

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

25 March 2006

Workers in Indonesia protest manpower law changes

Tens of thousands of members of the All-Indonesia Workers Trade Union (SPSI) and other labour organisations rallied outside the Cimahi Legislative Council and Bandung Legislative Council in Indonesia on March 23 against a planned revision of manpower laws. The changes will allow companies to introduce contract work systems, outsourcing across a range of industries and to lay-off workers without severance pay.

According to a union spokesman, the changes are designed to destroy workers' rights and make Indonesia "investment-friendly". Another said the government's anti-worker attitude was indicated in a number of recent decisions, including its approval for 34 Central Java companies to delay payment of wages, legalisation of wage cuts at PT Rodeo and endorsement of layoffs at a number of industries.

Indian port workers strike over suspensions

Staff and employees at the southeast Indian port of Cochin went on strike on March 16 against the suspension of five workers, including the general secretary of the Cochin Port Staff Association. Cochin Port Trust authorities accused those suspended of doing trade union work during working hours. The strike was called off the next day after management agreed to withdraw the suspensions during discussions with the union and the regional labour commissioner.

Further protests at the port are expected. The Cochin Port Employees Organisation, which is affiliated to the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-controlled Water Transport Workers Federation, served notice on March 17 that its members would strike at the end of the month over the port management's "anti-labour actions".

Indian co-operative workers demand salary increase

On March 17, workers at the Salem Co-operative Society and Namakkal Districts Co-operative Societies held a sit-down protest outside the Joint Registrar of Co-operative Societies office in Salem in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

They are fighting for a number of demands, including payment of a long-overdue wage revision, restoration of the Dearness Allowance with 50 percent to be included in the basic wage, an end to Sunday working, easier access to the provident fund and regular employment for employees with 20 years service. They also want a more democratic process for electing cooperative society officials.

Punjab doctors rally protest against privatisation

Punjab doctors, paramedical and health staff protested outside the district Civil Surgeon's office in Ludiana on March 17. The protest was part of a statewide campaign against the state government's decision to hand over 1,193 state health institutions to Zila Parishads (local government bodies) and the use of contract labour.

The Punjab Civil Medical Services Association state president Dr Hardeep Singh said the replacement of regular doctors and supporting

staff with contract personal was a step toward privatisation of health services. Another association spokesman said "the state government is shedding its constitutional responsibility of providing health services to the rural population and the poor".

The association claims that the dislocation of government doctors and paramedical staff through "far and wide transfers" has downsized the Punjab Civil Medical Service and abolished 1,193 jobs.

University college teachers hold sit-down protests

University college teachers from more than 160 non-governmental colleges in Punjab held sit-down protests on campuses on March 17 over the transfer of classes from colleges to schools. They also want the release of government grants to Bachelor of Education colleges and implementation of a pension scheme introduced in 1996.

Principals Federation representatives and members of the Non-Teaching Employees Union participated in the protest.

Indian police arrest retrenched workers

Tamil Nadu police arrested 300 workers at a demonstration near the Madras Export Processing Special Economic Zone (SEZ) on March 21. The former SEZ employees were demanding payment of outstanding entitlements, such as employees state insurance, provident fund and gratuity.

More than 54 companies in the special economic zone have closed units recently, leaving 3,078 workers without jobs and robbing them of outstanding wages and other entitlements. In one instance, an auto parts manufacturer closed down and moved its machinery to another location to avoid paying 557 workers outstanding wages and benefits. Of all the companies operating in the SEZ, only six paid workers the basic minimum wage stipulated by law.

Pakistani bank workers fight privatisation

Habib Bank Limited (HBL) employees in Hyderabad and adjoining districts held a one-hour work stoppage on March 16 over the retrenchment of messengers, guards and drivers. Workers from 59 branches attended a rally in Hyderabad.

An HBL union spokesman reported that around 2,300 employees, including 67 workers from the Hyderabad region, were sacked after the bank was privatised. He warned that upper and lower division clerks would now be targeted.

The union alleges that a number of retired HBL executives had formed their own finance companies and were hiring retrenched bank employees on meager monetary contracts. The bank workers will begin two-hour stoppages in the coming days. These will continue until their demands are met.

Sri Lankan police attack protest

Police attacked and dispersed about 175 laid-off Central Bank workers holding a protest fast outside "Temple Trees," the official residence of President Mahinda Rajapakse in central Colombo, on

March 15. Parents of workers involved in the protest were injured during the police assault. Four of the protestors were arrested but released later in the day.

