

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 April 2011

Air India sacks striking pilots

State-owned Air India sacked six Indian Commercial Pilots' Association (ICPA) leaders and suspended two other pilots following strike action by over 600 union members. The strike forced the cancellation of dozens of domestic and international flights on Wednesday. ICPA members struck after the breakdown of months of pay talks with the airline and the government.

Over 800 ICPA members—formerly Indian Airline (IA) pilots now employed by Air India (AI) after the amalgamation of both airlines—are demanding pay parity and similar working conditions to their AI colleagues who are members of the Indian Pilots Guild (IPG). While ICPA members are paid according to flying hours and not paid during training, their IPG counterparts receive a fixed salary component, irrespective of the hours they work.

The ICPA has accused the airline of inflaming the dispute by reducing ICPA members' flying-time rosters by 50 percent since December. Air India has also obtained a court order banning the strike, "de-recognised" the ICPA, and shut down the union's offices in Delhi and Mumbai.

Maharashtra government hospital nurses strike

Up to 30,000 nurses in Maharashtra government hospitals walked off the job for 24 hours on Tuesday to demand allowances as per the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations, security, and employment of all vacant positions in line with Indian Nursing Council regulations. Maharashtra Government Nursing Federation members also want protective equipment, such as gloves, masks and soaps for infectious disease nurses, and a state-wide standard uniform.

Karnataka public transport workers strike

Drivers and conductors employed by the North-West Karnataka Road Transport Corporation (NWKRTC) walked off the job in Hubli and protested outside their depot on April 22 to demand safer working conditions for long-haul crews. Their walkout erupted after a driver and conductor were killed in a traffic accident that morning.

The protesters claimed that accidents involving NWKRTC buses have increased because bus crews are forced to work for extended

hours without rest breaks on long-haul routes. The workers want two drivers employed on each long-haul bus and compensation for the family of the crew who died in the accident.

Telugu film industry union ends strike

Striking Telugu film industry workers from four disciplines ended their 15-day strike this week and accepted a 32 percent wage increase following recommendations from the Andhra Pradesh Film Industry Employees Federation.

Over 14,000 film workers from 21 work disciplines struck on April 8 to demand higher wages. Ten days later workers from 17 disciplines ended their strike after their representatives accepted the 32 percent pay rise offer from the Andhra Pradesh Film Chamber of Commerce.

Strikers from the other four disciplines, however, rejected the offer claiming they were required on the set for at least 16 hours but only paid for 12 hours. By accepting the chamber's offer their pay will increase from 300 rupees to 460—well below the 600 rupees they had demanded. Union representatives accepted at face value a promise from employers for a future review of the four disciplines' salaries.

Andhra Pradesh beedi workers protest

Hundreds of Andhra Pradesh Beedi Workers' Union members rallied in Nizamabad on April 23 to demand the government pass Government Order 1381 to increase their minimum wage above the current rate of 50 rupees per 1,000 beedis.

In December, over 600,000 beedi workers (cigarette rollers and packers) ended a 32-day statewide strike on the basis that the government would draft a Government Order on their wages and make a commitment to implement it within 60 days.

While the draft sets the minimum payment to 145 rupees for rolling 1,000 beedis, 5,000 rupees per month for sorters and staff members, 7,000 rupees for head clerks and 10,000 rupees for managers, the government has failed to pass the legislation.

Beedi workers are amongst the lowest paid in India with over 800,000 families dependent on the industry for a living.

Nepalese tea workers end strike

Thousands of tea plantation workers in eastern Nepal ended a 10-day strike on April 27 after employers agreed to provide the workers with a social security package in line with instructions from Prime Minister Jhalanath Khanal. The settlement, however, did not include any of the workers' wage demands—a 226-rupee (\$US3.18) daily wage in all districts with a minimum 6,100-rupee monthly salary, and an increase in retirement pay which is currently 20,000 rupees.

Tea workers affiliated with three major trade unions—the All Nepal Trade Union Federation (ANTUF), Nepal Trade Union Congress (NTUC) and General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT)—walked off the job on April 17 shutting down 35 manufacturing plants and 65 major tea gardens.

To head off any anger from workers over the sell-out deal the unions and government pledged to form a “high-level taskforce to study problems in tea production, including remuneration of tea workers, and suggest measures to resolve them within a month.”

Vietnamese footwear workers end industrial action

About 1,300 employees at Stateway Vietnam Footwear, a Taiwan-owned shoe factory in Haiphong city in northern Vietnam, ended a 24-hour strike on Wednesday after the company agreed to increase their monthly salary. The workers were demanding their salary be increased from \$US80 a month to \$88.

According to the local media, strike action has increased throughout Vietnam in the past year as the country's inflation rate approached 10 percent. Over 100 unofficial strikes have erupted so far this year, most of them involving wages, social insurance, welfare and compensation.

Patrick dock workers hold Australia-wide stoppage

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) has called a nationwide 24-hour stoppage of its Patrick Stevedores dockworkers after the company cancelled enterprise bargain agreement negotiations this week. Strikes at terminals in Brisbane, Port Botany in Sydney, and East Swanson in Melbourne will be followed by a similar stoppage at the company's Fremantle terminal in Western Australia on Monday.

Negotiations for a new work agreement have been ongoing for nine months and are currently being mediated by Fair Work Australia. Workers took protected strike action in December and January over the dispute.

The MUA, which has regularly called off planned industrial action, including strike action two weeks ago, each time Patrick management agreed to resume talks, wants annual pay increases of 6 percent 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.

The company has offered annual rises of between 4 and 4.5 percent and a \$5,000 signing-on bonus for each worker in exchange for productivity trade-offs. MUA secretary Paddy Crumlin told the media

that the union was prepared to negotiate over its claims, including the proposed \$5,000 signing on bonus.

Canberra bus workers maintain bans

Bus maintenance workers at government-owned ACTION Buses in Canberra are maintaining overtime bans for a new work agreement. The company responded to the industrial action by cancelling most of its Easter holiday bus services. It has also reduced Saturday services and cancelled all Sunday services.

The Australian Capital Territory government has been negotiating with the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) on an enterprise bargaining agreement for almost 18 months. Workers have rejected the government's offer of a 2.5 percent pay rise and a \$650 sign-on bonus and want changes to their work roster which ACTION management opposes. Under the changes, the maintenance workshop would close after midday on Fridays and workers would be called in on Sunday to do urgent maintenance work.

While the AMWU has rejected government demands that the dispute be taken to Fair Work Australia for arbitration, the union is beginning talks with ACTION management this week.

CSIRO union accepts pay deal

After six months of negotiations and industrial action that included demonstrations and nationwide rolling stoppages, Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) Staff Association officials have accepted a pay deal from the government-owned CSIRO that was previously rejected by the union's 2,000-strong membership.

CSIRO Staff Association members wanted 4.6 percent annual pay rises over three years but their union has accepted 3 percent annualised increases over 3.5 years.

According to CSIRO boss Megan Clark, other issues involving staff consultation, redundancy and redeployment, and parental and maternity leave, were resolved in the in-principle agreement. CSIRO Staff Association president Michael Borgas told the media that the deal was “not what he'd hoped” but “we had to be realistic about what we could achieve.”

Association membership meetings will be held nationally, commencing May 3, to vote on the deal.



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