

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 April 2008

Asia

Mass walkout at Nike factory in Vietnam

Over 20,000 workers at the Taiwanese-owned Chingluh shoe factory in Long An Province, Vietnam, struck on March 31, demanding a 20 percent wage increase to compensate for soaring consumer prices.

Just hours after the walkout, the company offered to pay a 10.5 percent increase but the workers, mostly young women from rural areas, rejected the offer and remained on strike. Currently they are paid a monthly salary of just 930,000 dong (\$US4.50).

Rising consumer prices, 19 percent higher than last year, have sparked a nationwide push by low-paid workers for wage increases. Last January, over 6,000 workers at six different foreign-owned manufacturing factories went on strike while last November, 10,000 workers at a Nike factory in Dong Nai province struck. Monthly pay at the Nike plant was increased by \$US4.50.

Korean insurance managers sacked for joining strike

On April 1, life insurance company Allianz Korea sacked 99 branch managers for joining a ten week-long strike by 1,000 of the company's 1,700 employees. The strike, mainly involving workers from the sales department, began on January 23 in opposition to the company introducing a performance-based wage system without negotiations and in breach of an existing collective work agreement.

The strikers have been holding rallies in front of the company's headquarters in Yoido, Seoul. Despite a 60 percent drop in the company's sales since the strike began, management is refusing to hold talks with the Korean Federation of Clerical Labor Unions (KFCLU).

The sacking of the managers came after KFCLU delegates travelled to Germany on March 24 in an unsuccessful attempt to negotiate a deal directly with the parent company Allianz SE.

Chinese pilots strike over low pay

Pilots employed by China's state-owned airlines staged rolling strikes during March over low pay and unfair contracts. On March 14, 40 pilots of Shanghai Airlines called in sick and stayed off work and on March 28, 11 pilots at Wuhan's East Star Airlines suddenly requested leave. On March 31, 14 China Eastern Airlines flights were disrupted due to industrial action by pilots.

Pilots in state-owned companies have had to forego better paying jobs because they have been forced to sign 99-year contracts binding them to the companies. If they quit they are required to pay compensation ranging from 700,000 to 2.1 million yuan (\$US98,591 to \$US295,000).

The pilots have filed a series of lawsuits against the airline companies over the past two years but these have been either ignored or rejected outright by the authorities. One pilot from China Eastern Airlines said: "The only way left for us is to go on strike."

The Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) held an emergency meeting on April 1 and issued a statement declaring that the pilots involved in the March 31 strike will be "punished severely and will face lifelong employment bans".

Indian Lignite mine workers on strike for conditions

More than 13,000 contract workers at the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in the southern Indian State of Tamilnadu began an indefinite strike on March 29, demanding the provision of housing, medical facilities, access to the NLC general hospital, transport allowances and bonuses. Other demands include regular employment for contract workers, equal pay with permanent workers for equal work and recognition of the casuals' trade union.

The striking workers are planning a number of actions including a public meeting, a mass hunger strike and extensive pickets at the NLC offices. Workers struck as the company was gearing up to meet its financial year-end target of lignite excavation and power generation. These activities have been severely disrupted by the strike.

Indian insurance workers demonstrate

Workers at government-owned General Insurance in Coimbatore in Tamilnadu stopped work on March 30 for one hour and demonstrated in front of the company's divisional office.

They are seeking the implementation of promotions outstanding for the last four years, improvement in staff welfare, an end to an arbitrary unfair transfer and mobility policy, restoration of compassionate-based appointments and a pension scheme. Workers warned the management they would intensify action if the demands were not met.

Orissa nurses strike for pay and conditions

Around 3,800 nurses, both regular and contractual, in government-run medical institutions, including medical colleges and hospitals, in the Indian state of Orissa went on strike on March 27.

Their demands include a hike in the basic pay scale from 4,500 (\$US112.92) to 6,500 rupees a month, an allowance of 3,000 rupees per month on par with workers in the Railways and Central Government hospitals, the regularisation of contractual posts and the provision of residential quarters. The nurses are members of

the Orissa Nursing Employees Association.

Tamilnadu utensil workers strike continues

An indefinite strike of around 2,000 utensil workers entered its eighth day on March 27. All production of utensils at around 200 workplaces in Anupparpalayam on the outskirts of Tirupur in Tamilnadu has been brought to a standstill.

