

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 March 2012

## South Korean public broadcasters' strike escalated

Journalists and technicians at public broadcasters KBS and YTN have joined a six-week strike by MBC employees. Around 500 journalists and technicians at MBC in Seoul walked out on January 30 over alleged biased coverage of major social issues. KBS workers struck on March 6, followed by YTN workers on March 8. Journalists from the three broadcasters have formed a joint committee to oppose government interference in public broadcasting and demand the reinstatement of fired colleagues.

Journalists have accused South Korean President Lee Myung-bak of attempting to dominate the broadcast media through political appointees of CEOs at the three major broadcasters. Strikers have refused to return to work until the CEOs at MBC, KBS, and YTN step down.

## Indian security forces shoot Assam refinery workers

One worker was killed and four seriously injured when security forces at the Brahmaputra Cracker and Polymer Limited (BCPL) gas and oil refinery opened fire on protesting workers on March 2 outside the plant gates in Assam's Dibrugarh district. The reason for the protest has not been reported.

Workers immediately walked out on strike and the next day the Dibrugarh deputy commissioner announced an inquiry into the incident. He has offered 200,000 rupees (\$US4,032) compensation to the family of Montu Orang, who was killed, along with a job at BCPL for a family member.

State public servants, together with educational institutions, business establishments and shops in the district, joined a 12-hour general strike on March 5 called by the All Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (AATSA) to condemn the shootings and to demand compensation for the BCPL workers. Road transport between Dibrugarh and other parts of the state were severely disrupted. AATSA also wants compensation and permanent jobs for the next of kin of the other four workers injured.

BCPL is a joint venture of four companies—GAIL, ONGC, Oil India, Numaligarh Refinery—and the Assam government. It produces polymers and other high-quality chemicals.

## Strikes by nurses continue in India's private hospitals

Following a month of strikes and protests by Kerala private hospital nurses, 250 nurses at the 600-bed Madras Medical Mission (MMM)

Hospital in Tamil Nadu walked off the job on March 1 to demand a wage revision and better benefits.

Members of the All India Private Nurses' Association (MMM unit) want their monthly minimum wage increased from 6,000 rupees (\$US120) to 7,000 rupees. Nurses are also demanding an end to the current bond system, which imposes a 50,000-rupee penalty if they leave the hospital before their two-year bond has ended. Management responded to the walkout with various punitive measures, including cutting power and water supplies to nurses' hostels.

Nurses at Apollo Hospitals in Madras have also given strike notice on similar demands. They want their monthly minimum 6,000-rupee wage doubled to 12,000 rupees.

## Pakistani gas-processing employees protest

Over 5,000 daily wage workers of the Sui Southern Gas Company Limited (SSGCL) demonstrated outside the company's office in Karachi on March 5 to demand job regularisation. Strikers rejected management promises that their jobs would be regularised by the end of the week if they ended protests. Workers said similar promises have been made before and that they would not end their action until they received regularisation letters.

Angered by repeated union betrayals, the gas-processing workers have formed a contract employees' action committee to fight for their demands. Workers said that many of them had worked at the facility for over 20 years without medical cover, overtime payments and leave. According to the media, the action committee has warned that gas supply lines to industry and defence facilities could be shut down to step up the industrial campaign.

## Pakistani public education workers to strike

The Islamabad Model Colleges' Welfare Association, which represents Federal Directorate of Education (FDE) workers, has threatened a national strike on March 12 to demand regularisation of all daily wage workers, including teachers and non-teaching employees. The pending walkout will follow two weeks of protests by FDE employees in Islamabad over the issue.

## Queensland miners protest over safety

Fifty members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) picketed the Moranbah North underground coal mine in Queensland's Bowen Basin on March 7 to protest speed-ups and reduced safety standards. The pit is owned by Anglo-American corporation.

CFMEU members held various placards including "Safety before profits" and "Enter at own risk." One worker told the media that three major roof falls and numerous high-potential incidents had occurred at the mine in the last five years. "If companies continue to throw safety by the wayside in a mad grab for profits, we are staring down the barrel of disaster," he said.

