

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 February 2011

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

Pakistan International Airline employees strike

Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) was hit by strike action on Tuesday after hundreds of employees walked out and picketed major airports in Karachi, Islamabad, Lahore and Peshawar. Over 60 pilots booked in sick on the day. Many strikers were arrested after police attempted to remove protesting workers from runways and terminals.

The strike, which is in protest over a job-cutting business plan, erupted after the airline sacked eight pilots earlier in the week. PIA claimed that the sacked pilots, who are also union leaders, were “not performing their jobs.”

The Council of Employees of PIA (CEPIA), a confederation representing six different unions, is protesting management’s code sharing agreement with Turkish Airlines, which allows both airlines to slash jobs and use each others’ aircraft, facilities and gain access to cities not already on their network.

A union official said the strike action would continue until the airline’s managing director was dismissed and the sacked pilots reinstated.

India: Striking Madhya Pradesh nurses arrested

More than 200 nurses have been arrested and 14 suspended from duty after the Madhya Pradesh state government invoked the Emergency Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) against more than 3,500 striking nurses at the five hospitals attached to government medical colleges. The invocation of ESMA makes all industrial action illegal.

Nurses walked out on December 28 to demand a salary rise in line with the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations and improved working conditions. A spokesman for the strikers said that nurses currently come under the state’s medical education department and are not paid benefits that their colleagues in the state’s public health and family welfare department receive.

Although the government claimed that the strike had not affected health services, it has threatened nurses that their “services will be terminated” if they do not return to work.

Striking Manipur secondary school teachers jailed

Over 120 teachers involved in a hunger strike at the Johnstone Higher Secondary School in Imphal were arrested and jailed this week. The teachers are continuing their hunger protest inside the jail. Following the arrests, more than 600 teachers from other secondary schools resolved to strike in support of their Council of Teachers’ Association (COTA) colleagues. COTA has demanded implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations.

Cochin Port workers end strike

Cochin Port workers ended a nine-day strike this week after the Kerala High Court directed the Cochin Port Trust to continue operations at the Rajiv Gandhi Container Terminal for the next three months.

Port workers, mostly from the private sector, walked off the job on February 1 to demand job protection and development of Cochin Port as a domestic cargo hub after container operations are shifted to a new terminal at nearby Vallarpadam Island. The new terminal was commissioned on February 11.

Despite earlier assurances that no jobs would be lost, port authorities this week told the media that up to 70 workers would lose their jobs because of the move.

e-Seva workers in Andhra Pradesh on strike

At least 120 employees at 21 e-Seva centres (online services for utility and phone bill payments) in Andhra Pradesh are on strike to demand payment of wages in accordance with a government order.

Centres in the Srikakulam district have been closed since January 27 due to the strike and workers in Andhra and Rayalaseema walked out on February 6. Long queues were seen at the e-Seva centres while electricity and municipal corporation staff manually processed customers’ bills.

Karnataka public servants hold state-wide demonstrations

Over 15,000 public servants in Karnataka held state-wide lunchtime protests on Wednesday to demand a wage rise. The Karnataka State Government Employees Association said that its members have not had a pay increase since 2006. The association wants pay parity with central government workers who are paid according to the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. Workers also want the house rent allowance increased

from 10 percent to 20 percent of their salaries.

Karnataka beedi workers protest

Hundreds of beedi (local cigarettes) workers affiliated to South Kanara Beedi Workers Federation (CITU) demonstrated in Mangalore on Tuesday. The low paid workers want a state-wide increase of their minimum wages to 100 rupees (\$US2.19) for rolling 1,000 beedis and a minimum pension of 1,500 rupees. They also want regularisation of contract and sub-contract workers, sufficient supply of leaf and tobacco and a minimum of 26 days of work per month with a minimum of 1,000 beedi to be rolled per day.

Central bank workers demonstrate in Sri Lanka

Ceylon Bank Employees Union members are maintaining pickets established on January 27 outside the HDFC Bank in the Colombo Fort to demand their right to a pension.

One of the protesting workers said that the state bank had suspended its pension scheme from 1996: “We were fighting for the last 15 years for this right but successive governments did not take it up.”

The Central Bank workers have threatened to intensify their protests if the government does not fulfil their demands.

Indonesian cigarette manufacturing workers protest

Hundreds of workers from the failed Jambu Bol cigarette company in Kudus, Central Java, demonstrated outside the closed factory on February 2 to demand unpaid wages and compensation. Police were called when the protest spilled onto the street and stopped traffic.

