Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 April 2012

Indonesian miners attacked by police and military

At least 400 striking workers from several Thiess-operated open cut coal mines on the island of Borneo in the Indonesian archipelago were brutally attacked by police and military forces on March 24 after they gathered outside the company's office in East Kutai district with a proposal for ending the strike. Twenty miners were hospitalised and 12 were detained by police for several days. Two union leaders remain in custody.

Members of the Chemical, Energy, Mines, Oil & Gas Workers' Union and the Regional Mining and Energy Union struck for 47 days in November and December after Thiess refused to negotiate a new collective agreement. After negotiations reached deadlock on January 28 workers implemented a go-slow. The company sacked over 260 workers in response, triggering another strike and impacting on about 2,200 workers.

The mines are owned by PT Kaltim Prima Coal, Indonesia's largest coal producer. Thiess is part of Australian Leighton Holdings whose ultimate parent is the German global construction giant Hochtief AG.

South Korean public broadcasters' strike in tenth week

Journalists and technicians at three public broadcasters, MBC, YTN and KBS, along with journalists at the Yanhop news agency are maintaining strike action over alleged political bias by management. Around 500 employees at MBC walked out on January 30 and have refused to return to work until MBC president Kim Jae-chul steps down. Journalists from KBS, YTN and Yabhop joined the strike a few weeks later demanding reinstatement of sacked MBC journalists and the resignation of their CEOs who they claim are political appointees of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak.

MBC has begun hiring contract reporters and announcers to break the strike and attempt to overcome a steep decline in viewers caused by the restricted news coverage and program production.

India: Gujarat medical teachers remain on strike

Around 2,700 teachers at government medical colleges across the state have been on strike after walking out on 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 Junior Doctors Association threatened to call a statewide strike on April 4 in support of the teachers.

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.

Nurses' strike at Lakeshore private hospital in fourth week

Over 400 nurses at the Lakeshore Hospital in Cochin, Kerala remain on strike after walking out on March 12 to demand the reinstatement of six nurses who were sacked after participating in a previous strike. Lakeshore nurses, along with other nurses of the newly-formed United Nurses' Association at other private medical facilities, struck in a coordinated campaign in February to demand a wage increase and reduced workloads.

Lakeshore nurses had returned to work in early March believing their salaries would be reviewed and the sacked nurses would be reinstated, which did not happen. Nurses in most private hospitals in Kerala are only paid 5,000 rupees ($US101) a month.

Andhra Pradesh police detain protesting pharmaceutical workers

On March 30, about 800 employees of pharmaceutical manufacturer Aurobindo Pharma were detained for several hours by police during a demonstration at the Ranasthalam MRO (Mandal Revenue Office). Workers, organised by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, demanded the company implement all previous agreements and in addition provide full-time employment for women as opposed to the current 10 days a month, immediate provident fund payments and subsidised meals at the company canteen.

The protest follows a demonstration in July by 5,000 employees at the company's head office in Hyderabad over low wages, lack of medical facilities and workplace harassment. The international company has 12 manufacturing plants in India.

India: Midday meal workers protest

On March 31 hundreds of women employed as cooks and assistants at midday meal centres in Gulbarga district schools in Karnataka, marched through Gulbarga to demand a wage rise and the same benefits paid to other government workers.

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Samata Sainik Dal union officials submitted a memorandum to the state's chief minister demanding wages for chief cooks to be increased to 4,500 rupees a month and assistant cooks to 3,500 ($US65.7) a month. The union also wants the government to drop plans to outsource the midday meal scheme.

Three days later, about 5,000 midday meal workers from Orissa protested outside the state assembly in Bhudaneswar against the contract system and outsourcing, and for a wage increase.

According to the Orissa Midday Meal Workers' Union, those employed on contracts are paid just 300-400 rupees ($US5.87-$7.82) per month. Midday meal workers complained that their jobs are being outsourced to private organisations and NGOs and have threatened to strike if their conditions do not improve by the next academic session.

