

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 April 2004

Cambodian hotel workers strike over service charge

Several hundred workers employed in luxury hotels in Cambodia are continuing the strike they began on April 5 over the abolition of a 10 percent service charge earlier this year.

In the past hotel clients paid the service charges instead of giving tips to individual staff. The money was supposed to be divided among all workers in an enterprise and comprised a substantial part of their income. Hotel workers in Cambodia are paid a monthly base wage of around \$US75.

Even when the charges were being collected, the management withheld the bulk of the money. The Cambodian Tourism and Service Workers Federation estimated that over \$US3 million has been withheld in the last three years alone.

The Ministry of Labour and Tourism and the Cambodian Arbitration Council have ordered hotel owners to reinstate the charge and distribute 100 percent of the proceeds to hotel workers on a monthly basis, but they have refused to comply. A spokesman for the Phnom Penh Hotels Association Tek Ket has ruled out the workers' demand for the full distribution of the service charge as "unreasonable."

Filipino bus drivers ordered back to work

Striking bus drivers in Tarlac City, 100 kilometres north of Manila, were ordered back to work by the Department of Labor and Employment (DoLE) on the second day of a strike that began April 5. The workers are defying the order.

The 40 striking workers are employed by the Philippines Rabbit Bus Lines at their main terminal in Tarlac City. Although the company has over 1,000 employees, the strike by the 40 workers paralysed its entire operations because the Tarlac City terminal services the vital link between Metro Manila and Northern Luzon.

The strikers are demanding the payment of back wages for terminated employees, the regularisation of terms of employment and union recognition.

Filipino club workers demand living wage

Members of the Baguio Country Club's Employees' League (BCCCL) in the Philippines voted to go on strike from April 15 in support of their demand for a two-year work agreement.

Negotiations between the BCCCL and club management before the National Mediation and Conciliation Board are deadlocked over the unions demand for a 3,000 peso (\$US53.40) pay increase this year, followed by a further 1,950 peso increase in 2005. The management is offering only 400 pesos and 200 respectively.

While the management has ruled out the union's demand as "unconscionable," a BCCCL spokesman said the total increase was not even five percent of the club's revenue from January to June this year. Workers employed by the establishment, reputedly the country's premier club, are paid just a few pesos above the mandated minimal wage. Many live well below the poverty line.

Cannery workers march in support of strike call

The union covering workers at fruit canning company Dole Philippines

filed an intention to strike notice on April 2 after pay negotiations before the National Conciliation and Mediation Board became deadlocked. The union is demanding a 1,500 peso increase over two years, but the company has refused to even consider the amount.

About 500 union members marched from the factory to the Polomolok town centre to support the delegation filing the strike notice. The union will be able to conduct a ballot on the strike proposal within seven days of filing. Even if industrial action is overwhelmingly endorsed, workers will still have to obey a 30-day cooling off period before going out.

Textile workers in China demand compensation

Workers from the Sanmao Textile group in China's northwestern city of Lanzhou staged a series of protests to demand unemployment compensation for 800 workers facing layoff.

The protests continued over three days from March 30. On March 31 about 600 workers used two buses to block the factory's main gate, while others were sent as a delegation to demand the Lanzhou municipal government intervene to resolve the issue. Workers outside the plant carried signs reading: "We have been squeezed and abandoned," "We want human rights" and "We want food to survive."

Pakistani teachers continue struggle over working conditions

Pakistani teachers staged a sit-down protest on April 3 on the national highway in Thatta in Sindh province. The teachers are fighting for a series of demands, including an end to contract hiring, the repeal of a new insurance policy that increases the cost on workers and the restoration of a quota for the employment of teachers' children. They are also calling for the removal of Sindh Province education minister Irfanullah Marwat.

The latest protest is part of an ongoing campaign. On March 31, hundreds of teachers rallied at the D J Science College in Karachi and marched to the Chief Minister's home, where they held a sit-down protest. Police repeatedly attempted to block the path of the march but were unsuccessful. The protestors came from all over the Sindh province including Hyderabad, Thatta, Larkana, Ghotki, Jacobabad, Nawabshah, Shikarpur, Khairpur and Dadu.

On March 6, hundreds of government primary teachers across the province boycotted classes and took part in demonstrations over the same issues.

Esso forced to lift lockout of Australian contract workers

Gas giant Esso and its construction contractors were forced to lift a lockout of 300 workers at its gas plants and Bass Strait offshore platforms this week. Electrical equipment at Esso's key Longford gas plant was damaged on April 5 and the workers were needed to repair it.

The locked-out employees, members of the Electrical Trade Union, the Australian Workers Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, agreed to return to work after the company gave a guarantee of no further lockouts this month. The company imposed the lockout because workers had opposed a move by the contractors to replace a long-established seven-days-on, seven-days-off roster with a 14-day system that would impact sharply on family life.

The contractors involved in the dispute are Kellogg, Brown & Root,

Corpe Instrument Engineering and Worley ABB. The Longford gas plant was the site of a fatal gas explosion in 1998.