The workers, former employees of the Central Bank provident fund division, are demanding immediate reinstatement and permanency. They were employed as casuals despite some having worked for the bank for up to seven years.

The government is implicated in suppressing the bank workers' protest. The president's office promised to arrange a discussion between the finance minister and head of the Central Bank on March 15 but the meeting was cancelled and the protest attacked by police. A government official later said the Central Bank was an independent organisation and handled its own problems.

Meanwhile, hundreds of laid-off Cooperative Wholesale Establishment (CWE) workers picketed Fort station in central Colombo on March 22 to demand reinstatement and outstanding salaries. The workers marched to Rajapakse's office to deliver a memorandum containing their demands.

Sri Lankan flour mill workers on strike

More than 1,000 Prima flour mill workers in the eastern Sri Lankan port city of Trincomalee began an indefinite strike on March 15. They want a salary increase, an end to management intimidation of union members and safety gear for workers handling heavy sacks. The workers are seeking a 2,500-rupee (\$US24) monthly pay increase and a 150-rupee rise for daily-hired contract workers. They are also demanding reinstatement of a fellow worker sacked after he complained to the Labour Department about management harassment.

The strike has brought all flour production and distribution at the firm to a halt. The workers are picketing the factory and say they will continue striking until their demands are met.

Aluminum workers strike over wages

Maintenance workers at Alcoa's aluminum smelter in Portland, Victoria went on strike on March 22 after negotiations over wages and a new work agreement broke down. Management has refused to increase the wages of Portland workers in line with employees at the company's Geelong plant. The 65 striking workers are members of the Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union.

Other unresolved issues include the provision of a 5 percent call out allowance and "right of entry" for trade union officials. Union officials claim that the company is deliberately dragging out negotiations until the Howard government's new workplace relations laws, which make it more difficult to strike, come into force next Monday. The laws will also make union "right of entry" agreements illegal.

Teachers continue wage campaign

Australian Capital Territory (ACT) public school teachers voted at a stop-work meeting this week for further industrial action over a 12 percent pay rise after discussion between the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the territory government failed to resolve the dispute. The AEU said rolling stoppages could occur on March 28, 29 and 30.

Media reports indicate that the ACT Labor government may use the new federal industrial relations laws to stop industrial action, which include Australian Electoral Commission-controlled secret ballots before any strike.

In a separate dispute, 700 Catholic private school teachers in the ACT are threatening to strike for a new wages and conditions agreement. The teachers, members of the Independent Education

Union, want wage parity with public school teachers in New South Wales. They are due to meet to discuss an industrial campaign across 27 schools, including four-hour stoppages beginning at the end of this month.

Qantas workers rally against outsourcing

Off-duty Qantas maintenance workers in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane rallied at airport terminals in the three cities on March 24. They were protesting moves by the airline to send maintenance work overseas.

The company recently closed its Sydney heavy engineering maintenance workshop, destroying around 470 jobs, but promised to relocate heavy maintenance on 747 Boeing jets to another one of its workshops. Both the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Australian Workers Union did nothing to defend the jobs.

The unions are anxious to contain any opposition by workers to low-key protests and cause as little disruption to Qantas's operations as possible. An AMWU spokesman said the March 24 protests were "not meant to affect flight schedules".

New Zealand protests over youth rates

Workers took to the streets of Auckland twice this week in support of a campaign to abolish youth pay rates and increase the minimum wage. On March 18, McDonald's and Starbucks staff walked off the job to join 1,000 striking workers and supporters in a march through the city's central business district.

On March 20, about 1,000 secondary school students, many having defied threats of disciplinary action by principals, walked out of their schools at lunchtime to support the campaign. The protestors included students from Auckland Girls Grammar, Selwyn College, Western Springs, Epsom Girls and Senior College. After a meeting at Aotea Square, they marched through Queen Street, the main shopping thoroughfare, stopping along the way outside McDonald's and Burger King stores. Police intervened and arrested two students after protestors sat down and blocked a city intersection.

McDonald's, the country's largest youth employer, subsequently announced it had entered negotiations with the Unite union to phase out youth rates. The move follows an announcement last week by BP that it would abolish youth rates at its 90 New Zealand petrol stations. The minimum wage for adults is currently only \$9.50 an hour, while the youth rate is just \$7.60. The adult rate applies at 18 years of age but there is no minimum wage for workers under 16. Both rates are due to be increased by 75 cents from March 27.

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