West Bengal auto-rickshaw drivers strike

On April 2, thousands of auto-rickshaw drivers in Kolkata struck to oppose a 13 percent increase in the price of LPG. Tens of thousands of commuters were affected as extra vehicles took to the city streets due to the strike. Drivers have demanded an increase in fares to compensate for the fuel rise.

Pakistan: Karachi nurses and paramedics end strike

Over 5,000 striking nurses and paramedics from six government hospitals in Karachi ended their nine-day strike on April 3, after the government gave an assurance that their claims would be met.

The provincial nurses' association called the strike, which shut down out-patient wards and operating theatres, because the health minister had failed to act on commitments made in February to meet their demands. The paramedics and nurses want salary and allowance increases, time-scale promotions and regularisation.

Police assaulted strikers during a protest outside the Karachi Press Club. At least 47 nurses were injured and 30 arrested.

Karachi police attack education workers

Contractual workers of the semi-government National Commission for Human Development (NCHD) were assaulted by police with water cannons, tear-gas and batons on March 28 and on April 1 during a demonstration outside the Karachi Press Club to demand job regularisation. Eleven workers were injured and 69 arrested.

NCHD contractual workers assist in the improvement of education and healthcare at 3,000 schools in the Sindh province. After a decade on the job, the NCHD contract workers were still denied benefits received by full-time employees.

Bowen Basin miners to resume strike action

About 3,500 workers at seven BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) coal mines in Queensland's Bowen Basin voted unanimously at mass meetings this week to resume seven-day strike action after union talks with the company broke down in a 16-month dispute for a new work agreement.

The vote follows the end of a seven-day strike on April 4 by members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union. A date has not been set for the next walkout.

The company has offered Bowen Basin miners annual pay rises of 5 percent over three years and a $15,000 bonus for each worker in exchange for new productivity demands. BMA has rejected claims for three breaks for workers on 12-hour shifts rather than the present two, equal pay for labour-hire employees, protections for permanent workers displaced by contractors, increased superannuation and improved housing. The company also wants to change work rosters at any time and has said it will put the latest agreement to an employee ballot later this month.

In another indication that management may be preparing for a lockout, BMA declared *force majeure* citing industrial action and record rainfall. This means that the company is given leniency in meeting coal supply demands with customer contracts and freed from paying demurrage fees on coal ships waiting to be loaded.

While the CFMEU and other mining unions have denounced the BMA for the breakdown in negotiations, the unions have isolated the Bowen Basin miners during the long-running dispute and refused to call for joint industrial action by other Australian coal miners.

Lockout at New Zealand meat processor continues

In a dispute over a new work agreement, New Zealand meat processor Affco has imposed a four-day lockout on 480 members of the New Zealand Meat Workers Union at eight of its plants commencing yesterday. The action is in response to a solidarity strike on March 22 and 23 in support of 1,000 meat workers locked out at several Affco plants since February 29.

Over 500 workers who have not been locked out held stop work meetings on April 2 to decide on further industrial action. Affco workers are opposed to the company's proposed "flexible hiring" and productivity speed-ups in their new collective agreement.

Their struggle follows a similar dispute last year in which over 100 meat workers at CMP Rangitikei accepted a union-negotiated pay cut to end a 65-day lockout. The workers were locked out after refusing to sign a collective contract that involved wage cuts, shift changes and cuts in allowances.

Strikes continue at Oceania aged-care homes

Aged-care workers at 30 rest homes of Oceania, New Zealand's largest aged-care chain, planned to strike for four hours on April 5 after talks early in the week for a wage rise reached deadlock. The latest action in their nine-month dispute follows a four-hour stoppage on March 19 at 22 rest homes and two-hour stop work meetings at all of Oceania's 57 rest homes on March 14.

Members of the New Zealand Nurses' Organisation and Service and Food Workers Union 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

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offered 1 percent, with no backdating. The company also wants to slash overtime rates.

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