

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 March 2008

Asia

Filipino port workers' strike continues

Over 100 workers at the Dumaguete City Port in the Philippines remain on strike after walking out on March 13 following a breakdown in negotiations over job security with the port's new management, the Prudential Customs and Brokerage Services Incorporated (PCBSI).

Members of the Associated Labor Union-Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (ALU-TUCP) continue to picket the two main gates to the port. The port management called for police to remove the workers but the request was refused by the authorities who said the strike was legal and there had been no incidents on the picket line.

Felizardo Calimpong, provincial coordinator of ALU-TUCP, said the union called the strike because PCBSI management refused to recognise the port workers as permanent employees and had only offered to re-hire them as casuals. The National Conciliation and Mediation Board (NCMB) called the union and management together to continue mediation.

Japan Airlines workers plan stoppage

Around 2,500 unionised workers at Japan Airlines Corporation (JAL) plan to strike for one day on March 20 after negotiations for a new pay deal broke down. The strike is expected to affect 26 percent of JAL domestic flights, carrying around 17,000 passengers.

JAL cited persistently high oil prices affecting the company's bottom line as the reason for turning down the workers' pay claim. In February, the company announced it would shed 4,300 staff, 8 percent of the workforce, to reduce labour costs by \$US430 million.

Four unions, the JAL Flight Crew Union, JAL Labor Union, JAL Japan Labor Union and JAL Japan Pilots Union, have endorsed the strike.

Indian meal workers rally for permanency

On March 19, Anganwadi (midday meal) workers from 20 districts across the Indian state of Karnataka rallied in Bangalore demanding job permanency and retirement benefits. The workers are employed in the state government's scheme to provide midday meals at schools.

The protestors accused the government of attempting to privatise the midday meal component of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS). The Secretary to the Department

of Women and Child Development, Shalini Rajneesh, met a delegation from the rally and said the government would not privatise any part of the ICDS scheme. Other issues remain outstanding.

Sri Lankan petroleum strike called off

Unions at the state-run Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) in Sri Lanka called off a strike due to begin on March 19 after the management agreed to obtain a letter from the Treasury accepting some of the workers' demands.

The 6,000 CPC workers were seeking a 10 percent salary increase, the resolution of salary anomalies, a formal system for filling vacancies and priority for workers' families in new job recruitments.

They were also demanding an assurance that a group of filling stations and other facilities that had been incorporated into a separate company as part of an earlier privatisation process would be reincorporated into the CPC.

The strike would have prevented the distribution of fuel to depots across the country and impacted on transport and electricity production. The CPC Common Service Union General had not wanted to call the strike in the first place and was desperate to head it off.

Earlier this week, union secretary D.J. Rajakaruna told the media: "There is much anger and resentment among the employees. If we do not take union action, they will act independently."

Karachi drivers oppose fuel increase

Public transport drivers in Karachi, Pakistan went on strike for one day on March 18, protesting rising fuel prices and a sevenfold increase in fines for traffic violations from 100 rupees (\$US1.59) to 700 rupees.

The drivers, many whom are owner-drivers, operate minibuses, utilities and coaches. They refused the government's offer of an increase in transport fares and demanded it reduce petrol prices instead. A spokesman for the drivers said, "it (fare increase) will compound the public's miseries". The Karachi Transport Ittehad (KTI) is threatening an indefinite strike if the government fails to address the issues.

Australia and the Pacific

Qantas workers stop work over safety

Qantas baggage handlers at Sydney international airport walked off the job on March 17 for four hours to attend a

meeting to discuss safety issues and the increasing number of injuries on the job. There are also concerns about staffing levels, rosters and poorly maintained handling equipment.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) claims that one in three workers suffered injuries at work over the past year including torn discs, fractures and neck and shoulder strains.

Qantas management has agreed to meet with the TWU to discuss the issues but said the workers would not be paid for the stoppage because it was “unauthorised”.

NZ park workers strike over pay system

Workers at the New Plymouth District Council’s parks division in New Zealand are on strike after nearly eight months of negotiations stalled. The 45 workers are opposed to the council’s attempt to introduce a consultant-driven pay system.

According to the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union the new system would mean that workers could no longer negotiate collective pay increases.

Care givers protest over pay

Aged-care workers from rest homes rallied in Greymouth, New Zealand, on March 14 to lobby for extra government funding to supplement low pay rates and poor working conditions. A National Union of Public Employees spokesman said pay for the majority of support workers was only just above the national minimum wage of \$12 an hour despite a top-up last year.

Granger House worker Carol Columbus said: “We rallied instead of striking for more money but if no one listens to us we could still strike.” She said senior aged-care workers at Granger House were paid only \$13.40 an hour and “it is the highest amount they can get, apart from an extra \$8 if they work on either Saturday or Sunday.” The protestors demanded the minister of health inject funds into the residential aged-care sector in the May Budget.

In Auckland, workers from the Mission Bay rest home attended the Auckland District Health Board meeting last week to demand the board take action and audit Mission Bay. The owner has received thousands of dollars in government funding for increased wages but the workers have received nothing. Management at Mission Bay has promised a pay rise with back pay.

Automobile Association workers reject pay deal

Roadside response workers employed by the New Zealand Automobile Association (AA) have rejected a pay deal negotiated by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU). Over the Christmas holiday period last year the workers took unprecedented strike action in support of a pay claim.

The AA and EPMU brokered a deal for a 4.5 percent wage increase and for changes to a long-service policy to be included in a new collective agreement. The company is reportedly “stunned” that the deal was rejected. After the union signed off on the agreement, the company immediately issued a media statement declaring the dispute was over.

EPMU national secretary Andrew Little confirmed that workers had voted down the deal. They would meet to discuss “what action to take next” and “the possibility of further industrial action could not be ruled out”.

Fiji public servants demand cost of living adjustment

Fiji Public Service Association (FPSA) members have instructed the union executive to demand the interim government pay a cost of living adjustment (COLA). FPSA branch meetings will be held over the coming weeks to decide on the amount of the increase.

The Public Service Commission had said earlier that current financial constraints would not allow it to negotiate any COLA increase. FPSA industrial relations advisor Nirbhay Singh said the union was receiving daily requests from members seeking assistance because of financial hardships.

Meanwhile, the Fiji Bank and Finance Sector Employees Union called on the National Provident Fund (FNPF) to honour a decision by the disputes committee to pay its members a 5 percent COLA. Workers employed by FNPF went on strike in December 2007 when the FNPF refused to grant salary adjustments for 2005 and 2006, and performance salary increments and bonuses for 2007.

Strike at PNG mine ends

A strike by over 300 workers at the giant Ok Tedi copper mine at Kiunga in Papua New Guinea’s western province ended on March 16.

Workers walked out last week after Ok Tedi Mining Limited (OTML) management awarded engineers a 100 percent pay increase. Mining and Allied Workers Union members immediately demanded a pay increase for all employees and the payment of outstanding bonuses.

Work resumed at the mine Sunday, following a meeting between employees and managing director Alan Breen, but details of the settlement ending the strike have not yet been made public. A statement issued by the company only confirmed that the dispute had ended and that industrial action “had resulted in a loss of production of some 2,500 tonnes of contained copper metal in concentrates and 200kg of contained gold”.



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