

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 February 2009

## Strike by Bihar public servants in fifth week

At least 300,000 public servants in the Indian state of Bihar remain on strike after walking off the job on January 7 to demand full implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission report. Government services have been brought to a standstill.

Rambali Singh, general secretary of the Gope faction of Bihar State Non-Gazetted Employees Federation (BSNGEF), said his members were intimidated by a Public Interest Litigation filed against them in the Patna High Court. "We are yet to receive the court notice but as soon as it is served, we would prepare a detailed reply for its submission," he said.

The Sixth Pay Commission has recommended the payment of three years' wage arrears, outstanding since January 1, 2006, transport allowances for all employees and the retirement age lifted from 58 to 60 years in 2010-11.

The BSNGEF and the Bihar Secretariat Services Association rejected a government offer to pay the arrears from April 1, 2007, declaring, "We will not accept anything less than the commission's recommendations".

Bihar's finance secretary has issued an order to all department heads to implement a "no work, no pay" policy and warned that those on strike would not be entitled to interim arrears and the planned revised pay scale.

## Indian college and university teachers rally

More than 3,000 college teachers and university lecturers organised by the All India Federation of University and College Teachers' Organisation demonstrated in Chennai, Tamil Nadu on January 31 over salary demands. The Joint Action Council of College Teachers (JAC) presented a memorandum to the Tamil Nadu chief minister's office demanding implementation of the University Grants Commission (UGC) new salary scales.

The JAC wants the central government to give 100 percent assistance to

the states to implement the revised UGC pay scales in full and for state governments to uniformly and simultaneously introduce the new pay scales, back paid from January 1, 2006.

Other demands include parity of college and university retirement ages, all eligible college lecturers given professorship without discrimination between undergraduate and post-graduate colleges and no direct appointment of college professors.

Teachers also want the pension benefit of new pay scales to be extended to all teachers who retired prior to January 1, 2006 and the Indian government to withdraw rules preventing colleges and universities from creating new departments without the prior permission of the UGC.

## Pune forest workers to protest

Forest workers in Pune will demonstrate outside district forest offices and at the residence of Maharashtra's forest minister, Babanrao Pachpute, on February 9 to demand permanent government jobs.

Prakash Shinde, general secretary of the forest workers union, said this week that although the government had given an assurance that the forest workers' demands would be settled, the rallies will proceed because "nothing happened" following similar promises by the state government.

A forest worker on daily wages for more than 10 years said: "There are many like me. We have hardly got any benefit from our service. We should be rewarded for our hard work and the government should give us permanent jobs."

According to the union, there are around 5,500 workers attached to the Pune forest department. Involved in guarding the forest lands and other related work, they receive only 83 rupees (\$US1.70) per day.

## Bangladesh river transport workers strike

Around 750 river transport workers employed on 250 cargo and coastal vessels in Mongla, Bangladesh's second largest seaport, struck on February 2 for an increase in their daily food allowance from 35 taka

(\$US0.51) to 100 taka. The cargo vessel owners have refused to negotiate an increase.

Transport of goods to and from adjacent river ports in India came to an immediate halt. The port handles 250 shipments per month on the average, mainly from Indian ports.

In 2008, members of the River Vessel Workers' Federation struck three times to demand higher pay. In December 2000, four dock workers at the port were shot dead by riot police during another wage dispute.

### **Philippines furniture workers union accepts redundancies**

Union representatives for 250 displaced workers at Giardini del Sole, one of the Philippines largest furniture exporting companies, have agreed to remove a picket at the company's Cebu factory to allow 240 non-striking workers into the plant. Union members have been picketing the factory since January 15.

Nagkahiusang Puwersa nga Mamumuo sa Giardini union officials, in an agreement with the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and the National Conciliation and Mediation Board (NCMB), will approach displaced workers and provide a list of those willing to accept the redundancy package.

Details have not been made public, but even if workers accept the deal, severance payments will not be made until the company "can afford" it. The union has called for a government bailout package that includes a subsidy for displaced workers, tax refunds for workers, and a reformed and expanded state employment program.

### **Telstra unions escalate campaign for new wage deal**

Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) and Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members at Telstra, Australia's largest telecommunications provider, will stop work for 24 hours nationwide on February 9 to demand a new work agreement.

The CEPU has called on members to implement bans on overtime, recalls and call backs this weekend and an undisclosed group of technicians could implement industrial action prior to the national stoppage. Union members will also attend rallies at midday outside Telstra's T Life shops in Sydney and Melbourne with protests in other state capitals during the national walkout.

CEPU and CPSU members began industrial action against Telstra in December in an attempt to force the company to the negotiating table. Telstra is adamant, however, that it will not negotiate a new collective agreement, 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 company's 32,000 workers are on Australian Workplace Agreements (individual contracts).

