

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 March 2015

Asia

India: PAPSCO workers in Puducherry end strike

Workers at Puducherry Agro Products, Food and Civil Supplies Corporation (PAPSCO), a Puducherry government undertaking, ended a three-day strike on March 23 after the government agreed to “look into their grievances.” On the second day of the strike police baton-charged striking workers in Thattanchavadi after they blocked PAPSCO negotiators from leaving a meeting following failed talks. Several protesters were injured in the attack.

The strike was in protest over the sacking of 750 voucher-based and daily-wage workers who had walked off the job to demand unpaid salaries for nearly six months. PAPSCO management agreed to revoke its dismissal order and all retrenched workers have been reinstated. The union and management have resumed negotiations.

Protesting West Bengal teachers attacked by police

Kulti Police, supported by the Central Industrial Security Force, baton-charged around 200 teachers demonstrating outside the main gate of the Sanctoria headquarters of Eastern Coalfields Limited (ECL) on March 20 to demand unpaid salaries. Around 12 teachers, including a 70-year-old retired woman, were injured in the police attack. Five teachers were arrested.

The government-owned ECL has shut eight of its 164 primary schools, but refused to pay teachers from the closed schools their salaries and post-retirement dues.

Karnataka sanitation workers protest

Around 185 municipal sanitary contract workers in Mandya district, Karnataka protested against the non-payment of wages for the last three months on March 20. At least 40 workers surrounded the municipal corporation president in support of their protest. Workers said that they had resorted to selling their jewelry to provide for their families.

Tamil Nadu government insurance workers protest

Around 500 agents of the state-owned Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) staged a fast and protest in Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu on March 20. Their demands were an increased bonus amount for policy holders, withdrawal of service tax on premiums, no withdrawal of renewal commission and hereditary renewal commission currently paid to agents.

Over 7,000 LIC agents from Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry rallied in Chennai in January last year to oppose the introduction of the 3 percent service tax on premiums, complaining that it was a “blow to the public’s saving habit and to the livelihood of insurance agents.”

Pakistan: College teachers in Lahore protest

College teachers in Punjab province demonstrated outside the Lahore Press Club on March 18 over several demands. The Punjab Professors & Lecturers Association (PPLA) wants the government to immediately fill around 5,600 vacant teaching posts, make permanent 2,200 contract lecturers and for the government to allocate a minimum 7 percent of GDP to education. Commerce stream teachers also joined the demonstration to protest the non-payment of salaries by the Punjab Higher Education Department over the last two months.

Sindh province municipal employees demand wages

Larkana Development Authority (LDA) and Larkana Municipal Corporation (LMC) workers in Sindh province have been protesting for nearly a month to demand unpaid wages. The LDA has not paid salaries for 14 months to over 270 employees while the LMC has withheld salaries of 524 employees for five months. Municipal employees are especially subjected to rigorous verification procedures before they receive wages for duties performed on a daily basis.

Philippines logistics workers protest

Unionised workers at courier company LBC Express in Davao protested outside their depot on Tuesday, after the management rejected their demands in a new work agreement. The LBC Davao employees union, an affiliate of the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) and Association of

Democratic Labor Organizations (Adlo), representing 188 workers at the company, declared a deadlock in negotiations after management rejected all their demands and only offered a 3 percent pay rise.

Workers want a 7 percent salary increase (reduced from 15 percent), six-day vacation leave, seven-day sick leave, union leave, educational assistance, a 14th month bonus and a signing bonus. A union spokesman complained that the 3 percent salary increase would add only around 9–13 pesos daily to wages. LBC workers' monthly wages are between 8,484 pesos (\$US190) and 11,090 pesos.

The union, which has not called any industrial action, has issued empty appeals for LBC customers to pressure the company to agree to workers' demands.

Australia and the Pacific

More federal public sector workers vote for industrial action

The Fair Work Commission has announced the outcome of a protected industrial action ballot of Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members in the Employment Department in which 90 percent of voters supported taking protected industrial action. Some 82 percent of eligible voters participated in the ballot. Protected industrial action is expected to commence within the next two weeks.

