Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 April 2010

Korean tyre workers on strike

Around 4,000 Kumho Tyre Workers' Union members began strike action at the company's Gwangju plant on April 1 after the 20th round of negotiations with management on a 25 percent job cut broke down. The cash-strapped company announced in early March that it intended carrying out a debt-reduction plan and began issuing termination letters to 1,200 employees to take effect on April 2.

Management has rejected a union offer to accept a 10 percent pay cut if bonuses are restored and no jobs are lost. The company wants a 15 percent basic salary cut and no restoration of bonuses. Over 190 employees have already been coerced into taking early retirement.

Over the past two years the union has worked with Kumho to convince workers to accept wage freezes and the elimination of bonuses to "save the company". Last September the union accepted Kumho's demands for a 2008 wage freeze to be extended throughout 2009, scheduled 2008 bonuses not be paid, and for talks on 2009 bonus schemes to be put off until the first quarter of 2010.

Indian electricity workers walk out

Nearly 60,000 Punjab State Electricity Board (PSEB) employees stopped work for 24 hours on March 30 to protest against the state government's decision to privatise the company. Striking workers also want immediate salary increments and other demands including employment for a relative of any worker who dies during service.

PSEB workers have already taken industrial action over privatisation this year. In February, technical staff stopped work for 24 hours to demand the state government not sell any part of the industry.

Indian government employees strike

Thousands of state government workers in Imphal, Manipur have resumed strike action to demand the government pay arrears recommended by the Sixth Pay Commission. The government started paying commission rises but claims it does not have enough money to pay the arrears. Earlier this year Manipur government workers struck for 20 days over the issue.

The Joint Administrative Council (JAC) of All Manipur Trade Unions' Council (AMTUC) and All Manipur Government Employees' Organisation (AMGEO) is leading the strike action.

Indian teachers protest

On March 31, Mahila Vidyalaya teachers in Lucknow began two-hour daily sit-down protests and wearing black ribbons during examinations to demand payment of arrears recommended by the Sixth Pay Commission. Teachers claim the arrears are almost 15 million rupees ($US322,580) and date back to December 2008 and June 2009. The Lucknow University and Associated College Teachers Association organised the protest.

Bangladeshi garment workers protest

On March 30, several hundred Man Trust Sweater employees in Bhogra, Gazipur downed tools and held a sit-in protest to oppose a wage cut. Workers allege that the factory manager had only paid basic salaries and not production wages. The striking workers later held a street protest but were met by a large contingent of police who broke up the rally.

On the same day hundreds of Oriental Sweater workers rallied outside their closed factory, stopping traffic for several hours. The garment workers allege that management had closed the plant owing them three months' pay. Police intervened but the protesting workers only dispersed after the factory management claimed that the outstanding wages would be paid on April 15 when the factory reopens.

Bangladeshi miners end strike

On March 27, 1,000 striking miners at the Barapukuria coal field, near Dinajpur, ended their five-day strike after the Barapukuria Coal Mining Company (BCMCL) and Chinese contractor XMC agreed to raise the miners' salaries by 22 percent.

The miners alleged that BCMCL and XMC had not implemented a 2008 agreement to pay their annual wage increment each February. The strike was sparked after the companies failed to honor assurances that a decision on the salary increase would be made by March 20.

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Qantas engineers escalate industrial bans

Qantas and Jetstar professional engineers have extended industrial bans to include overtime bans during the four-day Easter break, beginning on April 2. The more than 200 highly-skilled engineers, who are responsible for maintaining the airworthiness of Qantas and Jetstar, sign-off on all significant maintenance work.

Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia (APESMA) members, who have not had a pay increase since July 2008, want a 30 percent wage rise over three years and fatigue-management. In June 2008, Qantas imposed a 3 percent pay rise cap on all employees. Inflation was then running at more than 4 percent.

A key issue in the dispute is the airline's out-of-hours work policies, which have led to serious fatigue amongst engineers and poses real safety risks. APESMA members began industrial action in November, refusing to respond to call-outs on weekends and between 5 p.m. and 8 a.m. on weekdays. According to Qantas, the latest bans will have no effect on flight schedules because professional engineers do not work on weekends or public holidays.

