Council's decision to make staff appointments on a contractual basis. The institute has threatened to take legal action if the workers go ahead with the planned strike.

Papua New Guinea academics resign en-masse

More than 60 lecturers at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology in Lae resigned en-mass after being on strike for three weeks. The lecturers are demanding the university's vice-chancellor resign over allegations of corruption and poor management. The university has threatened to sue the National Academic Staff Association (NASA) for damages and to freeze lecturers' final entitlements.

Last week, four NASA executive members were arrested and charged for breaching a court order directing union members to return to work. The PNG ombudsman brokered a truce based on the striking lecturers resuming work while the allegations of mismanagement are investigated. However, as this was being announced, reports emerged that the National Court had ordered the NASA leaders re-arrested and taken to Port Moresby to face contempt charges.

With tensions running high over concerns that the academic year may be in doubt, members of the Student Representative Council also stepped down in protest. The vice-chancellor has issued a notice to department heads to prepare a resumption of classes.

PNG Telikom workers walk out over claims

Workers at Telikom PNG Ltd walked off the job nationwide on March 14, claiming management had failed to address a log of claims. Their action came one day after Telikom's CEO resigned only 10 months into his contract. He was under investigation by the Department of Labour and Industrial Relations for allegedly misleading the department about the status of work permits for some expatriates employees.

A PNG Communication Workers Union spokesman said the strike would continue until the management addressed the demands. The union is seeking the immediate and unconditional re-instatement of suspended officers, the re-introduction of a new salary structure and a voluntary exit scheme for employees. It also wants the removal of all expatriate consultants engaged on business visas. Telikom management denounced the strike as "illegal and not proper".

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