The factory, which once employed thousands of people, closed in 2008 but employees have not been officially terminated. By law the workers are entitled to “waiting money” of 160,000 rupiah (\$US18) per month. They claim to have only received one payment and that the company still owed unpaid wages.

Australian waterside workers suspend strike

Striking Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members at Patrick Stevedore’s bulk and general facility at Melbourne’s Webb Dock voted to return to work on February 4, a few hours after commencing a series of four-day rolling stoppages for a new work agreement. Their action followed a commitment by Patrick to return to the negotiating table with an offer.

According to the union, Patrick had repeatedly refused to negotiate a new agreement, despite seven months of talks and a month of industrial action that also involved members at Patrick docks in Western Australia.

The MUA wants a 30 percent pay rise over three years, improved safety and reduced casual employment. At least 60 percent of Patrick workers are casual and the union has called for long-term casual employees to be

offered permanent positions. Another issue is improved safety training—three port workers were killed in accidents during 2010. Patrick and the MUA plan to begin talks yesterday.

Victorian auto components workers on strike

Over 15 Autonex employees at Brunswick in Melbourne walked off the job last week and are picketing the company’s factory over a new work agreement. According to the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), the auto parts manufacturer wants to lower pay and conditions, remove penalty rates and significantly change roster arrangements.

An AMWU organiser told the media that changes to the contract included a 76-hour fortnight roster that gives management the capability to make employees work 60 hours one week and 16 the next. Other disputed issues include the elimination of meal allowances and weekend penalty rates.

Tasmanian nurses hold rolling stoppages

Nurses from Tasmanian public hospitals walked off the job on Tuesday to attend stop work meetings in Hobart, Latrobe, Burnie and Launceston over a new work agreement. The Tasmanian branch of the Health and Community Services Union, which covers 600 nurses and more than 800 allied health professionals, called the meetings to oppose a plan by the state Labor government to introduce nursing assistants in public hospitals.

About 90 percent of the union’s members voted against the government’s recent enterprise bargaining deal because it included a trial of nursing assistants, who will carry out such tasks as showering patients and basic monitoring. The union claims that the plan is a cost-cutting measure, with no extra budget for the new positions, which will take the place of more senior qualified nurses.

The Australian Nursing Federation, which represents most Tasmanian nurses, has supported the enterprise agreement offer.

New South Wales nurses union accepts sell-out deal

In a move designed to clear the decks of any industrial disputes before the pending March state election, the New South Wales Nurses Association (NSWNA) and the Labor state government have reached agreement on a new pay deal for nurses that falls far short of the nurses’ expectations.

The NSWNA is recommending its members forgo their original demand for a 15 percent pay increase over three years and accept a 9.7 percent increase over the same period. The union has also betrayed nurses’ demands for a staffing ratio of 4 patients to 1 nurse, which requires an additional 6,000 nurses, and accepted a lesser offer of an extra 1,400 nurses by 2013.

The association has also agreed to the government’s demand that over \$170 in allowance payments to nurses be eliminated. Nurses’ calls for a 1 percent increase in superannuation contributions have also been ignored.

The NSWNA suspended industrial action after the government agreed to negotiate on the nurses’ demands on January 12, following nurses’

industrial action which closed 570 hospital beds statewide.

New Zealand public school teachers maintain work bans

The Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) has continued its ban on attending meetings and events after school hours following last year's failed pay negotiations with the education ministry. Industrial action over the last four months of 2010 included rolling stoppages and work bans. Any additional industrial action will be voted on by South Canterbury teachers on February 22.

The PPTA has rejected the education ministry's pay rise offer of 2.75 percent over two years plus an \$800 one-off payment in the first year. Teachers want a 4 percent pay increase and a commitment by the ministry to address increasing class sizes through teacher retention and recruitment.

Papua New Guinea school teachers strike

At least 4,000 public school teachers in the Southern Highlands are boycotting classes in a dispute over pay and conditions. Teachers voted last week not to return to their schools for the beginning of the new school year until their slate of demands are met by the education authorities. Striking teachers want increased pay and hardship allowance, and the 6-Kina housing allowance increased to 100 Kina (\$US38). In addition, teachers want an allowance of 400 Kina to compensate for the impact of natural gas projects on the cost of living.

A teachers' spokesman told the media they planned to meet in Mendi to discuss further action. He was critical of the PNG Teachers Association for not supporting their fight for the entitlements and said some teachers had threatened to quit the organisation and form a new association.



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