### **Air traffic controllers' dispute no closer to resolution**

The Australian government has urged air traffic controllers and Airservices Australia to resolve their long-running pay dispute as airlines become increasingly nervous about potentially crippling industrial action. The air traffic controllers union, Civil Air, and Airservices Australia postponed talks scheduled for February 3 causing concern for airlines worried about flight disruptions.

Civil Air members are currently involved in a ballot on future industrial action. The vote will be completed by February 11, with seven days' notice required for any industrial action.

Disagreement on pay increases and rosters are unresolved but union executive secretary Peter McGuane said that sick leave remains a major sticking point. Airservices wants to limit sick leave to 15 days. Air traffic controllers want to retain unlimited sick leave, arguing they are on a 24-hour roster and have to meet higher health standards than other members of the community.

### **New South Wales teachers accept new pay deal**

A long-running dispute between the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and the Department of Education and Training ended on February 6 when teachers at dozens of two-hour stop-work meetings across the state voted overwhelmingly to accept a new pay agreement. The NSWTF has more than 65,000 members.

Under the deal public school teachers and permanent TAFE teachers' salaries will increase by an accumulative 12.48 percent over the next three years. This amount is only one percent higher than an offer rejected by union members in November. Teachers originally wanted a 5 percent annual increase over three years.

The new three-year deal, which was struck with the union leadership on January 21, will halve teachers' sick leave, substantially reduce workers' compensation entitlements and streamline dismissal procedures. Centralised staffing will be formally overturned, with half of all appointments to be made via local principal hire, thereby facilitating the shift to "school autonomy".

### **Sydney port workers walk off the job**

A wildcat strike by port workers of Patrick Stevedoring shut down its Sydney terminal at Port Botany for one full shift on January 29. One hundred wharfies walked off the job shortly after 6 a.m. over the sacking of a shop steward in Brisbane earlier in the month. Wharfies clocked on, as scheduled at 2 p.m. for the second shift the stoppage delayed the unloading of two container vessels.

The Maritime Union of Australia did not authorise the stoppage but the union's national secretary Paddy Crumlin said it came after several weeks of tension on the waterfront.

Patrick sacked the shop steward at its Brisbane terminal for a series of offences, including not wearing the company uniform. The union claims the dismissal was an overreaction by the company and warned that union members at other Patrick terminals could be disciplined or sacked for minor offences. The Brisbane shop steward has not been reinstated.

### **Sydney prison officers strike over privatisation**

More than 100 prison officers stopped work at Sydney's Long Bay Jail on February 4 calling for an end to the NSW government's moves to privatise Cessnock and Parklea jails.

NSW Public Service Association assistant secretary Steve Turner told a prison officers' rally in Sydney's east that the privatisation, which was announced in the November 11 state mini-budget, would not stop with Parklea and Cessnock. Prison officers are concerned that privatisation will lead to lost jobs, lower pay and reduced conditions for both officers and inmates.

Prisons are now the responsibility of the new minister for corrective services John Robertson, who took a high-profile stand against the privatisation of state electricity assets last year when he was secretary of Unions NSW. Since entering government, Robertson has accepted the government's decision to sell off the state's three electricity retail outlets.

### **Local government workers strike over privatisation**

More than 500 Newcastle City council staff walked off the job for 48 hours on February 5 over council plans to privatise garbage services. The action followed a mass meeting of council administrative staff who voted to join their garbage collecting colleagues in the strike action. The walkout affected local pools, lifeguards, roads and construction, as well as garbage services.

Noel Martin from the United Services Union said workers are concerned that council's plans to privatise garbage collection could be extended to other areas. He accused the council of abrogating the Newcastle City Council award that provides for consultation with staff before any contracting. The issue is now before the Industrial Relations Commission.

On December 11, Ipswich council workers in Queensland struck for the second time in a week over privatisation. The council planned to enter a 10-year, \$110 million contract with an outsourcing company to oversee customer and property rates services—the first of its kind in Australia. Around 100 of the council's 400 employees will be forced to transfer to the private company.

### **Solomon Islands construction workers to strike**

Some 160 employees of China United (SI) Cooperation building a commercial centre and rugby stadium in the Solomon Islands capital Honiara will strike on February 9.

Tony Kagovai of the Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (SINUW) claimed that standards on the project violated government health and safety standards and voiced concern about the poor terms and conditions provided by the company.

Union members also claim mistreatment of elected union representatives in breach of the work agreement. The *Solomon Star* reported this week that China United management "deliberately delayed negotiating terms and services of the workers".

The company chief executive director has agreed to meet with workers and union representatives to resolve the issues.



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