

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 March 2011

India: Punjab police attack demonstrating paramedics

Six health workers were hospitalised and 30 arrested while trying to escape a brutal police attack on their protest march on March 6. An eyewitness said the police “did not even spare women workers but beat them up mercilessly”. Members of the Contract Multipurpose Health Workers Union were attempting to march to the Punjab chief minister’s village home in Badal to demand regularisation of their services.

According to a union official, contract paramedics who work as multi-purpose health workers, staff nurses, radiographers, laboratory technicians and drivers have been demanding regularisation of their services for many years. “The government has been making false promises,” he said, “so we decided to lodge a protest in front of the chief minister’s home.”

West Bengal tea estate workers impose bans

Over 30,000 temporary workers on 80 plantations in the Darjeeling district are blocking tea shipments from the estates. The GJM Plantation Labour Union imposed the ban as part of a pay campaign.

The union wants the basic daily wage of 67 rupees (\$US1.50) increased to 120 rupees for non-skilled workers, 140 for semi-skilled and 154 for skilled employees. The Darjeeling Tea Planters Association and the union have begun negotiations on the workers’ claims.

Bangladeshi road and highway employees strike

Over 1,200 Roads and Highways Department (RHD) employees struck on Tuesday for the day and held sit-in protests at RHD premises in Rajishi, Patuakhali, Moulubazar, Sylhet and Jessore to demand job regularisation. Union officials representing over 7,600 non-regular RHD employees said their members were not being paid their entitlements, including festival bonuses, pensions and gratuities. The unions threatened to escalate the industrial action if workers’ demands were not met.

Pakistani doctors on strike

Young Doctors Association (YDA) members in three government hospitals in Rawalpindi walked off the job on Tuesday to protest the Punjab government’s failure to honour an agreement it made in January to

increase doctors’ salaries by 100 percent. The YDA also demanded that the National Accountability Bureau vacate the girls’ hostel, which the bureau has occupied for over a year.

YDA members have set up temporary shelters on the grounds of the hospitals to provide free treatment while negotiations with the government are in progress.

Sri Lankan supplementary medical workers protest

Supplementary medical workers, including medical laboratory technologists, pharmacists, radiologists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists, picketed the ministry of health in central Colombo on March 2 over five demands. The medical workers want promotions, a 25 percent professional allowance, filling of vacancies and duty-free vehicle permits. They held a 24-hour national strike last month over the same demands.

Korean university cleaners on strike

Up to 860 contract cleaners and janitors at three private universities in Seoul struck and began a sit-in protest on Tuesday to demand improved wages. Employed by nine outsourcing companies at Korea University, Ewha Womans University and Yonsei University, the workers want their hourly pay increased to 5,180 won (\$US4.60). Employers have only offered 4,320 won an hour, the government’s approved minimum wage.

Their strike follows a 49-day sit-in by cleaners and guards at Hongik University in Seoul. The sit-in ended after their employers made a tentative agreement to increase hourly rates for cleaners to 4,450 won and 3,560 won for guards.

Philippine Airlines union issues strike notice

On Monday, the Philippine Airlines Employees Association (PALEA) filed a strike notice with the Department of Labor and Employment, accusing the airline of refusing to negotiate with the union. PALEA said it had submitted its collective bargaining agreement (CBA) to PAL six months ago but management had refused to negotiate until its temporarily halted staff restructure proposals were implemented.

In 2009, PAL announced a cost-cutting plan to outsource over 2,600 jobs, including in-flight catering services, airport services (ground, cargo

and ramp handling), and call centre reservations. PALEA claimed that workers would be rehired by contractors on reduced wages and conditions and barred from joining a union. Strike action by PALEA members was put on hold last December following an intervention by Philippines President Benigno Aquino. Fearing a public backlash if the strike occurred during the Christmas holiday period, he ordered the airline to put its job-cutting restructure plan on hold.

PALEA members have not had a wage increase or improved benefits and conditions since 1998 when the union sided with the government and suspended their CBA for ten years, a condition for the airline's reopening and rehabilitation. The union now is complaining that the moratorium expired in 2007 and that PAL is "guilty of bad faith" for backtracking on new CBA talks.

