

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 April 2011

Strike at General Motors India in third week

A group of employees at the Halol plant of General Motors (GM) India in the western Indian state of Gujarat are maintaining their strike, begun on March 16. Up to 900 employees walked out for the second time in four months to oppose speed up and brutal working conditions. Workers have accused GM of subjecting them to severe overwork and long working hours, which have resulted in numerous cases of acute back pain and spinal injuries. They have also charged GM with medical negligence for ignoring their repeated complaints about the intense workload.

The strikers' demands include cancellation of all transfers, which the company used to victimise workers who complained about conditions, restoration of the previous workload, and elimination of wage discrepancies. On Tuesday, a delegation of striking workers travelled to the state capital Gandhinagar and presented a memorandum of their demands.

The workers struck last October to demand higher wages and other benefits. The strike ended when Gujarat Kamdar Mandal, which is affiliated with the Indian National Trade Union Congress, agreed to a rotten deal in December, which imposed additional production quotas upon the workers in exchange for modest wage improvements.

South Korean tyre manufacturing workers locked out

Over 3,400 employees at South Korea's second largest tyre manufacturer, Kumho, were locked out of the company's two plants in Gwangju, 300 kilometres southwest of Seoul, after walking off the job on March 25 to demand improved wages and conditions.

In an attempt to divide the workers, management immediately closed down the two plants and told workers they would be allowed to return to work only if they signed an agreement saying they would not join any further strike action. Workers have refused to sign the agreement.

Cambodian riot police attack protesting garment workers

At least eight female garment workers were injured on Monday in clashes with Cambodian police, who used shields and electric shock batons in an attempt to end a protest over a factory closure. According

to witnesses, some demonstrators were pushed to the ground and shocked with batons.

Over 1,000 female workers had rallied in Phnom Penh to demand payment of unpaid wages and compensation after a local garment factory went bankrupt. The total number of injured is unknown and some workers are being held in police custody.

Sri Lankan rail workers strike

Sri Lanka Railways workers, including engine drivers, helpers, workshop employees and office workers, walked off the job on March 22 to demand payment of unpaid salaries. Most trains were either stopped or delayed due to the strike. Workers returned to work after seven hours following an assurance from the Transport Minister Kumar Welgama that salaries would be paid immediately.

Cancer hospital workers walk out

Around 450 workers at the National Cancer Hospital in Maharagama, on the outskirts of Colombo, held a three-hour protest this week at the hospital director's office to oppose a cut in overtime payments. The protesters returned to work after the director agreed to reply to their demand by the following day.

Postal workers march through Colombo

On Wednesday, members of 19 trade unions in the Sri Lanka Postal Department held a procession from the Central Mail Exchange in Colombo to the President's House to hand over a petition. Workers demanded that the Post Master General be removed and that the administration of the Postal Department come under the control of workers. According to the unions, postal services have been "deteriorating day by day".

Philippine Airlines ground crew vote to strike

At least 95 percent of the 3,500 ground crew at Philippine Airlines (PAL) have voted for a strike, to commence any time after April 1. The vote was sparked after President Benigno Aquino gave PAL a green light to implement a job-cutting plan.

In 2009, PAL announced a plan to outsource over 2,600 jobs, including in-flight catering services, airport services (ground, cargo and ramp handling), and call centre reservations. Strike action by PAL Employees Association (PALEA) members was put on hold last December following an intervention by Aquino who ordered the airline to suspend its restructuring plan.

In an attempt to avert a larger strike over pay, PAL has offered its 7,000 employees a 750-pesos pay increase for this year, followed by annual increases of 1,500 pesos for the next two years. 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 Collective Bargaining Agreement for 10 years, as a condition for the airline's reopening. Last month, PALEA filed a strike notice with the Department of Labor and Employment, accusing the airline of refusing to negotiate.

Australian research staff suspend action

On Wednesday, scientists at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) suspended industrial action to enter talks with the government over a new work agreement. The CSIRO Staff Association wants a 4.6 percent pay increase but two other unions—the Community and Public Sector Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union—have indicated that they are willing to negotiate for less. Other demands include redundancy payouts and improved staff consultation.

Over 2,000 CSIRO employees at 43 sites around Australia began two-hour rolling stoppages on March 22 after six months of negotiations reached deadlock. The CSIRO Staff Association said the action, the first national industrial campaign at the CSIRO in 15 years, could escalate if management refused to raise its offer of a 3 percent annual pay rise.

South Australian public sector workers protest budget cuts

On Monday, members of the Public Service Association and the Nursing and Midwifery Federation attended a lunchtime rally in Adelaide to protest the state Labor government's latest budget cuts, which threaten some 4,000 jobs, and its cost-cutting "shared services" program. Since the 2006 introduction of the program, which streamlines government operations into one office, workloads have already grown, pay systems have failed and workers have quit amid claims of widespread burnout.

On Wednesday, members of the United Firefighters Union rallied at the Rundle Mall in Adelaide to oppose the budget measures, which will cost them \$1,600 a year in entitlements and long service leave.

Australia: Northern Territory firefighters vote for industrial action

Northern Territory firefighters have voted to start industrial action after seven months of negotiations with the NT Fire and Rescue Service for a new work agreement ended in a deadlock. Firefighters in the Northern Territory are paid 15 percent below the national average. A union official said action would only affect non-urgent duties.

Australia: Transport union reaches agreement with TNT

After a two-month campaign of rolling stoppages and work bans by 2,500 Transport Workers Union (TWU) members at the national logistics company TNT, the union and the company have reached agreement for a new pay deal. Union officials claimed this week that they secured a "groundbreaking" offer that would improve pay, job security, conditions and safety. Union officials plan to hold workplace meetings to push through the deal. No details of the agreement have been released to the media.

While management and the TWU had earlier agreed to an 8 percent pay rise over two years, the company had opposed claims for increases in employers' superannuation payments and also rejected demands that it pay matching rates to its 3,000 casual and labour hire employees, as well annual leave, sick pay and overtime penalties.

Papua New Guinea doctors end strike

After negotiations with the government on Thursday, the National Doctors Association (NDA), representing 500 striking public hospital doctors across the nation, said it would direct members to return to work on Friday morning on condition the government delivered previously promised salary and allowance increases.

On March 25, government doctors in public hospitals defied a court restraining order and walked off the job over the government's failure to implement its 2009 agreement on salaries and remuneration. The Health Minister has agreed to lift restraining orders and a court contempt order. However, he said he could only source 25 million kina (\$US9.4 million) from the Health Department to finance half the doctors' salary package.



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