

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

24 January 2009

Apollo tyre lockout enters seventh week

A lockout of 1,100 workers from Apollo Tyres Ltd at Kalamassery in Kerala, India has entered its seventh week after talks failed again this week. Management is demanding productivity increases and claims that the plant is unviable at current production levels. The unions claim that the basic issue is not productivity but a management decision to re-locate the factory.

Kerala's state Labour Minister told the media that the government was "ready to make the trade unions" accept company demands for productivity increases. The unions have declared that while they are ready to discuss "all the issues mentioned in the lockout notice" they will only consider three of 12 matters listed for consideration to maintain the plant. Other issues would be discussed after the lockout is lifted, the union stated.

The Kalamassery plant currently produces 90 tonnes of tyres per day, a three-fold increase in 1995 production levels.

Indian brick workers' strike escalates

Workers from 100 brick kilns in Adalaj, Gujarat this week joined strikers at 20 kilns in Sanand, who walked off the job on January 11 over wages and conditions. The brick workers' demands include a fixed payment of 350 rupees (\$US7) for 1,000 bricks; free housing, electricity, and drinking water facilities at the workplace; and access to basic health and education.

Int Bhatta Majdoor Union secretary Dinesh Parmar said: "The daily wage rate for an eight-hour day is as low as 40 rupees while most of the time workers work for 16 hours at a stretch without having any light at nights. The workers are forced to buy their own kerosene for lighting." Parmar said that employees worked in "near-bondage conditions".

Workers at Birla Tyres protest closure

More than a 1,000 workers led by the Birla Tyres Workers' Union (BTWU) on January 21 demonstrated outside the district government building in Balasore over the closure of their factory.

Birla Tyres have shut down production from January 19 to 31 because of the slump in demand and falling prices and announced a no-work no-pay policy. The factory also closed for 14 days in December.

The union issued a seven-point charter of demands describing the interim closure of the factory as illegal. Workers want an audit of Birla Tyres' properties and balance sheet, the payment of all permanent and casual employees' wages during the closure, and other measures implemented under the Industrial Disputes Act, the Factory Act and the Contract Labourer Act.

Indian fish sellers demonstrate

Over 1,000 fish vendors protested in Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu on January 20 over the Indian government's failure to implement reforms to improve working conditions. The national government promised to provide identity cards, shelter, sanitation, market facilities and loans to fisherwomen and street vendors.

India's national policy on urban street vendors, launched in 2004, has so far only been implemented in Madhya Pradesh. There is no sign of the new measures being introduced in Tamil Nadu.

Philippines furniture workers demand jobs

About 100 displaced workers from Giardini del Sole, one of the Philippines largest furniture exporting companies, picketed the factory in Cebu on January 15. The union, the Nagkahiusang Puwersa nga Mamumuo sa Giardini, has formally filed for notice of strike action.

The union is concerned that while some 60 workers are still

employed to maintain production, another 250 Giardini workers remained displaced despite an agreement on job rotation. It is also calling for a government bailout package that includes a subsidy for displaced workers, tax refund for workers, and a reformed and expanded state employment program.

Telstra technicians implement further industrial action

Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) members at Telstra, Australia's largest telco, are continuing workplace stoppages this week for a new work agreement.

The union said that it would call for 48-hour stoppages by staff in Telstra wireless operations and mobile networks field groups in Melbourne's CBD, at Telstra's Global Operations Centre and at Next Generation Operations and Enhanced Operations groups.

Telstra employees imposed overtime and call-back bans during December. Telstra is adamant, however, that it will not negotiate with the union, claiming only 15 percent of Telstra employees are union members.

About 13,000 Telstra employees are covered by an enterprise agreement that expired in September. The unions estimate that the rest of the 32,000 workers are on Australian Workplace Agreements (individual contracts).

New South Wales industrial court rules on teachers' dispute

On January 21, the Industrial Relations Commission brought a long-running dispute between the NSW Teachers Federation and the Department of Education and Training closer to an end when it awarded teachers a pay increase and made modifications to disputed changes to the teachers' transfer system.

If accepted, public school teachers' and permanent TAFE teachers' salaries will increase by an accumulative 12.48 percent over the next three years.

The teachers were planning industrial action on January 28 and 29 as part of their campaign against the government's changes to the transfer scheme, which would dismantle an established method in which schools are allocated teachers by a centralised staffing unit. Under the new scheme teachers are selected by the school principal, making it harder for teachers to transfer to a school of their choice.

Union president Bob Lipscombe said a new transfer agreement meant teachers posted to remote locations not to their liking had a

better chance of being transferred to a more desirable location.

NSW Department of Education director-general Michael Coutts-Trotter said that the union had negotiated trade-offs for the salary increase because it was higher than the state government's 2.5 percent cap on public sector wages. The teachers' union web site admits "some concessions" but has not provided any details.

Teachers are reportedly being asked to accept cuts to their annual sick-leave accumulated entitlements from 32 days per year to 15. They will vote on the agreement next month.

Australian air traffic controllers granted strike ballot

This week Australia's air traffic controllers took the next step towards potentially crippling industrial action after eight months of talks failed to resolve a key issue in pay negotiations with their employer, Airservices Australia.

On January 22, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission approved an application from the controllers' union, Civil Air, for a protected-action ballot of members for strike. Options include rolling stoppages or an overtime ban, both of which could significantly disrupt air travel.

Airservices is offering a 4 percent salary increase per year for three years but wants to cap sick leave at 15 days per year. Air traffic controllers currently get unlimited sick leave. The union is demanding a wage increase of 7 percent a year for three years and no cap on sick leave.

The union has accused Airservices of mismanagement and poor wages that have led to chronic staff shortages and "unreasonable" levels of overtime to minimise delays and avoid airlines flying through uncontrolled airspace. **The strike ballot will end on February 11.**



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