

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 March 2012

Pakistani gas workers end strike

Over 3,500 daily wage workers of the Sui Southern Gas Company Limited (SSGCL) ended their five-day strike and protest outside the company's office in Karachi on March 10 after management agreed to meet their demand for job regularisation.

The workers established an independent collective bargaining unit and called strike action on March 5 following years of union betrayal and broken promises by management. SSGCL has agreed to regularise over 3,000 jobs on a merit basis, beginning immediately with senior workers.

Pakistani kiln workers protest

On March 8, scores of female brick kiln workers rallied at the Lahore Press Club to demand the minimum wage, medical benefits and other facilities. The rally was organised by the Bonded Labour Liberation Front. According to protesters, they are only paid 200–250 rupees (\$US5) for a thousand bricks. The legal minimum is 517 rupees.

A recent UNHCR report revealed that up to 900,000 people, including 250,000 children, work in Pakistan's 11,000 brick kilns. Many children work alongside their families in an attempt to pay debts that will remain unpaid even after decades of continuous work.

India: Nurses at Lakeshore private hospital stop work

For the second time in six weeks, members of the newly formed United Nurses Association at the Lakeshore Hospital in Cochin stopped work on March 12. They were protesting the dismissal of 18 probation nurses involved in last month's strike and management's repudiation of an agreement to revise salaries. Lakeshore Hospital officials had threatened to dismiss all probation nurses or extend their probationary period if they joined the walkout.

Lakeshore nurses, along with nurses from the MOSC Medical College and the Amritha Institute of Medical Science, previously struck in February to demand a wage increase and reduced workloads. Nurses in most private hospitals in Kerala are only paid 5,000 rupees (\$US101) a month.

Police attack textile workers in Andhra Pradesh

At least 200 former Sangi Polyester workers in Hayatnagar were lathi-charged (hit by steel-tipped sticks) and arrested by police on March 12 after they protested outside the factory's gates in an attempt to prevent bank representatives taking possession of the plant. Workers were demanding the payment of 14 months' outstanding wages when the factory closed three years ago.

Karnataka public transport workers demonstrate

On March 13, hundreds of public transport employees marched to the Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) headquarters in Bangalore to protest against the lack of labour rights. The workers were from KSRTC, the Bangalore Metropolitan Transport Corporation, North-Western Karnataka Road Transport Corporation and North-Eastern Karnataka Road Transport Corporation.

Unions representing drivers, conductors, mechanics and other workers told the media that the transport corporations had to negotiate a new labour contract every four years but had not done so since 1994. The basic monthly pay for transport corporation workers is about 3,000 rupees (\$US60.5). Other complaints include the lack of adequate health care and basic toilet and sleeping facilities, and an unfair system of fines and indirect punishments, such as transfers to difficult routes.

The All India Trade Union Congress, Indian National Trade Union Congress and other affiliated unions have threatened to hold an "all-Karnataka" transport strike if management continues to ignore workers' demands.

Nepalese soap manufacturing workers end strike

Employees at Unilever Nepal's Hetauda factory ended a one-month strike on March 6, after reaching an agreement with management over wages and conditions. At least 100 workers struck on February 3 to demand a 50 percent salary and allowance increase, as well as one million rupee interest-free housing loans and an annual 100,000-rupee housing maintenance payment for each production worker. The average monthly take-home pay, including overtime, allowances and bonuses, was 10,500 rupees (\$US145).

Under the deal signed between Unilever and the Nepal Independent Food and Beverage Workers Union and the All Nepal Free Industrial Workers Union, the company will lift the combined remuneration of basic salaries, allowances and provident fund contributions by a total of 2,800 rupees. Housing loan and life insurance allowances were each increased by 50,000 rupees.

Sri Lankan nurses protest

Around 1,000 Sri Lankan public hospital nurses demonstrated outside the Ministry of Health in central Colombo on March 13. The Government Nursing Officers' Association (GNOA) wants higher theatre, inventory and risk allowances, overtime payments lifted and increased recruitment of qualified nurses. The union is also demanding the number of male nurses be raised to 20 percent and amendments made to the nurses' five-day week. According to the GNOA, there were approximately 100 graduates waiting to be absorbed into the government nursing services.

On March 10, doctors from the 16,000-strong Government Medical Officers' Association (GMOA) gave the government until March 13 to resolve their long outstanding demands or there would be strike action at all main and base hospitals. GMOA members want payment of their agreed disturbance, availability and transport allowances, which the government approved in 2008.

Burmese shoe workers end strike

Nearly 1,800 striking Tai Yi Slipper factory workers in western Rangoon's Hlaing Tharyar Industrial Zone have ended a four-week strike after a Ministry of Labour tribunal awarded a pay rise on March 1.

