

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 March 2008

## Asia

### **Sri Lankan road workers continue indefinite strike**

Indefinite strike action by workers on a high-speed highway project in southern Sri Lanka entered its tenth day on March 24. The 1,600 employees—building workers, foremen, machine operators, drivers, surveyors and survey assistants—walked off the job on March 14 in support of ten demands. These include a 3,000-rupee (\$US27) wage rise, improvements in work allocation and the provision of a risk allowance. They also want reinstatement of 100 laid-off workers.

The highway, which passes through rural areas such as Baddegama, Pinnaduwa and Kurundugaha, has been under construction for the last five years. While Japanese company Kumagai Gumi is the primary contractor, workers are hired through manpower agencies Lakshan Mishuthani and N.S. Enterprise.

Kumagai Gumi, Lakshan Mishuthani, N.S. Enterprise and the government's project coordinator, the Road Development Authority, all refused to participate in meetings called by the Galle District Labour Commissioner on March 18 to discuss the workers' demands.

Instead, a campaign aimed at intimidating employees has been launched, including posting notices at work sites claiming that 600 strikers have been dismissed. The company, with the assistance of armed police, is also attempting to use scab labour. Strikers regularly demonstrate at work sites to disrupt and prevent any strike-breaking.

### **Indian doctors protest over pay**

Senior public doctors in Andhra Pradesh began an ongoing protest inside the Directorate of Health in Hyderabad on March 24 to demand a salary increase.

The Andhra Pradesh Government Doctors Association members are protesting over low pay. They want salaries on a par with the Central Government Health Scheme's scales for non-teaching doctors and a national uniform pay structure for all doctors.

### **Tamilnadu weavers demand pay increase**

Around 50,000 power loom weavers located in and around the city of Komarapalayam in Tamilnadu struck work for the second consecutive day on March 23 to demand higher wages. Only workers involved in export production were exempted from the strike action.

## **Philippines power workers threaten to strike**

Union members at the Salcon Power Corporation (SPC) in Cebu City in the Philippines held a lunchtime protest on March 24. They are threatening to strike if management continues to refuse to recognise the union and negotiate a new draft collective bargaining agreement.

Salcon Power Independent Union (SPIU) secretary Noel Tolentino said that the union has been recognised by the National Conciliation and Mediation Board (NCMB) and has authorised the union's strike notice which becomes operative on April 14. Tolentino said the strike would "paralyse Cebu's power supply".

SPC management has refused to negotiate with the union until their petition to the Department of Labor and Employment for deregistration of the union is heard. The NCMB has set a conciliation meeting between SPIU and SPC for March 28.

## **Philippines port workers expected to end strike**

About 100 workers at the Dumaguete City Port in the Philippines are expected to end a two week strike after the new port management, Prudential Customs Brokerage Services Inc. (PCBSI), promised it would "absorb all union members with several conditions".

Union district coordinator of the Associated Labor Union-Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (ALU-TUCP) Felizardo Calimpong said the union will not call off the strike until it receives official notification of the deal and has time to study its conditions. The port workers struck on March 13 when PCBSI refused to recognise them as permanent workers and only offered to re-hire them as casuals.

## **Cambodian garment workers' strike enters third month**

About 50 workers at the Hong Kong-owned Kings-land Garment Factory in Phnom Penh remain on strike for reinstatement of 19 union leaders and supporters who were sacked in January after they attempted to discuss labour issues with management. The strikers are members of a newly formed branch of the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union (CCAWDU).

The Ministry of Labor told the media on March 18 that it had brokered a deal with both parties which involved reinstatement of the sacked workers but company management was waiting for permission from Hong Kong head office before proceeding. Union president Ath Thorn said that the strike would continue

until management agrees to negotiate outstanding issues.

### **Australia and the Pacific**

#### **Torres Strait nurses demand safe accommodation and workplaces**

Nurses on 11 islands in the remote Torres Strait in Australia's far north walked off the job on March 28 over the failure of the Queensland state Labor government to provide safe workplaces. The nurses voted to strike and to leave the islands because they were not convinced that work carried out on their living and working quarters had made them secure.

