

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 February 2009

Striking government employees arrested in India

Thousands of Arunachal Pradesh state government employees, demanding the full implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission report, blocked streets in the state's capital Itanagar for several hours on February 12, following the arrest of six of their striking colleagues under the Essential Service Maintenance Act (ESMA). Around 5,000 workers surrounded the Itanagar and Naharlagoon police stations, demanding the release of their imprisoned colleagues, forcing the government to send in police reinforcements.

The state government invoked the ESMA after the Confederation of Service Associations of Arunachal Pradesh (COSA-AP) refused to call off its "pen down" strike launched on February 5.

The government has been trying to convince the union to agree on a modified version of the pay commission's recommendations. The proposal would restrict pay arrears to six months, but employees are demanding 36 months arrears as recommended by the commission.

More than 200 teachers from several un-aided colleges in Lucknow, in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, were caned by police on February 12 while demonstrating in the streets of Hazratganj shouting slogans supporting their demands. Five teachers were arrested when they pelted cane-wielding police officers with stones.

Teachers are demanding remuneration equal to that of teachers of aided colleges, whose work is similar.

Government surgeons in Orissa end strike after pay agreement

Some 353 Orissa House Surgeons Association members on February 12 called off their indefinite strike that began four days earlier, following assurances from the Orissa state government that their monthly stipend would be increased from 5,000 rupees to 8,640 rupees (\$US173) to bring their pay in line with surgeons in other states.

Surgeons at state-run medical college hospitals at Cuttack, Berhampur and Burla had walked off the job after the Sixth Pay Commission's recommendations were implemented for other doctors and employees in the health services, but college hospital surgeons were not included.

Dismissed hospital workers protest in Tamil Nadu

Some 42 workers at the Tirunelveli Medical College Hospital, whose contracts were terminated recently, staged a demonstration on the hospital premises in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu on February 12, demanding reinstatement and the regularisation of their service.

S. Narayanan of the All Medical Employees Association said that for the past 10 years contract workers had taken care of most of the hospital's sanitary operations. He added that most of the sacked workers had been employed for eight years. Now that their contracts had been terminated, the workload on the remaining workers had "increased phenomenally".

Sri Lankan customs officers strike

Assistant customs officers in Sri Lanka launched a strike on February 16, protesting against the introduction of fingerprint machines to record their work shift. Officers said that because of the nature of their work it was very cumbersome to record their attendance that way. They vowed to continue the strike until the existing manual signature system was reinstated.

Indonesian commuter transport workers strike

Up to 2,500 driver-owners of minivans and buses staged a strike in the Indonesian city of Bandar Lampung on February 16 to protest the mayor's decree of a 20 percent fare cut. The rally, organised by the Organisation of Land Transportation Owners (Organda), paralysed public transportation in the city, forcing the local police to deploy trucks to carry stranded commuters.

The decree, issued in January, slashed fares from 2,500 rupiah (22 US cents) to 2,000 rupiah. Drivers claimed that they would not be able to make a profit. One minivan driver told journalists: "They ask us to pay them 100,000 rupiah per day [for fees]. If we get less, we have to make it up with our own money. That means I go home without any money."

The mayor said the fare cut was justified because the government "had already cut fuel prices three times". He declared that he would not hesitate to revoke operating licences if drivers and Organda representatives failed to apply the new fares.

Domestic workers rally in Jakarta

Around 300 people, including 100 domestic workers, rallied at the Hotel

Indonesia Traffic Circle, Central Jakarta on February 15, demanding that domestic workers be recognised under Indonesia's labour law.

The rally was organised by the National Network for Domestic Workers Advocacy (Jala PRT), which estimates that more than four million people are employed as domestic workers, including one million child maids. The group proclaimed the day National Domestic Workers Day.

Protesters carried cardboard posters depicting a maid on her knees at her employer's feet, with words, "PRT (domestic maids) are not allowed outside the house," and staged a short play about the daily life of a housemaid.

They demanded that employers acknowledge their job as a profession and called on the government to pass a Domestic Workers Protection Law and make February 15 a national holiday for domestic workers.

Indonesian workers protest lay-offs

About 2,000 sacked workers from the PT Sejahtera Usaha Bersama plywood factory in Jombang, East Java gathered at the plant last week to protest their unilateral dismissal and demand recognition of their normative (legal) rights.

Meanwhile, 200 workers from furniture company PT Timur Selatan in the neighbouring district of Kediri filed a complaint with the local manpower office over their dismissal due to a minimum wage increase.

Thousands of Indonesian factory workers have been laid off in the past two months due to an acute drop in orders from the US and Europe. In the industrial areas of Rungkut, Surabaya and Sidoarjo, dismissed workers who have been denied their legal rights remained at their workplaces to seek settlement of their disputes.

Ten dismissed workers at the PT Philips Indonesia factory in Rungkut are appealing to the High Court after being replaced by outsourced workers. They charge that their dismissal breaches a Manpower Ministerial Decree.