The shoe manufacturing workers walked out on February 4 after their salaries were reduced from 17,000 kyat to 10,000 kyat for the 10-day Chinese New Year break. They refused to end strike action unless their wages were doubled to 150 kyat (\$US0.18) an hour and the monthly bonus increased from 6,000 kyat to 8,000 kyat (\$10).

The labour tribunal decided to raise workers' regular pay from 75 to 120 kyat an hour and increase basic monthly salaries from 40,000 to 51,000 kyat.

Lock out at Brisbane domestic airport lifted

A one-day lockout of 26 Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members at the Avalon domestic terminal in Brisbane was lifted on March 12 after the union and employer, BCS Infrastructure Support, reached an agreement on pay. BCS, which is contracted by Qantas to maintain baggage handling and other terminal equipment, was in dispute with the electrical workers who were demanding pay parity with their Victorian counterparts who reportedly received 20 percent higher salaries.

The ETU has only released limited details of the agreement to the media, with one official stating that members would be back-paid to July 1 last year and receive better pay and conditions.

Tasmania's public sector union accepts pay cut

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) has stitched up a deal with the Tasmanian state Labor government that will deliver a pay cut to all state public servants over the next two years.

The CPSU used an "options paper" presented to parliament by Premier Lara Giddings, which proposed linking politicians' pay and state public service pay, to convince members to accept the deal. The sell-out agreement will deliver a 2 percent pay increase this year and 2 percent next year, well below Tasmania's consumer price index of 3.6 percent in December 2011.

Tasmanian politicians' pay is currently tied to movements in the federal MPs' salaries. The state Labor government claims that it will pass legislation restricting Tasmanian politicians' pay to 2 percent.

New Zealand maritime strike continues

Over 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). Following six strikes and several lockouts over three months, workers remain opposed to POAL's proposal to increase wages and bonuses in return for a new on-call roster system and further contracting-out of port shuttle work to Comlinxx, of which POAL has 90 percent ownership. POAL has begun proceedings to replace the 300 striking workers with contract labour.

Over 3,000 people attended a rally and marched through Auckland on March 10 to back the dock workers. Despite this broad support, the MUNZ and the Council of Trade Unions have refused to mobilise other union members to back the dock workers. In what will most likely be a futile move, the MUNZ has filed an injunction in the Employment Court in an attempt to stop POAL making the dock workers redundant.

More strikes at Oceania's aged care homes

Following two days of two-hour rolling stoppages last week by caregivers, nurses and service workers at 20 rest homes of Oceania, New Zealand's largest aged-care chain, over 1,500 Oceania employees walked out for two hours at the company's 57 rest homes on March 14 to attend union meetings. New Zealand Nurses' Organisation and Service and Food Workers Union members voted overwhelmingly at the meetings to increase industrial action with three four-hour stoppages, beginning March 19. The nine-month dispute is for a wage increase.

Over 150 Oceania workers were joined by supporters in a procession to the company's head office in Auckland to voice their demands on March 10. Most Oceania workers only receive \$13.61 an hour, which, as of April 1, is just 11 cents above the minimum wage.

Oceania workers are demanding 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. The company also wants to slash overtime rates.

New Zealand meat processing workers locked out

Nearly 800 members of the New Zealand Meat Workers Union have been locked out at five Affco processing plants since February 29 in a dispute over the company's proposed "flexible hiring" and productivity speed-ups in a new collective agreement. The dispute has escalated with

nearly 2,000 workers either locked out or implementing rolling stoppages at Affco's eight New Zealand plants.

The Affco struggle follows a similar dispute last year in which 111 meat workers at CMP Rangitikei accepted a union negotiated pay cut to end a lockout. The workers were locked out for 65 days after refusing to sign a collective contract that involved wage cuts, shift changes and cuts in allowances.

New Caledonian nickel smelter workers issue strike notice

New Caledonia Workers Confederation Union Soenc branch members at the Société Le Nickel (SLN) smelter in Noumea have issued a strike notice over pollution and poor safety at the plant. The threatened action comes a few weeks after a worker was seriously injured in a furnace explosion. The union claims that the plant is old and Eramet, the French parent company, does not want to upgrade the facility. A strike date has not been announced.

French Polynesian teachers suspend strike

Teachers in Tahiti suspended strike action planned for March 12 after the French government agreed to meet French Polynesian education officials over the issue of job cuts. Up to 177 teaching positions in French Polynesia have been earmarked to go when the new school year starts in September.

Last month thousands of teachers struck in 101 French departments and overseas territories after the education ministry announced that it was axing 14,000 jobs.



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