The dispute follows the alleged rape of a 27-year-old nurse as she slept in her quarters on Mabuiag Island on February 5. The government has ignored warnings raised in a number of reports over several years about the dangers faced by nurses in remote communities.

A Nurses Union spokesperson said the nurses were not satisfied with steps taken in recent weeks supposedly to make their living and working areas secure. She said there were concerns about personal duress alarms that had been supplied and that "on several islands there is not even security lighting at the health centres". She said that the nurses felt "very vulnerable" and "very angry".

The victim of the February 5 alleged rape has not returned to work and is reportedly considering legal action against Queensland Health. She had repeatedly written to Queensland Health demanding that her living quarters be made secure. Her requests were ignored.

#### **Northern Territory teachers to strike for wage rise**

Teachers in Australia's Northern Territory (NT) plan to strike on March 31 to demand a 15 percent pay increase over three years. The NT Labor government this week said it would raise its pay offer from 10 to 11 percent and demanded the teachers call off the industrial action.

An Australian Education Union spokesman said wage negotiations had not "progressed well" and that the only way teachers could put pressure on the government was by withdrawing their labour. "Hopefully this strike action will encourage the other side to come up with something that's a bit better," he said.

NT's commissioner for public employment Ken Simpson said the government would not budge on its latest offer and condemned the strike action as "unnecessary".

#### **New Zealand hospital workers to strike**

Around 800 kitchen workers, cleaners and orderlies employed by Australian-owned district health boards (DHB) and hospital cleaning contractor Spotless Services plan to strike on April 2. The Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) has already lodged a notice of strike over the company's refusal to pay a wage increase agreed to last year. A \$14.25 minimum pay rate was negotiated last year as part of new national agreements covering workers employed directly by DHBs and three other contracting companies.

On March 26 this year, Spotless announced it would pay the

money but only after it received funds from the district health boards (DHBs) and claimed the company was discussing the pay issue with DHB representatives and that the talks were "progressive and productive".

The strike will affect hospitals in Kaitaia, Bay of Islands (Kawakawa), Whangarei, North Shore, Waitakere, Middlemore, Pukekohe, Franklin (Waiuku), Tauranga, Rotorua, Gisborne, Palmerston North, Wanganui, Hawkes Bay, Kew, Wairarapa and Timaru and at Manukau Superclinic.

#### **Fuel workers strike in French Polynesia**

Workers at the Tahiti affiliate of the French oil and gas supplier Cegelec have been on strike in Papeete since March 15 over planned dismissals. The strike, which is preventing a tanker anchored off Tahiti from offloading its cargo, is causing fuel shortages. International flights out of the country have stopped and road transport and electricity generation has been affected.

Strikers blocked access to the Papeete port this week but ended the action after being warned that riot police were being mobilised to force access. An attempt by Tahitian President Gaston Floss to get employees back to work failed and company officials are flying from Paris to negotiate directly with the workers.

#### **PNG university academics protest over mismanagement**

About 80 percent of lecturers from the Papua New Guinea University of Technology (Unitech) stayed away from work on March 26 and plan to continue a sit-in protest.

They are demanding that the Interim Council appointed by the Education Minister investigates long-standing allegations made by the National Academics Staff Association (NASA) concerning the misuse of funds and corruption by university management. NASA's caretaker president Dr Loko Aota said the problems at Unitech started 10 years ago.

A NASA spokesman said that the sit-in was "indefinite" and that the union would petition Unitech's senior executive management to vacate its office. The union's accusations are currently being investigated by the Ombudsman Commission.

#### **Fiji council workers set strike date**

Local Government Officers Association members at Lautika City Council will strike on March 28 over an outstanding annual pay increment. Association president Rouhit Singh said that the union was concerned about the lack of progress in talks with the council over the increment.

The Lautika City Council claims that it cannot pay the annual increment because it has made no provision for it in the 2008 budget.



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