

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

31 December 2010

India: Madhya Pradesh nurses strike

Up to 2,500 nurses at government hospitals in Madhya Pradesh walked off the job on December 28, ignoring the state government's three-month invocation of the Essential Services Maintenance Act on nursing services. The striking nurses want a salary rise in line with Sixth Pay Commission recommendations and improved working conditions.

Under the essential services act all industrial action is illegal. The health minister has also threatened that "strict action" will be taken against the striking nurses. Madhya Pradesh Nurses Association coordinator Laxminarayan Sharma claimed that the strike was legal because it was "mass leave".

Goa pharmaceutical workers locked out

Over 400 workers at three pharmaceutical production plants of Orchid, Qualpro and Zephyr Systems (Rowtech) in Verna, South Goa have been locked out after demanding a wage rise and an end to the recruitment of contract workers.

On December 27, union members marched to the labour commissioner's office in Margao for a mediation meeting but management failed to attend. The commissioner said his office would send labour inspectors to the plants for discussions with management. The pharmaceutical workers are members of the Orchid, Qualpro and Zephyr, Verna employees union.

Tamil Nadu sugar workers protest

Amaravathi Cooperative Sugar Mill workers in Tirupur demonstrated on December 20 for a charter of demands. According to an Anna Thozhilalar Sangam Peravai union official, the workers want the wages of unskilled and skilled employees, up to the rank of Grade-C supervisor, to be increased and equal to other workers in the mill receiving government pay-scale wages. The sugar mill workers also want all vacant positions in cooperative sugar mills to be filled.

Sri Lankan tea warehouse workers strike

On December 24, 190 Welisara warehouse workers at Finlays-Sri Lanka

(a London-based tea trader) walked off the job to demand a wage rise and improved conditions. The warehouse workers want a 2,500-rupee (\$US22) monthly salary increase, withdrawal of the night shift, the compulsory 12-hour shift to be reduced to 8 hours, and various other demands. Finlays' offer of a 7.5 percent wage rise was rejected.

Indonesian water utility workers strike

PAM Jaya water utility workers in Jakarta demonstrated on December 21 to demand an increase in wages and health benefits, and restoration of a uniform allowance. The workers claim they have not received a wage rise since the regional water company was privatised 13 years ago and that the uniform allowance was axed in 2006 without explanation.

SP-PDAM Jakarta, the water utility workers' union, is holding talks with the company over the disputed issues.

Vietnamese footwear and garment workers strike

Over 23,000 workers at two South Korean plants in Dong Nai province, Vietnam walked off the job last week over pay, bonuses and Tet New Year holidays. Almost 20,000 footwear workers from the Tae Kwang Vina plant struck on December 23-24 while 4,000 garment workers at the Namyang factory struck for 24 hours. The basic salary at the Korean-owned plants is just 1.3 million dong a month (\$US65).

A Tae Kwang Vina worker told the media that management had agreed to allow eight days for the Tet holidays but ignored workers' demand for an increase in basic salary and the Tet bonus. Vietnamese workers have been hit by rising inflation, which according to official figures is currently 11.8 percent.

Philippine Airlines flight attendants dispute settled

Philippine Airlines (PAL) flight attendants withdrew threatened strike action in December after the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) ordered the carrier to raise its forced retirement age and grant increases in pay and allowances.

The 1,600 member Flight Attendants and Stewards Association of the Philippines (FASAP) and PAL have been in dispute over wages and conditions since November last year. PAL insisted that female workers hired after 1996 retire at 45 years of age and those employed after 2000 at

40. FASAP wanted the retirement age lifted to 60.

DOLE assumed jurisdiction over the dispute in October and forced both sides into mediation. In its decision last Friday DOLE ordered the airline to set a uniform retirement age of 60 for men and women, stating that different retirement ages for flight attendants performing the same services was discriminatory.

DOLE also directed the airline to grant salary increases totalling 200 million pesos as against the 105 million pesos PAL management had offered. The union wanted 300 million pesos (\$US6.8 million). Other entitlements awarded include a 1,800-peso rice allowance per employee, backdated to 2007, and improved pregnancy leave.

Philippines food processing workers seven-month strike

Up to 50 employees of Bal Asia, a food seasoning manufacturer, have been on strike for seven months and last week established a picket outside the company's Laguna plant in Southern Luzon. The company has been able to maintain production by moving strike-breakers in and out of the factory by helicopter.