The workers are demanding a 50 percent wage increase to meet the spiralling prices of essential commodities. They are also opposing a new system of calculating wages on the weight of the utensils produced instead of number of items turned out. According to workers, the new system has resulted in a reduction in pay.

Five rounds of talks between trade unions and Utensil Manufacturers Association over the past three weeks failed to reach a wage accord. Tirupur is one of the major manufacturing centres of utensil production.

Hospital workers in Mumbai walk out

On March 27, workers at the SL Raheja Hospital at Mahim in Mumbai in the Indian state of Maharashtra went on strike, causing the hospital to transfer its 122 patients to other private hospitals. The 180-bed hospital was vacated overnight and services at the out patient department ceased.

More than 450 staff members, including laboratory technicians and ward boys went on strike demanding a salary increase and the reemployment of 20 staff members who the workers claim were dismissed on frivolous grounds. The workers have been seeking a pay increase for the past four years but the management has been indifferent.

Australia and the Pacific

South Australian teachers threaten to strike

Public school teachers in South Australia met on the last weekend in March and voted to take strike action within seven days over the state Labor government's failure to respond to demands for improved wages and conditions in a new enterprise work agreement.

The old enterprise agreement expired on March 31. An Australian Education Union spokesperson said the dispute centred on making sure that teachers have job security and good working conditions.

Northern Territory teachers vote to strike

About 500 teachers in Australia's Northern Territory (NT), members of the Australian Education Union, voted unanimously at a stopwork meeting in Darwin on March 31 to reject the NT Labor government's last pay offer of 11 percent.

The teachers, who want a 15 percent wage increase over three years, voted to strike for 24 hours on April 17. They decided to refuse to work unpaid overtime and will only work 36 hours a week.

New Zealand hospital workers strike over pay

Hundreds of cleaners and food preparation workers in many of New Zealand's public hospitals walked off the job for 24 hours on April 2 over contract company Spotless' failure to pay a negotiated wage increase. The Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) and Spotless agreed to a base wage rate of \$14.25 an hour nine months ago but company is yet to pay up.

Australian-owned Spotless said last week it would pay the

money but only after it received agreed funding from the district health boards (DHB). The company has contracts to provide services in 18 hospitals and employs over 800 cleaners, food workers and orderlies. It is the largest cleaning contractor in the NZ health sector.

A union spokesman said the SFWU is seeking meetings with DHBs to discuss whether "it is still appropriate that private companies profit from public health by contract labour".

In a separate dispute, the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists, representing senior doctors, this week withdrew a threat to strike after the health minister stepped in to broker a pay deal with the union and the DHBs. The ASMS had given the minister a month's grace to arrange a deal.

A spokesman said the union had "got as much as we can to move forward" and it would be taking the new offer back to its members to ratify. Doctors have been seeking a 5 percent per annum pay rise, increased overtime, a doubling of the medical education allowance from \$8,000 to \$16,000 and a new independent salary commission to bring doctors' pay in New Zealand more in line with colleagues overseas. The proposed strike would have been the first ever by the country's senior doctors.

French Polynesia fuel strike ends

A strike by fuel workers in French Polynesia ended this week after management and unions reached an agreement over salary rises. The two-week strike had paralysed the island's fuel supplies, with tankers unable to unload at the Pape'ete wharf.

The three main oil distributors, Total, Mobil and Shell, were affected and service stations on the island of Tahiti dried up last week. The companies have agreed to pay workers for days lost in the strike and to increase the retirement premium. Last week, French Polynesia's president Gaston Flosse, called on the French high commissioner to step in and assist to shut down the strike.

New Caledonian strikers face jail

A New Caledonian prosecutor has called for a Noumea court to jail 19 members of the Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE) on charges arising out of their involvement in clashes with police in January.

The prosecutor is demanding jail terms of one to six months for alleged attacks on police officers. The violent clashes erupted after police attacked workers when they refused to disperse from publicly-owned land next to the bus depot at the centre of an industrial action.

Many workers were beaten and injured by police tear gas and rubber bullets. The court heard unionists claim that they threw rocks only to defend themselves. USTKE has moved to lay charges against the French government over excessive police violence. The court is expected to deliver a verdict on April 21.



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