

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

31 March 2012

Police attack Bangladeshi garment workers

Over 100 striking workers from two textile factories in the Ishwardi Export Processing Zone were injured after being attacked by police and factory goons last week. More than 100 workers were also charged or detained.

The Roshita Knitting Wear and Megha Textile employees had refused to commence work on March 25 and were protesting outside the factories for a wage increase. Families of the strikers told the media that many employees went into hiding after police began arresting workers without specific cause.

India: Medical teachers in Gujarat on strike

Around 2,700 teachers at government medical colleges across the state have been on strike since March 23 to demand implementation of the University Grants Commission (UGC) pay scales in parity with other higher education faculties. Junior doctors at government hospitals in Vadodara joined the strike on March 25 and municipal medical teachers across the state struck for 24 hours on March 26 in solidarity.

The Gujarat Medical Teachers' Association said it has been fighting for implementation of UGC pay-scales for teaching doctors since September 2010. Medical teachers struck for one day on January 3 over the issue.

Haryana construction workers down tools

On March 23, workers at Ireo's Grand Arch construction site in Gurgaon, Haryana walked off the job following the death of Babul Hasan, a work colleague who fell from the sixth floor of the building. Workers have accused Alufit Private Limited, the employer contractor, of neglect. They claim that Hasan was still alive after falling but that supervisors failed to immediately get him to a hospital.

The following day around 4,000 workers from other Ireo construction sites in the area walked off the job to protest Hasan's death and poor job safety. Police were deployed to the area after Ireo's site office was set on fire.

Protesting Pakistani health workers baton charged

On March 26, Islamabad police baton-charged thousands of female health workers protesting for immediate regularisation of their jobs and outstanding wage payments. Many have not received their salaries for several months. Several workers were injured and hospitalised. One worker suffered a heart attack during the assault, according to media reports.

The family planning and primary health care workers from across Pakistan had held a sit-in protest in Islamabad and then marched to parliament house. About 150,000 women work for the family planning units on daily wage basis, including many since 1994 when the programme began.

The protesting workers denounced the government for failing to honour a commitment made in 2010 to regularise their jobs. The demonstration ended after the Chief Justice made another promise to take up the issue with the government. In 2010, the Pakistani government lifted their salary to the required minimum wage level of 7,000 rupees (\$US77) a month but failed to adjust the contractual daily-wage.

Karachi nurses strike

Hundreds of nurses from six government hospitals in Karachi walked off the job on March 26 and demonstrated outside the Karachi Press Club. Out-patient departments and operating theatres at most hospitals were closed during the day.

The provincial nurses' association called the strike because the health minister had failed to act on commitments made last month to increase nurses' salaries and allowances.

Cambodian police assault garment workers

Three female garment workers were injured, one hospitalised with a broken nose, when 100 police baton-charged 900 striking employees from the Win Shing-tex factory in Phnom Penh's Por Sen Chey district on March 27. The garment workers had been on strike since March 16 to demand reinstatement of five suspended unionists and an increase in transportation allowance, among other issues. They were assaulted by police while marching from the factory to the Cambodia's ministry of labour.

A spokesman for the Cambodia Labour Confederation told the media that the dispute was for a collective bargaining agreement which the factory union, C.CAWDU, has been trying to secure for nearly a year. While C.CAWDU represents the majority of Win Shin-tex workers, the company was attempting to establish a rival union and had suspended

C.CAWDU leaders.

The garment workers ended their strike on March 28 after management agreed to reinstate suspended employees and increase transport allowances. Negotiations on workers' other demands have been scheduled after the Khmer New Year.

Indonesian workers and students oppose fuel subsidy cuts

Tens of thousands of workers and students rallied across Indonesia on March 27 to oppose proposed cuts to the government fuel subsidy in April 1. The demonstrations were organised by the Alliance of Confederations and Federations of Workers Unions. Over 20,000 police and soldiers were deployed in Jakarta where water cannon and tear gas were used against demonstrators. The media reported clashes between hundreds of police and protesters throughout Java.

