

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Asia

Thai journalists win battle for reinstatement

After a protracted legal battle, 21 employees sacked by independent television station iTV in Thailand four years ago have won reinstatement. On March 8, the Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling ordering the station to reinstate all 21 news editorial staff it dismissed on Feb 7, 2001. Shin Corp, which is owned by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, runs the television station.

Seven of the workers were sacked for criticising management and government interference in editorial comment and another was dismissed for so-called “insubordination”. Management used “restructuring” as an excuse for laying-off the remaining 13. The real reason for the dismissals, however, was the staff decision to form a union.

Reinstated worker Pattharaporn Sangpuangthong said that gaining back pay had “never crossed our minds”. “What we want is that news staff must be free from all kinds of political interference.”

Hotel workers demand increase in minimum wage

About 2,000 hotel and entertainment workers in Indonesia’s Riau Islands demonstrated on March 9 in the town of Batam. They want the government to raise the minimum wage in the area to compensate for increases in the cost of basic commodities caused by recent fuel price hikes.

The government announced an average 30 percent increase in fuel prices on February 28 sparking protests by students and workers in several centres, including Jakarta, Makassar, Malang and Bundung. One protesting hotel worker told the media that price increases are “making basic necessities unaffordable for us”.

Return to work ordered in dispute at Filipino food processor

The Philippines Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) ordered an end to a dispute that has seen 135 workers locked out by 7D Food International Inc in Cebu City since February 19. The company specialises in mango processing.

On March 7, DOLE ordered 7D to resume production and readmit all workers under previous working conditions. It ordered both parties to desist from any action that might exacerbate the conflict. The ongoing dispute began when the company attempted to intimidate more than 150 workers who had joined the Associated Labor Union-Trade Union Congress of the Philippines. DOLE has instructed the National Labor Relations Commission to resolve the dispute within 30 days.

Health workers oppose restructure

Around 3,600 health workers at the JIPMER public hospital in Pondicherry, southern India, went on strike on March 7, to protest government moves to convert the institution into an “autonomous” body. The conversion will mean that the hospital will have to find its own funds and workers fear that their welfare benefits and jobs are at risk.

The strikers demonstrated near the hospital and then held protest

meetings. Hospital services were disrupted and a skeleton staff left to operate the casualty and emergency departments. The strike went ahead despite management threats of disciplinary action.

Punjab National Bank employees held a statewide strike on March 7 over the bank’s decision to disinvest part of its operation.

Workers in Pakistan protest over unpaid wages and price hikes

The condition of four Pakistani teachers has seriously deteriorated since they began a fast-until-death protest in Dadu on March 1. The fast is part of a campaign by 58 newly appointed teachers demanding the payment of overdue salaries.

In a separate dispute, a large number of industrial workers demonstrated outside the Hyderabad press club on March 4 over sharp price increases in petrol, wheat, flour, sugar and gas. Workers pointed out that under General Pervez Musharaf petrol had increased by 22 rupees per litre (US44 cents).

Sri Lankan rail workers work to rule

Office staff at the government railway workshops in Ratmalana launched a work-to-rule and overtime bans on March 1. They are demanding an incentive payment in line with other railway employees. If their demand is not met within two weeks they have threatened to intensify the campaign.

Engineering workers demand salary increase

Around 3,400 engineering workers at the State Engineering Corporation (SEC) in Sri Lanka went on strike on March 2. They are demanding a 2,500-rupees (\$US25) salary increase, which was promised in the United Peoples Freedom Alliance government budget, and the immediate remittance of dues to the Employees Provident Fund.

The workers, who have also accused the government of attempting to privatise the SEC, rallied outside the company’s head office before marching to the prime minister’s office to present their demands.

Health workers fight for back pay

Health workers at the Gampola Teaching Hospital in Sri Lanka’s central province went on strike on March 2 to demand the payment of long-outstanding overtime. Hospital authorities promised to pay up, after protests two months ago, but then reneged on the commitment.

Minor staff of Diyatalawa Ayyurvedic Hospital in Uva province also began a campaign on the same day to demand the resolution of salary anomalies.

Australia and the Pacific

Contract refinery workers remain on strike

A strike by about 430 contract maintenance workers at BHP Billiton’s Worsley alumina refinery in Collie, in southwest Western Australia is continuing. The workers, members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Construction Forestry Mining and Electrical Union (CFMEU), have been out for a month demanding construction rates of pay—a \$200 per week increase— while the refinery is being expanded. They are currently paid as maintenance staff.

While two of the three contractors employing the men consented to pay the increase last week, the workers have refused to end their strike until all

contractors agree to the rise.

Workers picket against contracting out

Coal miners at Wesfarmers colliery in Collie, Western Australia refused to cross a picket set up by 62 striking maintenance workers this week. The maintenance workers have been on strike for eight days over proposed roster changes and the company's use of outside contractors.