The Agglo Genuine Labor Organisation called the strike in June, after the company rejected its proposed collective agreement. One worker told the media that most of the strike-breakers were contract workers or hired by agencies and were afraid they would be sacked if they joined the strike.

Taiwan: Retrenched Japanese Airlines employees continue protests

For the second time in two months, former Japan Airline (JAL) employees in Taiwan demonstrated on Monday, accusing the airline of illegally laying off 70 Taiwanese flight attendants. Protesters gathered outside the Council of Labor Affairs in Taipei to demand the government support their case. A government official said that the workers' case had "entered legal proceedings" and claimed that the flight attendants would be "provided assistance in the event of litigation."

In July JAL retrenched its Taipei attendants, claiming the layoffs were part of restructuring plans that included a 30 percent cut in its global workforce. Protesting senior flight attendants said they had been scheduled to retire within a year and alleged that they were laid off because the company did not want to pay their pensions.

Western Australian waterside workers strike

More than 200 waterside workers of stevedoring company Patrick walked off the job at two ports in Western Australia this week as part of a campaign for a 30 percent wage rise over three years, improved safety and an end to casual employment.

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members in Fremantle (south of Perth) struck for three days on Sunday and MUA members at Albany planned to strike for 48 hours yesterday.

A union official claimed that 60 percent of Patrick's workforce was employed on a casual basis, with no clear pathway to either part-time or permanent positions. He said many workers had been casual for more than nine years.

The MUA said that safety was a major issue on the waterfront and has

demanding improved training for members. Three port workers have been killed in fatal accidents this year, including a Patrick worker at Port Botany, New South Wales, in March. The MUA responded to the Port Botany accident with a one-hour protest at the facility and passed resolutions at other facilities calling on the then Rudd Labor government to establish a National Stevedoring Safety Taskforce and safety code of practice.

MUA members at Melbourne's Webb Dock and Geelong have voted for strike action but are yet to inform Fair Work Australia (FWA) when they plan to walk out. Under the Labor industrial relations laws the unions must give the employers and the FWA three working days notice prior to striking.

Sunbus drivers in Queensland to walk out again

For the third time this month, Sunbus drivers in Townsville and the Sunshine Coast plan to strike in a dispute over a new work agreement. Transport Workers Union (TWU) members have informed the company they intend to strike for 48 hours on December 31 and again on January 4.

According to the TWU, the Transit Australia Group, which owns and operates Sunbus, wants to force its 200 drivers back onto award pay rates and conditions, which would mean wage cuts of up to \$4 an hour and the elimination of allowances won over the last 10 years. The TWU wants a 4 percent pay rise and current entitlements maintained.

The company has refused to enter into any new negotiations until mid-January. It has chartered 25 buses to service the popular Sunshine Coast tourist routes on New Year's Eve. A company spokesperson told the media that drivers' wages were not being cut, but refused to say what the new hourly rate would be if drivers accepted the company offer.

New South Wales ambulance union accepts cuts in new award

Hundreds of New South Wales paramedics have condemned a new Health Services Union (HSU) work agreement with the state Labor government, which was ratified in the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) just before the Christmas holiday break.

The Emergency Medical Service Protection Association (EMSPA), a non-union body established to represent about 850 disgruntled officers, or roughly a third of all NSW ambulance employees, claims that the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) had no support from a large section of paramedics.

According to the EMSPA, the deal, which had been scheduled to be ratified in January, was rushed through in order to prevent potential industrial unrest before the forthcoming March state election.

Under the MOU, paramedics will only receive a 15 percent pay rise over four years and the HSU has accepted the elimination of paramedics' country relocation costs worth up to \$10,000. The allowance was originally introduced to encourage ambulance staff to move to rural areas. The EMSPA told the media that it believed most officers did not support the award and only 10 out of 17 HSU sub-branches supported the changes.

Sheraton Fiji Resort workers vote for strike

Over 450 Sheraton Fiji Resort employees have voted to strike if wage negotiations with management are not soon finalised. A second round of talks began this week.

A National Union for Hospitality, Catering and Tourism Industry Employees official told the media that some of Sheraton resort workers were given a 6 percent pay rise this year if they agreed to forego any unpaid pay increase from 2009. Workers who refused to sign the waiver did not receive the increment.

The union said that all other resorts on Fiji's west coast had unconditionally increased staff salaries last year. Sheraton management cited natural disasters, the global financial crisis, currency devaluation and low occupancy as the reason for not paying increments last year. The dispute goes before the labour dispute tribunal for mention in January.



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