

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 March 2006

Asia

Striking Indian doctors defy government attacks

An indefinite strike by resident doctors in Mumbai (Bombay), India that began on February 27 is continuing. Around 400,000 fellow resident doctors across India are threatening to strike in sympathy with their Mumbai colleagues after the Maharashtra state government invoked its draconian Maharashtra Essential Services Maintenance Act (MESMA) and began issuing termination notices to the strikers.

In a bid to break the strike, the state government is also recruiting replacements and mobilising doctors from the navy and rural areas. At the same time, striking student doctors are being evicted from government hostels.

Mumbai resident doctors are demanding an increase in the present stipend of about 8,000 rupees (\$US177) a month and improved security at workplaces. The Maharashtra Association of Resident Doctors (MARD) has reported two recent incidents in which two duty doctors in government hospitals were assaulted by relatives of patients.

On March 7, Mumbai's high court dismissed a petition by the doctors to uphold their right to strike and declared that the government was dealing with the striking doctors "in a proper way". Mumbai's municipal commissioner told the media that termination of services orders had been given to 348 doctors working in 24 municipal hospitals. In addition, "show cause" notices of why they should not be sacked were issued to 1,314 doctors registered as post-graduate students and to 736 unregistered doctors.

Imphal municipal strike results in garbage piling up

A strike by Imphal municipal workers in the northeast Indian state of Manipur is continuing. The workers, who are members of the Imphal Municipality Employees Union and Imphal Municipality Employees and Workers Welfare Organisation, went on strike on January 19 to demand the payment of salaries outstanding for the past 21 months.

The strike has resulted in huge mounds of garbage on the streets and is especially bad in the Thangal bazaar and Paona bazaar areas of Imphal. Now, with hotter weather, the fly-infested garbage is becoming a serious health hazard.

Sri Lankan transport workers demand unpaid salaries

Around 264 drivers, conductors and mechanics at the Galgamuwa bus depot, together with a section of workers at the

Kabithigollawa bus depot, of the Anuradhapura Central Transport Board, remain on strike after walking out on March 1. The strike has brought public transport to a standstill.

The transport workers are demanding the payment of January salaries, which were due on February 8. Other demands include assurances from management that salaries will be paid on time in the future, and the provision of spare parts for repairs and new buses to upgrade the service. Some strikers began a continuous fasting campaign outside the depot on March 3.

Pakistani college teachers demonstrate

A large number of college teachers marched from the Government Muslim Science College to the Press Club in Hyderabad in Sindh Province in the southeast of Pakistan on March 7. A sit-down protest outside the club caused delays to traffic for over an hour.

The teachers want job confirmation for casual teachers, the filling of 800 vacant teaching posts, the lifting of a ban on transfers on sections of teachers, and posts for 120 principals. They warned that if the demands were not met by March 15, thousands of college teachers would begin large-scale protests. The teachers are members of the Sindh Professors and Lecturers Association (SPLA).

In a separate dispute in Sind Province, a large number of Public Health Engineering Department employees protested outside the press club in Dadu on March 3. They want the salaries of 7,000 employees outstanding for three months paid. The demonstration was organised by the Public Health Engineering Employees Union.

Indonesian golf club workers protest

On March 7, gardeners, housekeepers, waitresses and security guards from the Klub Golf Senayan in central Jakarta demonstrated outside the manager's office, demanding transport and meal allowances on top of their basic salary.

The workers are currently paid 820,000 rupiah (\$US89) a month, a little more than the 812,000 rupiah provincial minimum wage. Up until last month they were paid just 720,000 rupiah. The club, which is run by PT Sinar Kemala, has asked for a month to consider the demand.

Korean railway union calls off strike

Union leaders called off a four-day strike at the state-run Korean Railway Corporation (KORAIL) on March 5 after the government declared it "illegal".

Over 17,000 unionised rail workers struck on March 1 after negotiations broke down over changes to working conditions, the reinstatement of laid-off workers and the status of temporary workers. The strike disrupted freight and passenger services across the country and subway services in Seoul.