Wesfarmers Premier Coal Mine is Western Australia's biggest coal operation. The 140 miners resumed work mid-week after being ordered to do so by the Coal Industry Tribunal.

Power workers strike for improved pay offer

More than 600 linesmen and maintenance workers at ETSA Utilities in South Australia will walk off the job on March 11 for four days. They have also banned the restoration of power to all properties except those using lifesaving equipment.

Emergency talks between ETSA management and the Electrical Trades Union to avert the strike broke down on March 9, after the company refused to budge on a pay and conditions offer in a new enterprise work agreement. The company is offering a 15.5 percent pay increase over three years, far short of the amount being demanded by workers.

New Zealand manufacturing workers begin pay campaign

New Zealand unions have begun a national wage campaign. Last week, the country's biggest private sector union, the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), launched its "Fair Share—five in 05" campaign for a 5 percent pay increase. The Council of Trade Unions, a 300,000-strong peak union body, has since endorsed the campaign on behalf of its affiliates.

The wage campaign—announced following a break down in negotiations to renew the pace-setting Metals and Manufacturing Industries Agreement—already represents a significant retreat on wages by the EPMU. In the face of employer opposition the union has reduced its original 7 percent pay demand to 5 percent. The employers' top offer was just 3.2 percent.

Following the retreat, EPMU national secretary Andrew Little called a press conference to declare that 5 percent was "realistic". After pointing out that "productivity is up, the economy is growing and profits are soaring" Little admitted, "some might say we are being too restrained in setting a bottom line of 5 percent".

New Zealand public servants seek pay rises

The New Zealand Public Service Association (PSA) began negotiations this week for what it termed "significant" pay increases for its 20,000 members employed in the core public sector and other government agencies. Negotiations are underway between the Ministries of Social Development and Agriculture and Forestry.

The union has not put a figure on what "significant" means. As there are 70 collective agreements with various expiry dates, different pay claims will be lodged for various groups of workers. However, PSA secretary Richard Wagstaff said offers in the region of 1 percent to 3 percent would "not be enough". Since 1991, public service pay has not kept up with increases in other parts of the state sector, or even the private sector where wage increases have generally been lower than the rate of inflation.

The PSA is also seeking an end to performance-based pay systems and four weeks' annual leave members now have, ahead of the introduction of provisions for improved working condition due in 2007.

New Zealand council staff to strike over pay

This week about 1,150 Christchurch City Council staff voted to strike for four hours on March 24 in an increasingly bitter pay dispute. About 55 percent of the council's staff are members of the Southern Local Government Officers' Union (SLGOU), which has rejected a council pay offer.

The council offer, tabled on March 4, included one-off payments of between \$NZ1,000 and \$1,500 for some staff while others would get base-rate increases of 1.5 percent, 3.5 percent and 7 percent. The union is

seeking 6.5 percent increase over two years.

The workers are also angry that the council has backdated a CEOs pay rise of 9.8 percent (\$30,000) but refuses to do the same in their case. The total annual salary of many workers is about the same as last year's bonuses for the CEO.

Under the council's offer, many employees on middle salary grades will only receive lump-sum payments with no cost-of-living increase. While the council admits that staff in the highest pay bracket get 30 percent less than other comparable local government workers, it refuses to address the discrepancy. The union and council will attend the Employment Relations Authority in the next week.

Airport staff demand overdue pay increase

Workers at several Papua New Guinea (PNG) airports walked off the job for 48 hours on March 3. They were protesting Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) delays in payment of a wage increase awarded by the government last year to all other public sector employees.

Those involved in the strike included technical staff, rescue workers, fire fighters and air traffic controllers. Staff-level workers joined the walkout despite instructions by their union to remain at work. CAA management took out a court order to prevent the strike and push the dispute into the industrial court.

PNG university strikers demand vice-chancellor resign

On March 10, striking academic and non-academic staff at the University of Papua New Guinea marched on Vice Chancellor Prof Les Eastcott's office to demand his resignation. Eastcott had sent letters to staff threatening dismissal if they continued their industrial action.

The strike began on March 6 to demand pay increases negotiated last year by the Public Employees Union University flow on to university workers. A National Academic Staff Association spokesman representing the striking university staff said union members "cannot tolerate threats and intimidation while pursuing a legitimate matter".

Fiji workers demand overtime back pay

On March 7, about 100 workers at the Fiji Public Works Department (PWD) Walu Bay pool plant went on strike to demand outstanding overtime payments. The strike went ahead despite pleas by Public Works Department chief executive Anasa Vocea for workers to "show patience".

While the overtime payments have been outstanding since the end of 2001, Finance Ministry acting head Shiri Chand would only say that the PWD workers were in a list of ministry workers who had lodged claims for outstanding overtime.

Employees returned to work the next day, after Public Employees Union General Secretary Mere Rakai said that the PWD had agreed to pay the outstanding amount in a week.



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