Melbourne bus drivers locked out over pay claim

Bus drivers employed by National Bus in Melbourne were locked out on April 7. The company took the action after 380 drivers attended a stop-work meeting to discuss the negotiations for a new enterprise work agreement.

Negotiations between the Transport Workers Union and the bus company have been going on for the last nine months. The company is offering 12 to 13 percent pay increase over three years, but the drivers have rejected this as inadequate.

ACT public servants threaten strike action

Australia Capital Territory (ACT) public servants are threatening strike action next week over a new wages and conditions agreement. They have rejected the ACT Labor government's offer of a 10.2 percent pay rise over three years and are demanding 15 percent. Negotiations have now broken down.

Union delegates from the Community Public Sector Union will meet with members over the next few days to decide what industrial action to take.

Australian health workers take industrial action

About 400 psychiatric nurses and mental health professionals in the Goulburn region of New South Wales and along the Victorian border began industrial action on April 5 over a new wages and conditions agreement. The Health and Community Services Union said workers had imposed work bans on non-essential work after rejecting the management's latest pay offer.

Catholic teachers demand reduced workloads

About 2,000 Catholic school teachers in South Australia are planning to strike on May 7 and hold a rally if Catholic Education does not meet their demand for reduced workloads and smaller class sizes. The Association of Non-Government Education Employees ran a newspaper advertisement on April 4 informing students' parents of the proposed rally and inviting them to participate.

The teachers' demands are part of negotiations for a new enterprise work agreement. The previous agreement expired in July last year, but discussions between the union and employees have failed to resolve outstanding issues.

Union secretary Glen Seidel said the union would call off the strike "if employers can come back with something which meets our latest proposal..." If the strike goes ahead it will be the first ever combined stoppage by teachers in Catholic schools in South Australia.

Western Australian nurses to strike over workloads

Nurses employed in 14 hospitals in the south west of Western Australia have voted to begin a campaign of rolling strikes within two weeks to push for a reduction in workloads. A spokesperson for the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) said the campaign would involve 700 nurses and that targeted stoppages could start as early as next week.

The nurses are currently involved in negotiations with the state Labor government for a new work agreement. ANF State Secretary Mark Olson said: "Even if these nurses were offered a 20 percent wage rise they would not be happy because this action is over patient care and their workloads, not money." Districts affected by industrial action will include Bunbury, Busselton, Harvey and Margaret River.

New Zealand laboratory workers to strike over pay cut

Laboratory workers in New Zealand public hospitals have served strike notices on 17 District Health Boards (DHBs). A spokesperson for the workers said 93 percent of the 1,000 laboratory workers voted to walk off the job for seven days from April 13 to protest over the DHBs' latest pay offer. A lab worker with two years' experience earns under \$40,000, but the DHBs' proposal would cut salaries by up to 10 percent.

A week-long strike would mean that hospitals would have to cancel

non-urgent surgery and reduce diagnostic tests and blood products. Union and DHB negotiators have been in mediation talks this week to try to avert the proposed industrial action. The union says its claims for higher pay are within the "budget constraints" of most boards and that just a "few hospitals" are holding up progress to a settlement.

Strike by Air New Zealand engineers called off

Last-minute talks between the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) and Air New Zealand have led to the cancellation of a strike by more than 1,000 airline engineers in Auckland and Christchurch. An overtime ban had been in place since last week and a full strike was due to start on April 5.

The company was seeking increased flexibility with the right to interchange workers between day and night shifts. EPMU national secretary Andrew Little said that the settlement came when Air New Zealand withdrew its claim, dropped its demand for other concessions and offered a better wage increase. A majority of EPMU members voted to accept the offer.

New Zealand nurses vote for new agreement

Nurses, midwives and health assistants covered by the Lower North Island Multi Employer Agreement (MECA) have voted to accept a revised employer pay offer. The workers were seeking pay rises of up to 13 percent to close the pay gap between Lower North Island nurses and midwives and their colleagues in rest of the country.

While the full details of the settlement have not been released, the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) claims the settlement marks a "turning point" in the nurses' and midwives' campaign to win pay equity.

The MECA covers 4,000 nurses, midwives and health assistants in seven District Health Boards, Taranaki Health, Hutt Valley, Whanganui, Wairarapa, MidCentral, Hawkes Bay and Capital & Coast.

PNG teachers to strike over non-payment of wages

Teachers in the Papua New Guinea's (PNG) National Capital District have threatened to strike over the non-payment of wages. The 200 elementary, secondary and high school teachers have not been paid for two weeks. A spokesman for the southern regional PNG Teachers Association said the union would seek a court order to direct the Education Department to pay the outstanding salaries.

Education Secretary Peter Baki had informed the union on April 2 that he had issued a direction for the teachers to be paid but nothing happened. The union says that the problem of the non-payment of wages is nationwide and hundreds of teachers are not paid on a regular basis.

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