During the strike the government ordered the arrest of 397 workers, including 26 leaders, and sacked 2,244 others. On March 5, police detained 411 railway labourers who were attempting to continue to strike and charged 10 with “interfering in the execution of duty”.

In defiance of both the government and the union, 380 female crew members employed on the KTX high-speed trains are continuing the strike action, claiming that they are discriminated against because of their irregular-worker status.

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the country’s second largest peak union body, has called national strikes for April 3 and 14 to protest the government’s use of repressive laws against rail workers. A KCTU spokesman said laws allowing the government to suspend strikes, “restrict labour rights and violate the constitution”.

Australia and the Pacific

Construction union ends strike over sacked delegate

Construction workers employed on the Perth to Mandurah Railway Project ended a 12-day strike on March 8. According to a Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) spokesman, the 430 workers returned to work after the contractor Leighton Kumagi announced that unless they returned to work they would be fined, lose redundancy entitlements and dismissed for misconduct.

The workers initially walked out over the sacking of a CFMEU shop steward despite the threat of individual fines of up to \$22,000 and in defiance of a no-strike clause in their work agreement. CFMEU state secretary Kevin Reynolds recommended a return to work after the union refused to endorse the strike. An unfair dismissal claim for the sacked union delegate Peter Ballard will be heard in the Industrial Relations Commission.

Canberra teachers to strike over new pay deal

About 4,000 teachers from public schools and the Institute of Technology in Canberra have rejected the Australian Capital Territory Government’s (ACT) latest pay offer of 9 percent over three years and are threatening to strike on March 14. The Australian Education Union is seeking a wage increase of 12 percent over three years.

The ACT Government claims that it cannot afford the 12 percent rise because it is facing a budget deficit and has already announced plans to cut 260 public service jobs. In a separate wage dispute, 780 Catholic schoolteachers in the ACT will take industrial action over three days at the end of March.

Auckland fast food workers continue strike campaign

On March 3, about 100 fast food workers and their supporters protested conditions at New Zealand McDonald’s and demanded an end to youth rates and an adult minimum pay rate

of \$12 an hour. McDonald’s workers from across Auckland joined the Queen Street picket together with 35 fast food call centre workers and employees from Starbucks.

Some workers accuse McDonald’s management of intimidation in an attempt to stop them striking. One 16-year-old worker said her employer falsely claimed it was against the law to strike without giving the store 24-hours notice. The manager also threatened disciplinary action and to serve written warnings on anyone who walked out.

A spokesman for SuperSizeMyPay.Com said McDonald’s wants to implement the new legal minimum wage but only for non-union members. The minimum adult wage is due to increase from \$9.50 to \$10.25 an hour from March 27. The minimum wage for workers aged 16 and 17 years will increase from \$7.60 to \$8.20 an hour, or about 80 percent of the adult minimum.

The Unite union, which is organising the campaign in the fast food industry, claims McDonald’s is spending around \$250,000 to oppose the union. Unite is preparing a case against the company with the Employment Relations Authority for “unlawful failure to bargain” and “discrimination on grounds of union membership”.

Hospital workers begin pay campaign

Service workers in District Health Board hospitals across New Zealand held stop-work meetings this week, with the main rallies in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. The Service and Food Workers Union (SFwu) began a new pay campaign on March 8.

The union is demanding a national collective agreement covering cleaners, kitchen and food service staff, orderlies and other service workers in public hospitals, with improved wages and conditions. The SFwu is yet to specify what percentage pay increase it wants.

Honiara port workers strike for allowance increase

More than 100 workers at the Point Cruz Wharf in Honiara, Solomon Islands went on strike on March 3 after the Solomon Islands Port Authority rejected their submission for an increase in the Education Assistance Trust Fund.

The workers are angry that the authority dismissed their submission but agreed to gratuity payments for former Solomon Islands Ports Authority board members who received about \$SB10,000 (US\$1,430) each. Work resumed in the afternoon, after the issue was referred to the Trade Disputes Panel.

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