

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 March 2011

Cambodian garment workers walk out

For the second time in a month 2,000 workers from the June Textile Company in Phnom Penh walked off the job and staged a protest outside the factory on February 23 to demand the company fire two high-ranking factory officials.

The textile workers have accused the administrative director and the information technology manager of sacking employees without cause, altering workers' union affiliations and creating forged documents to claim a percentage of workers' salaries.

One textile worker told the Cambodian media: "If the factory does not fire them, then the protests will keep going without a deadline."

Karnataka rural workers on strike

Landless rural workers employed under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in Jewargi taluk in northern Karnataka have been on strike since February 25 to demand 10 months' unpaid wages. This is the fourth time the rural workers have protested over this issue. According to an official from the Jewargi branch of the Karnataka Pranta Raitha Sangha, more than 1,500 people who enrolled for work under MNREGA scheme in the villages of Harwal and Harnal are collectively owed over 3.7 million rupees (\$US83,000).

Non-payment of wages to MGNREGA workers has been an ongoing issue for nearly two years in Karnataka. In March last year, hundreds of workers from six villages protested outside government offices in Kolar after not being paid for six months.

India: Andhra Pradesh municipal workers on strike

Nearly 2,000 contract workers from the Kadapa Municipal Corporation walked off the job on February 28 to demand payment of four months' outstanding salaries and a fixed minimum wage. Municipal Workers Union members marched from the corporation office to the Kadapa Collectorate where they are currently

protesting.

New South Wales university academics suspend strike action

Australian National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members at Macquarie University in Sydney ended four days of rolling 24-hour stoppages on Thursday over a new work agreement. The union and the university are due to resume negotiations next week in the 20-month dispute.

Academics want pay parity with other Sydney universities and a reduction in the numbers of contracted non-casual staff. They are also opposing a 7 percent, across-the-board reduction to teacher funding allocations that will axe six tenured staff positions in the Faculty of Science. The university has called for voluntary redundancies in three departments but academics were told that if there were not enough volunteers then a strict ranking process would be applied.

NTEU members struck for 24 hours nationally in September to oppose spending cuts, retrenchments, new limited-term academic appointments and longer probationary periods. The union, however, began negotiating individual deals with university administrators and since September has made agreements with 32 Australian universities, effectively isolating Macquarie academics and other NTEU members wanting to fight the cuts.

Northern Territory paramedics take industrial action

On February 28, Northern Territory paramedics imposed work bans in a pay dispute with St Johns Ambulance. The action includes bans on overtime and the transport of discharged patients to their homes. Members of United Voice (previously the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union) want a 15 percent pay rise over three years to achieve pay parity with other paramedics in Australia. St Johns' has offered just 10 percent over the same period.

Western Australian health union holds sham protest

United Voice officials and about 30 workers held an anti-privatisation protest on a busy Perth street for more than an hour on March 2. The demonstration was called after the Barnett Liberal government announced it would sign a \$3 billion-plus contract with SERCO to supply support services for the new Fiona Stanley Hospital in South Perth.

Last October the union told health workers that there were “no trade-offs” in a new pay deal with the state Liberal government and the Health Department and anti-privatisation clauses in the agreement would stop privatisation moves for two years. As soon as workers endorsed the package, the state government claimed the anti-privatisation clauses only applied to existing hospitals and new hospitals would be exempt. The government’s claim was later ratified in the industrial court.

New Zealand university academics stop work

Academic staff at Auckland University held a stop-work meeting on February 25 after a breakdown in negotiations between the university and the Tertiary Education Union (TEU) over a new collective agreement.

While the university’s offer includes a 4 percent pay rise, equivalent to the annual inflation rate, academics rejected it because the agreement removes key conditions, including research and study leave, promotion and appointment criteria, and disciplinary guidelines. This would allow the university to determine these conditions without seeking agreement from staff.

TEU members have indicated that they are willing to take industrial action for a better offer.

New Zealand Pizza Hut workers walk out

Unite union members at Dunedin’s two Pizza Hut outlets walked off the job on March 1st to protest an attempt by the stores’ new owners to put employees on individual contracts. The contracts would have imposed a 90-day probationary period, during which workers could be fired without any reason given.

The employers moved quickly to stop the industrial action by signing a revised contract without the probationary period. The contract gives a 3 percent pay rise to shop workers—below the current 4 percent rate of inflation—and increases the drivers’ pay rate from \$5 to \$6 per delivery.

New Zealand meat workers union accepts pay cut

The New Zealand Meat Workers Union (MWU) has accepted massive pay cuts and altered conditions for 800 members employed at the Alliance Group cattle processing plant in Mataura on New Zealand’s south island. Members narrowly voted for a new contract, which would reduce some wages by \$400 a week and others by 10 to 15 percent. The MWU pushed through the cost-cutting deal claiming the new contract was needed to secure the future of the plant. Details of the proposed cuts to working conditions are still to be negotiated.

MWU secretary Alistair McLennan told the media, “Now that we have lowered costs I don’t expect any stock to be carted out of Southland.” The company claimed that the new contract had to be endorsed before it spent \$13.1 million to increase the number of cattle processed each shift from 330 to 560, and another \$14 million in other capital works to make the plant more efficient.

This is not the first time the union has cut wages to save the company. In 1991, Alliance Group claimed the plant was on the brink of closure. The union convinced 40 percent of the workforce to take pay-cuts of about 18 percent. The company closed its Ocean Beach meat works instead. In 1999, when one plant in Southland was tagged to close, the union accepted shift work at Mataura to keep the plant open. The Makarewa abattoir was closed instead.

New Zealand education union accepts pay cut

The Technical Education Union covering teachers at the Wellington Institute of Technology (Weltec) is claiming victory in a new pay deal. A media release from the union declares, “Weltec staff retain hours of work and win pay-rise.” In fact, after eight months of negotiations TEU officials have agreed to a 1.875 percent pay rise for 15 months, backdated to June 2010. The equivalent of a 1.5 percent annualised increase—well below the annual inflation rate of 4 percent.

The deal also seeks cuts to workers’ conditions. The union has accepted the formation of a working party that will “look to enhance productivity”. Weltec originally put forward 15 claims that proposed significant changes to employees’ hours of work. TEU members will vote on the proposal over the next few weeks.



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