The protest follows the ongoing enterprise agreement (EA) dispute by over 3,500 workers at seven BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) mines in the Bowen Basin. BMA workers have been implementing rolling stoppages and work bans for the past nine months for a wage rise as well as an additional break on 12-hour shifts, EA conditions for contractors, and maintenance of existing health and safety conditions.

BMA has offered a wage rise but it wants to appoint its own staff to union safety positions and claims that the union's EA claims override the company's right to manage and are not negotiable.

### **Sigma pharmaceutical employees locked out in Victoria**

About 130 warehouse workers at the Sigma Pharmaceuticals plant in Rowville, Melbourne have been locked out since March 5 in a dispute for a new work agreement. The lockout, which management said will remain in place until March 14, followed four days of strike action which began on February 28. The National Union of Workers (NUW) members are opposed to Sigma's demands for a two-tier enterprise agreement (EA) that eliminates the current 15 percent night shift loading for all new employees.

Workers are picketing the plant and have stopped vehicles carrying non-urgent deliveries from entering or leaving the plant. Management said on March 7 that it was willing to re-enter negotiations. Union officials told the media that workers want their wages increased in line with the increased cost of living and were determined to retain existing conditions and penalty rates. The NUW, one of Australia's largest unions, has isolated the locked out Sigma employees and refused to mobilise other members to defeat the company attack.

### **Regional Express pilots impose bans**

Pilots from Regional Express (Rex)—a small airline servicing regional Australia—were scheduled to impose a "fuel-tankering" ban yesterday in pursuit of higher pay. The ban will force the airline to refuel in regional centres and cause delays to some flights.

The Australian Federation of Air Pilots claims that base pay rates for Rex pilots are 20 percent less than Qantaslink, the airline's competitor. The federation said that Rex had refused to grant the pilots' demand for their new enterprise agreement to lift pay in line with the consumer price index.

Last week Rex announced a net profit for the six months to December 31, 2011, of \$13.4 million, up 52.3 percent from the previous period.

### **New Zealand maritime strike enters third week**

Up to 300 members of the Maritime Union of New Zealand (MUNZ) have been on strike since February 24 in a dispute for a new work agreement with the Ports of Auckland (POAL). At least eight ships were unable to dock and two ships that discharged cargo in Auckland were delayed by picketing MUNZ members when they arrived at other New Zealand ports.

Although POAL has already been hit by six walkouts during the three-month dispute it has refused to increase a 10 percent pay offer and performance bonuses of up to 20 percent on hourly rates in exchange for a new, on call "flexible roster system."

The union has rejected the offer, claiming that workers are mainly concerned about contracting of port shuttle work to Comlinxx, of which POAL has 90 percent ownership, and that the proposed roster system will result in fewer hours and reduced pay. A MUNZ official said strike action would be lifted when POAL withdrew its contracting-out plan.

### **New Zealand aged care workers strike again**

For the second time this month, 1,500 care-givers, nurses and service workers employed by Oceania, New Zealand's largest rest home chain, walked off the job in two-hour rolling stoppages on March 7 and 8. The strike is part of an eight-month dispute for a wage increase. The New Zealand Nurses' Organisation and the Service and Food Workers Union representing workers at Oceania's 57 rest homes want a 3.5 percent pay rise from the expiry date of their collective agreement in June 2011.

While New Zealand's 2011 consumer price index was slightly above 4 percent, Oceania has only offered 1 percent, with no backdating, and wants to slash overtime rates. Most workers were paid an hourly rate of between \$13.61 (\$US11.10) and \$14.20. New Zealand's minimum wage is \$13 an hour.

If current negotiations fail the unions have threatened national stop-work meetings on March 14 and further strike action—for up to four hours—the following week.

### **French Polynesian teachers threaten indefinite strike**

French Polynesian teacher unions threatened to walk out indefinitely yesterday, following education job cuts recently announced in Paris. Thousands of teachers struck in 101 French departments and overseas territories five weeks ago after the education ministry announced that it was axing 14,000 jobs. Up to 177 teaching positions in French Polynesia have been earmarked to go when the new school year starts in September.

The unions in Tahiti have told the media that they are ready for talks with the government but if there was no agreement before Friday the strike would go ahead.



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