Workers Struggles: Australia, Asia and Pacific

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Strike cripples imports and exports in India

A nation-wide strike by 100,000 tax and customs workers paralysed import and export operations in India on Wednesday. The workers walked off the job Tuesday at international airports, cargo depots and ports across the country.

The job protest 'will have a tremendously damaging impact," said M. Roy, a director with the Confederation of Indian Industry. 'Imports and exports will come to a grinding halt." Ramu Deora, president of the Federation of Indian Export Organisations, estimated that a three-day walkout could cause losses of $120 million to the economy.

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Hong Kong retail workers protest victimisations

Striking sales personal from Chaifa Holdings Limited staged a sit-in outside the company's Quarry Bay office in Hong Kong last week protesting the sacking of 20 workers.

The workers were denied their severance entitlements when the company dismissed them on the grounds of 'poor performance'. The 20 workers were singled out after they refused to accept a further wage cut after suffering two earlier reductions in pay. Another 40 workers who had accepted the pay cut were not sacked.

The company claimed that the request by workers for union representation when meeting with management constituted poor work performance and was grounds for the dismissals. However, the strikers said that Chaifa just wanted to avoid awarding severance pay. One sacked saleswoman said: 'If we did anything wrong why didn't they mention it when they handed us the dismissal letter?'

After calling off the strike a union spokesman threatened further strike action if the workers' demands were not met. The union did nothing to oppose the two previous pay cuts and had only become involved in the latest dispute after the workers took independent action.

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Hong Kong's domestic workers under attack

Provisional Urban Counsellor Jennifer Chow Kit-bing last week demanded that the Hong Kong Legislative Council introduce a compulsory 16-hour day for domestic workers. Chow, who recently demanded a 20 percent wage cut for domestics, said: 'I have had complaints from several employers saying their domestic helpers started work around 8 in the morning and are going to their rooms around 9 at night and will not do any more work. If we set the working hours these situations would not happen.'

A spokesman for the United Filipinos of Hong Kong, a domestic workers welfare group, said: 'Many workers are employed for a 16 to 18 hour day already. It would be very difficult to monitor a working hours limit as many workers live in with their employers and are on call 24 hours a day.'

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Malaysian bank workers face sack

The newly formed Federation of Bank and Financial Institution Employees claimed last week that over 25,000 bank workers in Malaysia will lose their jobs over the next three years following a series of planned mergers.

Union official Andrew Lo told the media that the estimate was based on data that revealed that past bank mergers had resulted in jobs being cut by one-third. Currently 38 banks plan to merge to form eight entities. Lo said the other factors threatening jobs were 'organisation restructuring, operational downsizing and the application of new technology'.

The union has agreed to the jobs being eliminated on the basis of a 'voluntary separation scheme'. Following the recognition of the bank workers union by the director-general of Trade Union Affairs, Lo pledged that the union body 'would work closely with our employers and government'. He said that the union only wished to 'minimise' the job loses. Nine bank unions have affiliated to the federation.

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Falling crane kills Thai worker

One person was killed and five more injured in the Huey Kwang district in Thailand last Sunday when a huge mobile crane toppled over crushing five houses. The crane is owned by the Thai Phipat Construction Company and was being used to build a road to link the district with Soi Soonvijai. The crane fell after management ordered it to be moved over ground that was too soft to support its weight. A 25-year-old worker, Poonping Chanthet, was crushed to death beneath the rubble of one of the houses.

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South Korean job and wage cuts

Some of South Korea's major conglomerates are slashing jobs and cutting wages by spinning off parts of their businesses. The companies, including Samsung Corp, Hyundai Electronics and Daewoo Electronics, are separating off non-core business divisions to create independent entities that act as contractors to the parent company.

The LG Group, for example, used spin-offs to slash at least 23,000 jobs

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over the past 12 months. Samsung Electronics eliminated 50 business divisions that once employed a total of 6,000 workers.

Workers are deeply hostile to the process because it not only allows the destruction of jobs but in most cases results in the lowering of wages by 30 to 40 percent, and leads to the elimination of other benefits. Contracts to the new companies are usually only guaranteed for a maximum of three years, allowing jobs to be shed without severance payments.

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Accidents increase in Philippine construction industry

A recent report issued by the Geneva-based International Federation of Building and Wood Workers (IFBWW) shows that despite a slump in construction projects in the Philippines the rate of accidents has doubled compared to last year and the situation is worsening.