The industrial action coincides with two safety incidents involving Qantas flights this week. The Civil Aviation Safety Authority is currently investigating a February incident.

Telstra union calls national strike

The Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU), representing telecommunications technicians employed at Telstra—Australia's largest telecommunications provider—has called a national 24-hour stoppage on April 6. The walk-out is over a long-running dispute for a new enterprise agreement. CEPU members already have bans on overtime and emergency call-outs.

The main disputed issue is pay, with the CEPU calling for a base-pay rise of at least 12.5 percent over three years—equal to an increase already granted to technicians on individual contracts. Telstra is offering 10 percent over three years—one percent less than non-union negotiated individual contracts—and annual performance bonuses up to 2.5 percent. CEPU claims if members accept the offer they could be up to $10,000 a year worse off than the thousands of Telstra workers on individual contracts.

Telstra CEPU members have not had a wage increase for over two years. In an attempt to reduce worker discontent during stalled negotiations, Telstra has granted an interim 2 percent pay increase backdated to February this year. The interim pay increase, along with what members describe as "ineffective" ongoing work bans are a part of a softening up process designed to drag out the dispute, demoralise technicians and bring them closer to accepting an agreement acceptable to Telstra management.

Munitions workers in Victoria hold second strike

Over 400 employees at the Benalla and Mulwala plants of defence equipment manufacturer Thales downed tools for four hours on March 30 over stalled negotiations for a new collective agreement. The action follows a 24-hour strike earlier in the month and ongoing bans on overtime and call-backs.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and three other unions want a 12 percent wage rise over three years, a penalty rate increase from 15 percent to 17 percent for afternoon and night shifts, and wages and conditions for contract workers on par with full-time employees.

The company has rejected most of these claims and wants to extend the period of work before a meal break from five to six hours, and make access to paid sick leave entitlements more difficult to obtain for workers with long-term illness or injury.

New Zealand: Intellectual disability support workers step up action

Over 3,000 intellectual disability support workers at group homes across New Zealand participated in a one-day ban on sleepovers on March 29. The strike escalated previous action, including bans on overtime and non-essential paperwork. Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) members are protesting a pay freeze imposed by IHC, the government-funded intellectual disability service, and wants the company to pass on a 2 percent funding increase to workers.

Workers have announced plans to strike for two nights next week, and three nights the following week. The SFWU has been in negotiations with IHC since October and is calling on the Employment Relations Authority to mediate pay talks.

This week, nearly 1,500 District Health Board employees—orderlies, food service workers, cleaners, security guards and DHB-employed home support workers—will receive a 2 percent pay increase in addition to an existing service increase of about 4 percent from a new collective agreement.

Papua New Guinea cannery workers strike

More than 500 Frabelle fish cannery employees in Lae walked out on March 29 to protest low wages and exorbitant transport, food and safety gear expenses. The workers receive PNG's legal minimum wage rate of 2.29 kina ($US0.86) an hour, regardless of skill level, and are forced to pay up to 4.10 kina per day to commute. Frabelle also charges 30 kina for a pair of safety boots and does not provide any face masks or safety clothes for its boiler-room workers.

Tom Vevo, a spokesperson for the workers' interim union, said that local and provincial government safety authorities have ignored workers' repeated protests about conditions in the cannery.

French Polynesia airport workers strike

Around 90 workers employed by SETIL, which manages services at the Tahiti-Faa'a airport, went on strike on March 30 to demand assurances that they will keep their jobs and working conditions when the current airport management is taken over by Aéroports de Tahiti. The strike has grounded international flights. The three unions representing the workers, the CSTP-FO, Otahi and CSIP, are in negotiations with SETIL.

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Tahiti hotel workers protest redundancy

Some 140 workers from the Tahiti Hilton Hotel marched through Papeete on March 29 to demand redundancy pay. The hotel closed on March 20. Workers protested outside the French territory's parliament and established pickets outside the hotel. The O Oe To Oe Rima union has threatened to broaden the strike to hotels and other companies owned by the Louis Wane Group. The business group, which owns four of Polynesia's most luxurious hotels, 10 hypermarkets and a food importing business, employs more than 1,600 people in the territory.

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