Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Indian dock workers on indefinite strike

Kochi port workers in Kerala walked off the job on February 20 in protest against the suspension of a union leader. Port management suspended the official after Cochin Thuramugha Thozilali Union (CTT) members refused to use a newly installed biometric identity card system at the facility.

CTT members have ignored management threats that "stringent" action would be taken against anyone who disobeyed security instructions and that all striking employees would be suspended. The strike has stranded two bulk-cargo vessels in the port's outer anchorage and work at the container freight station has been disrupted.

Sri Lankan bus workers strike

Hundreds of workers, including field and office staff, at 11 bus depots in Sri Lanka's North Western province struck on February 19 to demand a pay increase. The action stopped all Central Transport Board buses.

Head office employees in Badagamuwa joined the walkout, demonstrating outside their office building, while striking workers at the Kurunegala South Depot climbed onto the depot roof to publicise their demands.

Employees alleged that they have not been paid a 1,000-rupee ($US8.70) wage rise awarded in the last budget and other promised salary increments. They vowed to remain on strike until their demands were met.

Sri Lankan electricity workers protest privatisation

Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) employees resumed their protests on February 25 against long-running government plans to privatise the utility. A statement by the CEB Joint Trade Union Federation said the agitation will continue until March 3 when a modified Sri Lanka Electricity Draft Bill is due to be adopted. The federation wants the Rajapakse government to withdraw the legislation, which will privatise electricity generation, with distribution handled by local government institutions, companies and co-operative societies.

Despite widespread opposition, the union federation has restricted the campaign to a series of harmless protests, including raising black flags in CEB offices, a petition and sending letters to MPs. The federation has asked CEB employees to apply for a sick-leave day when the bill is passed.

The government has presented the privatisation bill to parliament on four previous occasions but withdrawn in the face of popular opposition from CEB workers and the public. Last October the bill was withdrawn after all 28 unions in the CEB threatened to "put the entire country in darkness" if the legislation was passed.

Pakistan peasants march for land reforms

Thousands of landless peasants (haris) from Pakistan's Sindh province were expected to complete a 12-day, 250-kilometre march to Karachi on February 26, ending their protest with a sit-in at the Sindh Assembly building.

The peasants want amendments made to the Sindh Tenancy Act (1950), which would provide land to landless haris, establish hari courts, end bonded labour and other forms of exploitative labour. The march was organised by the South Asia Partnership-Pakistan, the Sindh Hari Porhiat Council and Bhandar Hari Sangat.

Indonesian cigarette workers strike

Hundreds of workers at cigarette producer PT Cakra Guna Cipta in Pakisaji walked off the job on February 18 and rallied outside the factory

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in Kendalpayak village to demand payment of the 2009 minimum wage and phase out the labour-contract system.

Workers said they were still receiving the 2008 minimum wage, which is 45,000 rupiah per month lower than the new minimum of 945,000 rupiah ($US85.90) that came into effect on January 1. The Committee for Struggle of Indonesian Labor claimed most workers at the company and other small cigarette factories were employed on labour contracts and paid daily.

A packing worker told the press that almost all employees in that section were underpaid and that implementation of the labour contract system and cuts to the regular eight-hour working day had considerably reduced wages. Sri Wilujeng, 43, a permanent worker, said that she was paid 13,500 rupiah per 1,000 cigarettes while contract workers were only paid 9,300 rupiah per 1,000.

Nestlé workers in Hong Kong end strike

Hong Kong Nestlé Workers Union members ended a 24-hour strike on February 21, after management agreed to reinstate sacked union officials. Union president Chan Pong Yin and another union member were sacked on February 17, two weeks after the union called off industrial action over wages and employment conditions.

While management had promised to negotiate on a range of issues, including permanent employment for temporary workers and formal union recognition, the company has not made any new commitment to recognise the union or negotiate other disputed issues.

Similar promises were made in July 2008, after Nestlé employees struck for three days in protest against 17-hour workdays, poor wages and one third of all employees on revolving casual contracts.

Philippine sugar cane workers demonstrate for bonuses

About 100 sugarcane workers and labourers in Negros Occidental marched to Bacolod City, the provincial capital, on February 19, to demand the release of 200 million pesos ($US4.17 million) of undistributed cash bonuses and the allocation of land for subsistence use. National Federation of Sugar Workers-Negros members want the bonuses distributed by the union.