The organisation reported on 42 accidents in Metro Manila and 12 in Makati City occurring over the first 10 months of this year. These resulted in 33 deaths and 28 serious injuries, including the fatality of construction worker Roosevelt Torrecampo who fell 26 floors in Makaiti City, the country's financial capital. Three days later three more workers fell from the fourth floor of the 61-story Philippine Bank of Communications building that was under construction in Makita. Rodolfo Paraguay died instantly and his two companions were both badly injured.

Albert Yusan, a local coordinator for IFBWW, said, 'despite all the accidents in the past, nothing has been seriously done to prevent them.' He pointed out the accidents monitored by his organisation were 'only the tip of the iceberg.'

'There are definitely a lot more accidents that are unrecorded. We can safely say that the actual number is at least double the number of reported accidents.' Yusan said that one of the major factors contributing to deaths was that building contractors ignored regulations and refused to provide safety equipment, including safety nets.

'If the government were to strictly enforce the existing guidelines on safety requirements I think every building site in the country would have to close.'

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Indonesian textile workers strike

Hundreds of workers at the P.T. Tegar Prima Nusantara towel factory struck November 18 in Cimahi (West Java). Workers made 13 demands, including 20 cents per day for food allowance, 15 cents per day for transportation, one can of milk per week and $7.50 per month for other basic needs. They have also demanded that no strikers be victimised, and that workers be paid full wages during the work stoppage. The company has only agreed to give one cent per day for food subsidies, five cents for transportation and $2.50 per month for basic needs.

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Job cuts in Japan

Over the next number of years many Japanese companies are preparing to slash thousands of jobs. These include the country's two leading gas companies, Tokyo Gas and Osaka Gas, which will restructure six of their regional utilities over the next five years at the cost of 2,300 jobs. The two companies are planning to outsource as much as 20 percent of the present in-house work from at least 20 branches.

Japan Vilene Co, one of Japan's biggest clothing producers, will lay off about 180 workers in the next two years or about 15 percent of the current workforce. Matsushita Electric Works Ltd. will downsize 2,500 jobs or over 10 percent of its workforce.

Sumitomo Bank is also preparing to carry out a major restructuring over the next three years, dropping 2,000 workers from its payroll. The bank will close down 89 domestic branches as well as 22 of its overseas branches.

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Japanese unions lower wage demands

The Japanese Trade Union Confederation (Rengo) has asked employers to grant a wage increase of 3 percent over two years, the lowest since the current system of bargaining began in 1955. The union body is seeking an immediate 1 percent increase of 3,200 yen in monthly base salaries to be followed by a further 2 percent rise in the spring of next year. Rengo made the point that it had lowered the wage claim after taking into account the drop in corporate earnings, and promised that it would be bound to increasing productivity to boost profits.

Meanwhile, winter bonuses paid by companies will shrink for the first time in four years. The average December bonus will drop 2.12 percent to 808,980 yen, or US$6,685, per worker. In Japan, bonuses are considered part of workers' salaries and a similar summer bonus is paid around July or early August. Companies have cited the country's recession as cause of the sharpest bonus decline in 25 years.

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Papua New Guinea academics and students threaten strikes

University academics and students in Port Moresby are threatening strike action over proposed legislation that will shortly be put before the Papua New Guinea parliament. They are demanding that all aspects of the legislation, that will replace the current three-semester school year with one based on two semesters, be made public.

A university spokesman said the changes were designed to cut costs 'throughout the department system.' The Student Representative Council (SRC) had threatened strike action earlier but backed down after the university administration had refused to scrap its plans. The SRC claims that the lengthening of the semesters and the 'streamlining' of many courses will lead to a drop in educational standards at the university.

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Australian miners strike over safety

Miners at the BHP-owned Elouera and Appin mines on the New South Wales South Coast went on strike for 24 hours this week over safety questions. The Elouera miners walked out Monday because they were concerned about the lack of maintenance on underground vehicles that was producing increased diesel fume emissions.

The Appin miners stopped work last Sunday after learning that the NSW Mineral Resources Department had ordered an urgent recall of 1,770 self-rescuer breathing devices after units at both Appin and Elouera were found to be defective. The miners were extremely angry that they had not been informed earlier about the defective equipment. The apparatus is vital in the case of underground gas emissions, roof falls and explosions.

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Sydney building workers stop work

On Tuesday over 1,000 scaffolders walked off construction sites across Sydney to demand that the NSW Labor Government support their call for the establishment of a separate building workers compensation and accident scheme.

The action brought scaffolding and other work on sites, including the Olympic projects, to a standstill for 24 hours. The workers said that 30 percent of construction companies and building contractors were not paying correct compensation premiums.

See Also:
Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa
[19 November 1998]
Workers Struggles: The Americas
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[14 November 1998]

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