Employment Department staff will join tens of thousands of CPSU members across the Australian public service taking action in April. This includes work bans and stoppages.

Meanwhile, CPSU members in Geoscience Australia this week won the right to take protected industrial action, with more than 90 percent of members voting for stoppages and other actions. Union members in CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation) and the Environment Department began voting in a protected action ballot this week.

Workplace agreements covering 160,000 public sector workers expired on June 30, 2014. Negotiations began in April with the government making similar low pay offers and reduced conditions across the board. Workers in over 70 federal departments overwhelmingly rejected the proposed agreements which sought to cut superannuation protections and many other conditions, in return for very low annual pay increase offers between 0 and 1.05 percent. With inflation running at over 2 percent, the pay offers would amount to a \$2,500–\$3,000 annual pay cut.

Several department heads have demanded longer working hours, cut to leave and a slowdown in the rate of progression up the pay scales.

Court orders suspension of industrial action at Esso in Victoria

The Federal Court on Tuesday ordered the Australian Workers Union (AWU) to suspend all industrial action by its members at Esso's gas processing plant in Longford, Victoria while the court decides on an injunction by Esso against union action at the plant.

Esso workers began limited industrial action, including work stoppages and work bans, at the company's Longford, Long Island Point and Barry Beach gas processing sites last week over a new enterprise bargaining agreement.

According to the AWU, Esso wants to cut operator numbers at its Longford site which constitutes a safety issue. Other disputed issues in the

seven months of negotiations have not been made public.

New Zealand packaging workers take action over revised industrial law

Some 240 workers at Orora Kiwi Packaging in Auckland, Hastings and Christchurch will impose a two-week overtime ban at the end of the month. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) has accused the company of trying to reduce leave and service entitlements after changes to New Zealand's Employment Relations Act came into effect this month. The company makes packaging for the kiwifruit, meat and wine industries.

Under the revised employment act, employers can refuse to negotiate a collective agreement with their employees, pay new workers less than the rate in the collective agreement, opt out of industry agreements in order to undercut their competitors on wages and deny workers meal and rest breaks.

Further, employers are able to reduce the wages and conditions of vulnerable workers, such as cleaners, when taking over a new contract, dock the pay of workers taking partial strike action and refuse to provide employees the information they need to challenge an unfair redundancy or dismissal. Restrictions on the right to strike were expanded.

Meanwhile, Cotton On, the Australian retail chain with over 80 stores in New Zealand, is trying to take advantage of the revised employment act to abolish tea breaks. FIRST Union is negotiating a collective agreement at the Cotton On distribution centre in Auckland. Negotiations began in July last year and both parties agreed to paid tea and meal breaks. But after the government's law changes came into force Cotton On has submitted a late claim to remove tea and meal breaks.

New Zealand supermarket workers protest

Around 30 employees of supermarket chain Pack'n Save demonstrated outside the company's Rotorua store on March 21 over alleged bullying and intimidation by the store's management.

According to the FIRST union, more than 70 staff had recently joined the union but when a list of members was sent to management it responded with a campaign of bullying and intimidation. "One by one the workers who joined the union were summoned to speak with the store manager and the HR manager," a union spokesman said.

Workers said they were pressured to resign from the union. The union has filed a claim with the Employment Relations Authority as a result of management's action.

Papua New Guinea power workers down tools

Papua New Guinea power utility workers downed tools on Monday to protest the government's move to restructure and privatise PNG Power Limited (PPL). Workers complained that with the restructure in progress the mechanism for negotiating their pending pay increase is non-existent.

Workers are demanding immediate payment of the 17.7 per cent pay increase agreed in a previous claim. On Tuesday they submitted a petition to Prime Minister Peter O'Neill demanding the payment of benefits,

entitlements and outstanding claims dating back to 2002 and 2003, incurred under former employer PNG ELCOM, to be paid by the first week of April. PPL workers are covered by the PNG Energy Workers Association.



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