

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 March 2008

Construction workers continue pay strike

A strike by construction workers at the Upper Kothmale hydro power plant in Sri Lanka that began on February 11 is continuing. The workers say they need a daily pay increase of at least 100 rupees (approx \$ US 1) to meet increases in the cost of living.

The government has contracted out construction work at the power plant to the private labour hire company Mayoda that pays its employees only 450 rupees (approx \$US 4.5) a day, an amount that is hardly sufficient to provide meals for an average family.

Yet the Upper Kothmale plant is an important project that is expected to make a considerable contribution to the national grid when it is up and running by 2011.

Indian bank workers demonstrate

Bank employees held a large demonstration in Mangalore in the state of Karnataka on February 22 against mergers and the outsourcing of bank jobs.

The protesters chanted slogans demanding they be given the option to join a pension scheme, the recruitment of staff to fill a large number of vacancies, the restoration of a compassionate appointment scheme and an early wage revision.

Indian jute mill workers demand pay increase

Workers from the Navya and Jyothi Jute Mills in Bobbili in the state of Andhra Pradesh protested at the Collector's office in Vizianagaram on February 25. They were demanding a wage revision to meet spiralling prices of essential commodities.

The workers from both mills have been on strike since February 12. They handed in a memorandum calling on the Collector to intervene in the dispute and to resolve the issue in the workers' favour.

Firemen march on parliament over pay and conditions

About 600 fire-fighters from across south-east Queensland marched in the state's capital Brisbane on February 28 and rallied outside parliament house. They came from as far away as Bundaberg and Tweed Heads to protest the refusal of the state Labor government to negotiate a decent pay offer. According to a United Firefighters Union (UFU) fire-fighters with a trade level qualification are paid just \$16.18 an hour while fire-fighters with a diploma receive only \$21.15 an hour.

A UFU spokesman said that even though an independent evaluation by company Mercer HR lodged last year had shown

that the value of fire-fighters' work had increased by up to 47 percent in the past ten years the governments offer to the vast majority of fire-fighters "has been for not one cent extra".

The spokesman said that during the past 15 years fire-fighters had become versatile rescue workers capable of responding to range of emergencies including road accidents, floods, chemical spills and building collapses but "Queensland's firefighters have dropped to be the lowest paid in Australia".

West Australian (WA) teachers stop work over pay

On February 28, over 5,000 public school teachers attended a half-day stop-work meeting at Langley Park in Perth as part of a campaign for improved pay and working conditions.

The teachers defied an Industrial Relations Commission ruling made earlier in the week instructing the State School Teachers Union to call off the stoppage. Around 50 schools across the state were forced to close as teachers from regional areas as far away as Kalgoorlie, Albany, Port Hedland, Broome and Kununurra travelled to attend the Perth rally.

The teachers are demanding a 20 percent pay increase over 3 years but the WA state government of Labor Premier Alan Carpenter has offered just 13 percent over 3 years. The stop-work meeting rejected the government's offer and demanded it release a taskforce report on teacher shortages. A resolution was passed calling for further industrial action if the teachers' demands are not met.

Public Service Union delays industrial action

The Community and Public Service Union (CPSU) in Western Australia postponed industrial action due to commence from February 25 after the state Labor government offered to increase pay between 15 to 17 percent over 3 years. The government had previously offered just 11.5 percent over 3 years but this was rejected at a CPSU stop-work meeting last week.

The new offer does not include any increase in government contribution to superannuation or in regional allowances that were part of the CPU's original demands. The new offer will be discussed at a CPSU delegates meeting on March 4.

The CPSU original claim was for a 23 percent pay rise over 3 years and increases in the superannuation contribution of up to 13 percent. The union was also seeking increases of up to 500 percent on current regional allowances for public servants working in remote areas such as the Pilbara region where the

cost of living, in particular rents, are soaring dramatically due to the mining boom.