The latest demonstration followed protests on March 21 in Central Jakarta where over 10,000 marched to the presidential palace. Workers claim that fuel prices will increase by 20 percent, equating to a 10 percent pay cut for most employees. The Indonesian government also plans to increase electricity prices as part of its austerity program to reduce its budget deficit.

Spotless cleaners protest in Melbourne

Employees of cleaning contractor Spotless at the giant Chadstone shopping centre in Victoria downed tools on March 28 and marched 15 kilometres to the Melbourne CBD to demand better pay and improved working conditions. The cleaners, who walk at least 15km a day doing their job, have accused Spotless of cutting staff hours and forcing fewer cleaners to do more work on just \$16.57 an hour.

The United Voice's "Clean Start" campaign has little to do with improving workers' conditions but is to boost union membership in the highly lucrative cleaning industry. The UV's isolated strikes and protests at office buildings and shopping malls in Victoria, the Sunshine Coast in Queensland and in Sydney, New South Wales have had little impact on Spotless or other cleaning contractors.

Victorian unionists march over state government use of WorkCover funds

Over 300 union members protested in Melbourne on March 29 to oppose Victorian government plans to strip \$472 million from WorkCover funds to prop up the state budget.

Unions claim that the Baillieu Liberal government's "dividend payment" from WorkCover would mean less money for injured workers and health and safety awareness campaigns. Seventeen people died in Victorian workplace accidents in the last six months of last year, compared with seven in NSW and eight in Queensland.

Tasmanian fire fighters protest budget cuts

Over 100 members of the United Firefighters' Union rallied outside state parliament on March 27 against a planned \$10 million reduction to the Tasmanian Fire Service budget.

The firefighters' union claimed that the budget cuts would result in less training, longer response times and less equipment maintenance. A spokesman said Tasmanian fire services were already under staffed compared to Australia's mainland states.

The Tasmanian Labor government's budget, which was announced last June, will slash \$1.4 billion in state spending or 10 percent in real terms during the next four years. While hundreds of Tasmanian state sector workers marched in October and November last year against the budget, the unions have opposed any unified action to defend state-sector jobs and state services.

Lockout at POAL in New Zealand enters sixth week

Over 300 waterside workers at the Ports of Auckland (POAL) container terminal remain locked out after striking on February 24 for a new work agreement. Maritime Union of New Zealand (MUNZ) members are opposing POAL's wage rise trade-off that includes a new on-call roster system and further contracting-out of port shuttle work to Comlinxx. POAL has 90 percent ownership in Comlinxx.

POAL had served notice it would extend the lockout for another four weeks from April 6 and begin recruiting contract workers at the port. The company also offered to pay the lost wages of locked out permanent employees who voted earlier in the month to end the strike.

This week the MUNZ claimed a 'partial victory' after it won a court injunction stopping POAL contracting out work until mid-May. The injunction was issued so the court could hear a claim by the maritime union that the port's bid to contract out jobs before completing collective negotiations was unlawful.

Despite strong support from maritime workers in New Zealand and internationally, the MUNZ and the NZ Council of Trade Unions have isolated the dispute and refused to mobilise other workers in industrial action to defeat the company attack.

Radius aged-care employees stop work

Nurses, caregivers and service employees at 10 rest-homes across New Zealand of Radius Residential attended two-hour stop-work meetings on March 30 to determine future industrial action in their pay dispute for a new work agreement.

The meetings followed two-hour stoppages in December at 20 Radius facilities and one in January where members of the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) and the Nurses Organisation (NZNO) voted for strike action of up to eight hours. The eight-hour walkouts never occurred.

The NZNO and SFWU allege that Radius has not passed on increased funding from district health boards in 2010 that was intended for wage increases. Workers have rejected Radius's offer of a 1.72 percent pay increase for 2011, well below New Zealand's inflation rate of 4 percent.

The SFWU claims that its Radius members are the lowest paid in the industry at just \$13 and \$14 an hour. The official minimum wage is \$13 an hour. The SFWU and NZNO represent 70 percent of Radius's 1,300-strong work force.

The SFWU and NZNO are currently in dispute with New Zealand's largest rest-home provider Oceania over a new work agreement. Oceania

workers are demanding a 3.5 percent pay rise, but Oceania has only offered 1 percent and wants to slash overtime rates.



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