Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 April 2012

India: Nokia Siemens workers strike in Tamil Nadu

Around 170 permanent Nokia Siemens Networks workers held a sit-in strike on April 9 to protest the suspension of 52 workers at the company's plant in the Oragadam Special Economic Zone. Other workers demonstrated outside the factory, which is on the outskirts of Chennai and employs 260 permanent and 100 contract workers.

An official of the Nokia Siemens Networks India Thozhilalar Sangam union said the dispute began in February when all permanent employees were locked out for nine days and 15 were transferred to another factory in Kolkata because they opposed Nokia's support for the formation of another union at the plant.

Conciliation meetings at the Labour Commissioner's office commenced on April 10.

Tamil Nadu sugar mill workers walk out

Around 6,000 workers of 17 cooperative sugar mills in Thanjavur, Salem, Coimbatore, Tirutani and Karaikudi began strike action on April 4 to demand a salary increase on par with government employees. Workers complained that supervisors are already paid according to government pay scales. Mill workers currently receive 8,000 rupees ($US155) a month. The strike was organised by unions affiliated with the Indian Trade Union Congress and the All India Trade Union Congress.

Maharashtra disability teachers protest

Around 50 teachers from 27 special and remedial schools in Chembur rallied outside the Social Welfare and Justice Department on April 9 to protest non-payment of salaries for the past 11 months. Nearly 100 teachers are affected. Four teachers are on a hunger strike.

The salaries were withheld until teachers submitted a No-Objection Certificate (NOC) from the disability commissioner. Teachers claim that they were not required to provide an NOC when appointed in 2004. Teachers who had recently obtained the certificate complained that five years of their service has been considered null and void because the date on the NOC would be taken as the new date of appointment.

Bangladeshi journalists protest

On April 3, journalists and newspaper employees demonstrated for six hours in front of the Jatiya Press Club, Dhaka to demand that the eighth wage board be declared by April 21. It was the second rally in a week over the issue. The Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ) threatened to call a national walkout and hunger strike at the press club for April 22 if the wage board was not formed.

The protest was organised by the Sangbadik-Sramik-Karmachari-Oikya Parishad, the BFUJ, Dhaka Union of Journalists and the Bangladesh Newspaper Press Workers' Federation.

Bangladeshi airline unions call off strike

The Biman Bachao Oikya Parishad, representing seven unions at the national carrier Biman Bangladesh Airlines, have called off a 48-hour strike planned for April 16 after the government promised to demand the immediate resignation of the Biman chairman and board members.

Biman employees, including pilots, engineers, cabin crew and ground staff, began protesting on March 5 after Biman announced that it had lost 10 billion taka ($US119 million) since it was made a public limited company in 2007.

Sri Lankan state bank employees boycott overtime

Bank of Ceylon (BOC) workers imposed an overtime ban on April 9 to demand salary increases of up to 25 percent, subject to a minimum increase of 5,000 rupees, in their new collective

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agreement. BOC management has offered increases of between 13 and 20 percent. The current collective agreement expired last year.

Ceylon power workers strike

Up to 15,000 Ceylon Electricity Board employees planned to strike for 24 hours on April 11 for a 45 percent pay rise. A spokesman for the United Trade Union Front said that in January workers accepted a 25 percent pay rise by 2015 but that recent increases in fuel and other living expenses meant the wage increase was inadequate.

Sri Lanka's official cost of living increase for March was 5.5 percent. CEB executive staff were recently granted a 45 percent pay rise. Further trade union action is planned for April 18.

Victorian mental health workers on strike

Mental health workers in Victoria have been holding two-hour rolling stoppages since April 10 in a dispute with the state government for reduced workloads and better pay and conditions. The Health and Community Services Union said the strikes would continue for 23 days and include over 100 stoppages. Psychiatric nurses, mental health clinicians and emergency response workers have been holding protests outside the Minister for Mental Health's electoral office. Mental health nurses in the regional city of Bendigo plan to strike this weekend.

The walkouts follow months of failed negotiations since the current enterprise bargaining agreement expired on November 1. On top of an 18 percent pay rise over three years, the union wants more staff for night shifts and high-dependency units, and better training. The government has offered annual 2.5 percent increases over three years. Victoria's consumer price index for the last quarter of 2011 was 3.1 percent.

New Zealand aged care unions begin sell-out

The New Zealand Nurses' Organisation and Service and Food Workers Union, representing 1,500 aged-care workers at 57 rest homes of Oceania, New Zealand's largest aged-care chain, called off planned April 11 strike action over a new work agreement. The unions announced they would resume negotiations with a reduced pay demand—from 3.5 percent with back-pay, to just 2.5 percent with back-pay left open for negotiation.

The union back-down follows numerous strikes and protests by members during the nine-month dispute who insisted that they would not reduce their original claim. New Zealand's 2011 consumer price index was slightly above 4 percent, but Oceania has only offered 1 percent, with no backdating. The company also wants to slash overtime rates.

Strikes continue at Affco meat processing plants

The NZ Meat Workers Union called for five-day strike action to commence on April 13 at three of Affco's eight North Island plants, after the latest mediation talks for a new collective agreement deadlocked. Eight hundred workers are currently locked out of five of the company's other plants. Nearly 2,000 workers have been involved in lockouts and rolling stoppages since February 29.

The meat workers are opposed to Affco's proposed "flexible hiring" and productivity speed-ups in the new 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.

New Zealand Armaguard security workers strike

Around 40 security guards of Armaguard Currency Management (ACM) struck for 24 hours on April 10 after negotiations for a new collective agreement reached deadlock. According to the Service and Food Workers Union, negotiations occurred in January and after a two-month break, ACM arrived at mediation but refused to negotiate.

An SFWU official said the union was willing to negotiate a reduced pay claim but ACM had not made a counter offer and would not change its original demands for a 90-day "sack at will" trial period, compulsory medical examinations with a doctor chosen by the employer, and random drug and alcohol testing. ACM has also said it will only guarantee 30 hours' employment in a week for union members but 40 hours for non-union workers.

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