

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 February 2008

Indian bank workers strike

More than half a million Indian bank workers went on a day-long nationwide strike on January 25 to oppose the proposed merger of associate banks with the State Bank of India, and the outsourcing of services. They are also demanding pensions for all the bank employees and the early settlement of a wage revision. Strikers demonstrated outside local bank branches in several major cities and many automated teller machines were closed by the strike.

The United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU), which has around 900,000 members, reported that normal banking transactions had been disrupted across 50,000 branches nationally. India has 82 commercial banks, including 29 foreign-owned banks and nearly 3,000 urban and rural cooperative banks.

Indian village nurses demand pay rise

Village nurses in the southern state of Tamilnadu demonstrated opposite the Collectorate in Udthagamandalam on January 28 to demand a pay rise. The demonstration was part of an ongoing campaign.

Village health nurses provide vital services, including family welfare, immunisation and the provision of protection for pregnant women. The nurses are members of the Tamilnadu Village Health Nurses Association.

Indian insurance workers demand staff recruitment

General Insurance Corporation of India (GIC) employees in Tamilnadu demonstrated in Madurai on January 24 over declining staff levels and “anti-worker attitudes” by the company. They also called for the merger of all government-owned insurance companies into a single corporation.

Workers claim that the lack of staff recruitment is impacting on more socially marginalised groups in rural areas who are being denied employment opportunities. Members of the All India General Insurance Employees Association, National General Insurance Employees Confederation and All India Insurance Employees Association participated in the protest.

Indian railway workers demonstrate for log of claims

Tamilnadu railway workers demonstrated outside the Virudhunagar Railway Station and the local divisional office in Madurai on January 23 for a log of claims. Their demands include the immediate disbursal of bonus arrears for 2006-07 and the tabling of the Sixth Pay Commission report and its implementation retrospective from January 1, 2006.

The workers, who are members of the Southern Railway Mazdoor Union, called on railway management to withdraw plans for retrenchments.

Sri Lankan teachers campaign for hardship allowance

Teachers at the Muslim Central School of Norochcholai in the North

Western Region began a sick-note campaign on January 23 over the non-payment of a hardship allowance. All 27 teachers at the school participated in the action. While the school is located in Kalpitiya and teachers are entitled to a 1,500 rupees (\$US1.40) monthly hardship allowance, it is not being paid by the government.

In a separate dispute, more than 100 medical officers and nurses in Dehiattakandiya and Mahaoya, near the country’s war-torn eastern region went on strike on January 28. They are demanding the immediate payment for overtime worked in the last five months and have threatened to intensify their campaign.

Chinese taxi drivers strike over colleague’s death

Around 200 taxi drivers went on strike in Tianmen, Hubei province late last month over the killing of one of their colleagues by City Management Officers (CMO). The driver was assaulted and killed while filming CMO employees attacking a protest rally in Tianmen.

Residents called the rally to oppose the expansion of a landfill site that was encroaching on their homes. The rally had been peaceful prior to the CMO intervention.

The striking taxi drivers protested outside the city offices and thousands of local residents attended the driver’s funeral.

South Korean subway workers oppose job losses

Over 4,700 union members at Seoul Metropolitan Rapid Transport Corporation (SMRT) have voted for strike action on February 1. The decision was taken in ballots held over three days from January 11. The workers, who are employed on subway lines 5-8, are opposing a company’s restructure plan that will destroy 950 jobs by 2010.

Seoul Metro, which runs subway lines 1-4, is also in dispute with workers over plans to axe 2,100 jobs during the same period.

Philippines garment workers attacked by police

More than 150 workers at Hanjin Garments Incorporated, a Korean-owned garment factory in Laguna have been picketing the factory’s main gate since January 24. Laguna is situated about 50 kilometres south of the country’s capital Manila.

The workers, who are members of the Organisation of Oppressed Workers in Hanjin Garments, were brutally attacked on the second day of their picket by 50 members of the Cabuyao Philippines National Police and the Laguna Industrial Park Assistance Group. The workers were dispersed and 21 pickets were severely injured. They have since regrouped at the main gate but the picket is surrounded by police who are preventing any food reaching the workers.

The strikers are demanding permanency for contract workers, reinstatement of 200 employees who were “illegally terminated” for not signing a non-union contract on January 18, union recognition and a pay increase. They are currently paid 185 pesos (\$US4) a day, even though the government-mandated minimum daily wage in Cabuyao is 282 pesos. The factory employs 1,000 contractual workers, many of

whom have worked at the factory for 12 years.

Plantation workers strike over unpaid wages

More than 400 workers at Rio Vista Agri-Ventures, a 250-hectare banana plantation near the town of Barangay Pangil Maco in the Compostela Valley, began a sit-down-strike on January 28. They are protesting over outstanding wages and non-payment of company contributions to the Social Security System (SSS). The strikers say they have not been paid for one month, have no money to buy food and cannot make emergency withdrawals from the SSS.