The current regional allowance for public servants is just \$3,000 a year in the Pilbara where rent for a four bedroom home in the regional town of Karratha can be as much as \$2,000 per week. According to the CPSU, only managers of government departments are entitled to free accommodation and housing.

New Zealand tutors to continue strike action

Tutors at New Zealand's EastBay REAP (Rural Education Activities Programme) based in Whakatane, Opotiki and Kawerau have resolved to take further strike action over the failure of the employers to make any significant shift in bargaining over pay and working conditions.

Members of the Association of Staff in Tertiary Education (ASTE) at the EastBay centres went on strike last year for two and half days over disputed issues and the union took part in mediated negotiations just prior to Christmas.

The ASTE boasts that it has made "significant concessions in good faith" to try and resolve the dispute but these resulted in minimal movement by the employers. EastBay REAP has cash reserves of around \$1.6 million yet many of its' staff are on very low wages.

Last year, the ASTE settled collective employment agreements with four other REAPs around the country on terms and conditions that have been rejected by EastBay.

New Zealand care givers vote to strike

Staff at Brackenridge Estate, that provides care for people with intellectual disabilities, voted for further industrial action including rolling strikes over seven weeks after the management made known it was unable secure extra government funding to improve pay rates and working conditions. The National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) and the NZ Nurses' Organisation (NZNO) have been bargaining since September 2007 for a multi-union collective agreement.

The majority of carers earn \$14.50 an hour and less. They had hoped that a two-day strike in early January would have seen the Ministry of Health provide the extra funding needed to settle the dispute. Management claimed it was "not reasonable ... to assume that an outside agency will increase funding to provide for any increase in wage costs".

Doctors' association calls off strike

New Zealand Health Minister David Cunliffe intervened this week to stop a proposed nationwide doctor's strike from going ahead. The doctors' union is seeking a pay rise of around \$10,000 on average for each doctor and has been in negotiations for some time. The 24-hour strike would have included senior doctors, making it the first time they had ever participated in strike action.

The Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS) was to issue notice of industrial action but its National Executive accepted Cunliffe's plea for a month's delay to allow him to

attempt to resolve the dispute after meeting with him on February 20.

At stop-work meetings last year nearly 90 percent of doctors voted for industrial action. ASMS blames poor wages in New Zealand for the number of doctors leaving the service for posts overseas where conditions are better.

NZ Bunnings workers strike over pay

Hundreds of employees at Australian-owned Bunnings Warehouse retail chain in New Zealand stopped work for two hours on February 21 demanding pay parity with their Australian counterparts. Workers in Australia are paid over \$6 an hour more.

Workers from several of the Auckland hardware stores rallied at the company's head office while workers in Wellington protested outside parliament house. Stop-work meetings were also held in Whangarei, Whangamata, Hamilton, Whakatane, Gisbourne, Rotorua and Christchurch.

A spokesman for the National Distribution Union said New Zealand workers at Bunnings' started on just \$NZ12.00 an hour while their Australian co-workers across the Tasman started on a union rate of \$NZ18.44 (\$AUS15.87) an hour and this was due to increase to \$NZ19 in July. Wages of Bunnings' workers on both sides of the Tasman are extremely poor even though it is owned by one Australia's richest companies, Wesfarmers.

New Caledonia's USTKE union calls strike

New Caledonia's Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE) called a strike on February 21, the day that 20 union members were due to appear in court facing charges related to clashes with police at a Noumea bus depot last month. Among those appearing are 14 workers who have been in custody since the clashes took place.

On January 17, hundreds of police dispersed striking workers from publicly-owned land next to the depot of bus company Carsud. The striking workers had occupied the land in a dispute over the dismissal of a colleague for alleged misconduct. During the assault police used batons, tear gas and rubber bullets inflicting severe injuries on many workers including broken noses and ribs.

There already have been demonstrations to protest the arrests. The union also decided to lay charges against the French government over excessive police violence.



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