The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) is legally obliged to pay 10 pesos for every 50 kilos of sugar into the Social Amelioration Fund (SAF). SAF is intended for the welfare of sugar workers, with 80 percent going to bonuses and 20 percent to economic projects for farm workers and maternity and death benefits. The bonuses are currently distributed via the landlords and planters' association and workers only receive a meagre bonus of between 40 to 400 pesos each crop year.

Union members met with the Provincial Board to explain their demands. Officials said they would approach DOLE but claimed they had "no control over the farm properties of landlords". DOLE has already convened two meetings involving workers and landlords on bonus distribution.

Shell refinery workers in Sydney locked out

Shell Australia has refused to reopen its Clyde plant in Sydney until its 150 workers accept a proposed labour agreement. The agreement includes an annual 4 percent salary increase over three years, which is below the inflation rate. Shell's Clyde plant was shut down at the end of November for maintenance and the company has not indicated when it will restart production.

Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members at the site rejected the company's latest offer in a secret ballot on February 20. Workers claimed that the offer could strip as much as $12,000 from their pay, allow management changes to shift rosters without consultation and cut minimum manning levels to allow more contractor labour.

Shell claims that the agreement is necessary to ensure that the Sydney-based refinery was "a sustainable operation". CFMEU members have accused Shell of preparing for a showdown by training staff and some outsiders to do their work.

South Australian nurses strike over commercial development

Nurses at the Glenside mental health facility in Adelaide walked off the job on February 25 in protest against the state government's plan to sell part of the site to help fund a $100 million upgrade of the hospital.

Nurses complained that the hospital will be "squeezed" into one corner of the site and bed numbers reduced by 100. Nurse Lynn Croft told the press that, "Having a mental health hospital surrounded by open space has therapeutic benefits and the loss of beds is a real concern."

Unmoved by the strike action, Minister for Mental Health Jane Lomax-Smith claimed that the Australian Nursing Federation would be consulted thoroughly during the sale of the site.

Victorian construction workers picket hospital site

Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members have been picketing a Bovis Lend Lease building site at the Royal Children's Hospital since February 18 in protest against company attempts to impose swipe identity cards.

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The issue flared at the hospital site after the company sacked Joe Angelino, an occupational health and safety officer. CFMEU state secretary Bill Oliver said the union had been intimidated and harassed by Bovis and its main contractor, Caelli Constructions. The union has been in dispute with Bovis for several months over the issue at other Victorian building sites.

The Industrial Relations Court (IRC) is currently hearing a contempt of court case brought against the CFMEU by Bovis, which claims that the union ignored a previous federal court order to end its blockade.

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NZ health workers picket over zero pay offer

New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) members and supporters at Rosebank residential aged-care facility in Ashburton picketed the Christchurch office of the facility owner on February 23.

NZNO organiser Steve Howard said the owner had offered workers a zero pay increase in negotiations for a collective agreement. This would mean that the already low-paid employees would not have a pay rise for two years. Workers were told that there would be no pay rise unless they agreed to staffing cuts. Employees rejected the ultimatum.

In November last year NZNO members protested outside the facility after rejecting a 1.2 percent pay increase in exchange for a reduction in staff hours, leaving them with hardly any increase at all.

The pay range for aged-care workers at Rosebank is between $12.55 and $13.05 an hour. New Zealand's minimum wage is set to rise to $12.50 an hour in April.

Workers protest against Papua New Guinea fishing firm

Nearly 1,000 employees from the Papua New Guinea fishing company Frabelle protested outside the Morobe provincial government headquarters on February 24 over low pay and exploitative conditions. The group, which mostly comprised mothers and young women, complained of being ill-treated, bashed by the security guards at the factory and only paid 90 toea (32 US cents) per hour.

Rose Tuo, a spokeswoman for the group, said that their fortnightly wage of between 30 and 40 kina ($US10.70 and $US14.30) did not keep pace with increasing cost of basic goods and services and that employees could not properly feed their families.

The governor agreed to approach the company but claimed that Frabelle was already paying wages determined by the Minimum Wages Board. The current official PNG minimum wage is 74 kinas per fortnight but is set to rise to 200 kinas before the end of 2009.

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