Vietnamese motorcycle workers strike

Over 3,000 employees at the Yamaha Motor plant in Hanoi walked off the job on Monday to demand a salary increase. The striking motorcycle workers want a 19 percent increase in the basic monthly salary—from 1.65 million dong (\$US78.6) to 2.03 million dong—along with a rise in housing and other social allowances.

A Yamaha official said management had previously agreed to a pay rise but that was before the government increased petrol and electricity prices by 18 and 15 percent respectively earlier this year. Vietnam's inflation reached 12.31 percent year-on-year last month, according to official data.

Western Australian hospital support workers impose bans

Hundreds of public hospital support workers in Perth have imposed work bans to protest the Western Australian government's plans to privatise a range of services at the new Fiona Stanley Hospital in the state capital's southern suburbs.

Last week, the state Liberal government announced it would sign a \$3 billion-plus contract with SERCO to supply support services for the hospital, which is still under construction. Workers reject government claims that "anti-privatisation" clauses in a new work agreement signed by the United Voice union in October do not apply to new hospitals.

Victorian auto accessories workers maintain bans

At least 15 employees at Autonexus, a Melbourne auto detailer that installs communications equipment in state government vehicles, are maintaining work bans implemented last month over changed working conditions. The bans have prevented the delivery of over 200 vehicles.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members walked off the job four weeks ago, accusing the company of wanting to lower pay and conditions, eliminate 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 allows management 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.

The dispute is currently being heard in the industrial tribunal, Fair Work

Australia, with a decision expected by the end of the week.

Salvation Army social workers in Victoria walk out

Up to 50 Salvation Army Westcare workers in Sunshine, Melbourne walked off the job for two hours on Wednesday following management's ongoing refusal to negotiate an enterprise bargaining agreement. Westcare is a major provider of placement and support services for children and young people and employs more than 100 staff. Other action planned by Westcare workers includes bans on overtime and data reporting to the Human Resources department, and a planned eight-hour strike.

An Australian Services Union (ASU) organiser said staff had been trying to negotiate an agreement with Salvation Army management for more than two years. In December, ASU members voted for strike action, after the Salvation Army ignored a Fair Work Australia directive to enter talks. Management has cancelled three of five scheduled meetings since the order was issued.

Qantas union applies for strike ballot

Over 1,400 Qantas ground crew at Melbourne and Sydney airports applied to Fair Work Australia on Wednesday for a ballot to endorse strike action and work bans after nine months of failed pay negotiations. Check-in, customer service and operational staff want a 15 percent pay rise over three years and an agreement on job security. The Qantas workers fear the airline plans to install self check-in technology that will put their jobs at risk.

An Australian Services Union official said that its ground crew members were even more determined to push for their demands after Qantas reported a four-fold increase in net profit. The official said proposed industrial action would target Qantas's domestic and international operations.

Last month, the Australian and International Pilots Association announced that it plans to apply for a strike ballot of its members. The association wants salary increases and revised job classifications that it claims equate to a 9 percent increase over three years. Qantas disputes this, claiming the increase is 14.4 percent over the same period. A major concern during negotiations has been job security in light of the airlines cost-cutting plan to "offshore" jobs to bases in Asia.

New Zealand: Casino workers locked out

Over 1,000 employees of the SkyCity casino in Auckland picketed the casino's main entrance on Monday to protest the lockout of 27 colleagues who participated in industrial action in a dispute for a new work agreement. The locked-out workers, including 200 colleagues who walked off the job to join the picket, were told by management not to return to work unless they resigned from the union and accepted the company's wage offer.

Around 1,100 of the casino's 2,500 staff are members of either the Unite union or the Service and Food Workers Union. On January 1, they began a series of stop-work meetings for a new collective agreement. The unions say new hires are only paid \$12.81 an hour (\$US9.93) and want a

\$15 hourly minimum wage, with proportionate increases for all staff. The company has offered 3 percent over three years.

The unions sent a message to SkyCity management during the picket indicating that they were willing to compromise and calling for an “urgent meeting”. SkyCity immediately agreed to talks.



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