The trade unions have not initiated any industrial action. Instead, Coordinator of the Alliance for Labor Rights (ABM) Jamaluddin recently claimed that workers did not object to being laid off as a last resort, but "the dismissals must be conducted in accordance with the law".

Philippine furniture workers accept redundancy deal

Displaced workers at the Giardini del Sole furniture factory in Mandaue ended all industrial action on February 17 and accepted a redundancy package negotiated between their union, factory management and the city government.

Primitivo Ginoo, Jr., president of the Nagkahiusang Puwersa nga Mamumuo sa Giardini (NPMG), said concessions include the immediate payment of separation pay of 13 days per year of service, refunds of unremitted social security payments and grants of 360,000 pesos (\$US3,200) in employment assistance from the city government of Mandaue to workers who are residents of the town.

Factory operations had been at a near standstill since February 3, when 250 workers struck and picketed the factory gates.

NSW ambulance officers ordered to drop industrial action

Ambulance Services NSW officers have been ordered to drop planned industrial action after a last minute hearing of the New South Wales Industrial Relations Commission. The officers had planned industrial action from 8 a.m. February 19, refusing to carry out non-urgent hospital transfers and paperwork.

Their proposed action was prompted by the state Labor government signing off on a plan to transfer rescue services from ambulance personnel to the fire brigade. The Health Services Union (HSU) said ambulance officers were also angry about issues arising from a new pay deal, including roster arrangements, but the union accepted the court order, which means implementing the government's demands.

Emerging from the court, HSU official Dennis Ravlich said: "We're going to have a very challenging nine hours [convincing members to accept the ruling]." He added: "We are also obliged to indicate to members that defiance of an order made by the commission can lead to direct penalty and sanction, both to the union and its individual members."

NSW Health Minister John Della Bosca claimed victory, saying the commission's orders were legally enforceable for three months.

Queensland rail unions defer strike

Rail strikes set down for February 16 and 18, that would have brought rail services along Queensland's east coast and Brisbane's metropolitan lines to a standstill, were called off at the last minute after Queensland Rail (QR) agreed to back down from its push to force train drivers to work additional Sundays.

The Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Engineers (AFULE), which represents just under half of QR's 1,000 city train crews and the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), which represents the remaining rail workers, are in dispute with the Queensland Labor government over a new enterprise agreement. The main sticking point has been QR's demand for cuts to train crews' days off from 19 to 16 in an eight-week period. QR has agreed to enter three days of talks this week.

Tasmanian cleaners rally against contracts

About 60 cleaners rallied in Hobart, Tasmania on February 17, protesting against office cleaning contracts they claim are unfair. Cleaners said they were being asked to do more work in less time and their pay was inadequate.

The cleaners are expected to clean the equivalent of four domestic homes in one hour. Every two or three years their jobs are up for contract, making their employment constantly insecure. The Miscellaneous Workers Union is urging Tasmanian cleaning contractors to sign a collective agreement, which is used interstate.

Victorian brewery workers vow to defend jobs

Some 115 redundant maintenance workers of global beverages firm Foster's Group Ltd have vowed to fight for their jobs. The workers claim that their sackings last week came without notice or consultation.

Foster's last week announced a five-year alliance with maintenance contractor ABB Australia for work at Foster's Abbotsford brewery in

Melbourne. Foster's claimed that redundant workers would be eligible to apply for positions with ABB.

An Australian Manufacturing Workers Union spokesman said no existing workers had been given assurances of work with ABB, which would be on lower wages and conditions. At a meeting, workers voted to reject the company's decision and fight to defend their jobs. The union made no statement on whether a campaign would be launched.

Sydney fast ferry protests end

A week of daily protests by 70 maritime workers and community supporters at Sydney's Circular Quay wharf ended this week after Bass and Flinders, the owner of the new fast ferry to Manly, said it would enter into an agreement over wages and safety with the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA).

The MUA said the ferry did not meet safety standards and crew members were being paid 25 percent less per hour than workers on state-owned Sydney ferries. The company reportedly agreed to a union collective agreement, safe operating procedures and a 25 percent pay rise for crew. The company and the union said they would aim to finalise an agreement by March 31. All pickets and protests will stop while negotiations are under way.

Six months ago the NSW state government cancelled the JetCat service to Manly, supposedly for financial reasons, and said it would be replaced with a privately operated service. The Manly contract sets a precedent for privatising all Sydney ferry services.

Papua New Guinea nurses to strike

More than 3,000 nurses throughout Papua New Guinea are set to walk off the job on February 25 unless the government honours its commitment to pay them the 2006 Nurses Salary Reclassification (NSR) awards by that date.

PNG Nurses Association general secretary Jack Suao said the industrial registrar had been informed of the union's intentions to call a strike. The union would call for its members to vote in an Electoral Commission ballot on a 14-day nationwide strike.

The union has accused the government of abrogating an agreement it made in December when nurses threatened to strike by the end of the year. The government agreed to meet with the union on February 12 to resolve the issue, but failed to do so.



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