Rio Vista Agri-Ventures is wholly-owned by the giant Philippines-based Marsman-Drysdale Corporation and employs over 3,500 people in a range of diversified companies with interests in agriculture, food processing, medical equipment, telecommunications, tourism, mining and investment management businesses.

Pay strikes continue in Vietnam's export processing zone

Over 5,000 workers at four companies in the Tan Thuan Export Processing Zone in Ho Chi Minh City's District 7 went on strike on January 24 to demand higher wages and hazard allowances. Some 4,000 workers at electronics manufacturers T.T.T.I. Company Limited and Nidec Tosok also struck and demonstrated for a pay rise and better meals.

At the same time employees at sewing machine parts manufacturers Juki Vietnam Company and Dong A Company have imposed a "go-slow" after striking to demand a 20 percent wage rise to lift the current monthly wage of 1.1 million dong (\$US68.53).

The government-mandated minimum wage in the Tan Thuan EPZ was increased on January 1 this year, but consumer prices over the last months have increase 12.5 percent. A labour officer said to the media that while most employers in the EPZ abide by wage laws "it is the higher cost of living that leads workers to the strike." About 60,000 Vietnamese are employed in the Tan Than EPZ.

Sacked Australian seaman occupy ship

Eleven seamen remain on board the Australian customs ship Triton despite an order by the Northern Territory police that they leave. The workers refused to disembark when the ship docked at Fort Hill wharf in Darwin on January 27 after learning they had been dismissed. The occupation has prevented the ship from sailing to Singapore for maintenance work.

The seamen are demanding that they be reinstated by Gardline Australia. The UK-based Gardline is contracted by the federal government to conduct border patrols in Australia's northern waters.

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) claims that Gardline terminated its contract with TK Shipping, which originally hired the former crew, in order to employ alternate seaman for \$30,000 per year less. The unions said that Gardline has been "systematically" replacing seaman and engineers with cheaper non-union labour.

New Zealand netball umpires in pay dispute

Leading netball umpires in New Zealand say they will not hesitate to withdraw their services in a dispute over pay and working conditions for a new professional trans-Tasman netball competition due to begin on April 5. They want a \$12,000 competition retainer, about the same salary a bench player will get for the 4-month competition. Domestic national championship umpires were previously only paid expenses and airfares.

Strike action would plunge the competition into chaos because top Australian umpires have confirmed they will take a stand alongside their NZ counterparts. A spokesperson for the umpires said they were "tired of being taken for granted".

The contracted pool of 16 Australian and NZ umpires will be under

pressure to perform as all games are to be televised. They argue that the sport's higher standards require the umpires to train harder and longer and to be away from their jobs and families for greater periods.

New Zealand cinema workers protest

Workers at Island Bay's Empire Cinema and Cafe went on strike for one hour on January 26 over the owner's refusal to begin contract bargaining. About 15 workers protested outside the cinema that evening and about 80 customers signed a petition demanding that management owner begin negotiations.

The Unite Union, which represents New Zealand cinema workers, has been trying to negotiate a collective employment agreement for the past nine months. The owner has ignored repeated emails and faxes from the union requesting a date for discussions.

New Caledonia demonstration supports jailed strikers

About 500 people demonstrated outside New Caledonia's main court house last week in support of ten workers arrested during recent clashes with Noumea police. The clashes, which left more than 20 people injured, erupted after 200 police used tear gas and rubber bullets to end a protest by striking bus workers. The workers were demanding that Carsud, a local bus company, reinstate a victimised driver.

The ten workers, which include the leader of the Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE), have been charged with being part of an "armed mob", assaulting members of the security forces and damaging public property. They have been remanded in custody and the case had been deferred until February 22.

USTKE has condemned the use of excessive force against its members and the "criminalisation of the exercise of union rights". Another one-day strike is being called to protest the arrests.

Christian Estrosi, the French state secretary for overseas territories, warned during a recent visit to the South Pacific island that the French government would not tolerate ongoing protests by New Caledonian workers. He also lashed out at the then High Commissioner Michel Mathieu for not authorising police to immediately intervene in industrial conflicts.

Doctors strike in French Polynesia

Doctors demonstrated last week outside the French Polynesia presidential headquarters over substantial cuts in reimbursements for doctor's visits, hospital and clinic operations and pharmaceutical purchases covered by the Caisse de Prévoyance Sociale (CPS), the country's social welfare system. The demonstration was timed to coincide with end of the current CPS agreement with doctors.

The doctors' association has accused CPS board members of unilaterally deciding not renew the collective agreement and attempting to impose individual agreements. The dispute follows a week-long strike by public sector doctors last November over the level of government health funding.



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