Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

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Philippine unions sign no-strike deal

At the beginning of this month unions in the Philippines ratified an accord with the Employers Confederation of Industry agreeing to prevent strikes by workers on more than 107 industrial estates mainly concentrated in Cavite, Laguna and Batangas.

The agreement, known as the Ecozone Social Pact, states that management will "use all means to boost productivity" but "avoid layoffs if possible". Union officials continued negotiations on the accord throughout January even as their members at J P Aoki Rubber, in Cavite, Southern Tagalong, who were on strike and picketing the plant, were attacked by police and a unit of the special armed forces.

During the assault the workers were beaten with hammers and other tools injuring 18 workers including females. About a quarter of the 147-strong workforce are women. The rubber workers went on strike at the beginning of January following the dismissal of five union delegates last year.

Local government authorities also waded in on the side of the company. One day at the end of January, when most of the picketers were away attending a rally, the mayor, accompanied by 50 uniformed and plain clothes police, went to the factory to declare the strike over. The police allowed a truckload of finished components to leave the plant.

Aoki supplies rubber components for cars to Yasaki-Torres and EMI-Yasaki, two locally-run Japanese companies in Southern Tagalog. The rubber plant is a joint venture between Aoki Japan and Joseph Chua, who is the son-in-law of tycoon Lucio Tan, a close friend of President Joseph Estrada.

Cambodian students back teachers' strike

Scores of students from the Institute of Technology in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh staged demonstrations outside their college this week in support of the week-long national teachers' pay strike.

The students burned tyres and shouted slogans calling on the government to grant the teachers a wage increase. Hay Pisey, a 20-year-old student said, "We burnt tyres as a warning to the government. They're ignoring our professors' demands over pay".

The teachers from secondary schools and universities are paid between 60,000 riel ($16) and 80,000 riel ($20) a month. They have pointed out the enormous discrepancy between their pay rates and salaries paid to senior government officials and parliamentarians, who receive $500 to $1,000 a month.

Last Friday the government said it intended to cut officials' pay by 70 percent and wanted members of parliament to take a reduction in pay. A spokesman for the teachers dismissed the government announcement as a trick designed to placate the strikers.

Hong Kong's domestics continue to fight pay cut

The Hong Kong government this week announced a 5 percent pay cut for foreign domestic workers, slashing wages from $HK3,860 ($US473) a month to $HK3,670. Maids and other domestic workers staged a noisy protest outside the Philippine consulate.

The demonstrators also condemned a move by the Philippines government to levy domestics $US25 every time they apply to renew their work contracts. Manuel Roxas, the majority leader of the Philippines House of Representatives, dismissed requests from the domestics for assistance. "Hong Kong foreign maids will have to accept the cut," he told the media.

Cathay Pacific workers stage sit in

Last Sunday around 70 flight attendants and pilots staged a protest outside Cathay Pacific's main office at Hong Kong's international airport. Air crews are demanding a 3.5 percent pay increase with no trade offs. The demonstrators travelled to the airport in open-top buses, waving banners that read, "We will fight back " and "Remove options."

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The workers have been seeking a pay increase since last year but management is attempting to tie the pay rise to a four-hour-a-month increase in working time. At the beginning of the year the company sent letters to the 4,598 workers demanding that they accept the offer, suffer a wage freeze or take redundancy.

Dye workers defy intimidation

This week 80 workers at the Australian Dying Company voted to continue their two-month strike and maintain around-the-clock pickets at the company's Clifton Hill plant in Melbourne. At the same time the Australian Federal Court blocked the company from going into liquidation and sacking its workforce.

Talks before the court involving the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union failed to produce any agreement on a 10 percent pay claim and a new work agreement sought by the strikers. The dispute has been marked by continuous provocations by management, including the employment of security guards to intimidate picketers and the use of spy cameras.

The police have also mounted attacks on the picket line to clear a way for scabs and materials to enter the factor. The unions have issued a directive ordering pickets not to obstruct vehicles or persons from going into the premises.

Nurses' strike called off

Union officials called off a strike by nurses at the Royal Melbourne Childrens Hospital on Monday after management offered to provide extra nursing staff.

The nurses had complained that staff shortages at the hospital threatened the safety of patients and caused intolerable waits for surgery. They had demanded an extra 10 nurses needed to provide the minimum levels of patient care but voted on Monday to accept the hospital's offer of just five extra theatre staff.

Despite the outcome, a union spokesman claimed the result was a victory. "I think the result is good for the nurses and it's good for the Victorian community," the official said.

Tasmanian mining jobs to go

Three mining companies in Tasmania announced plans this week that will see more jobs go to the wall.

Pasminco, the world's largest zinc producer, announced that 46 jobs at its Rosebery mine will be eliminated over the next 12 months. Management told the 309 employees that cutbacks were required to keep the company afloat due to falling world zinc prices. Thirty-six voluntary redundancy packages have been offered with the following 10 jobs going over the next 12 months.

Merrywood Coal Company has stood down its half dozen workers after losing a contract. The workers were told there is little hope of re-employment.

Two hundred workers at the Mount Lyell copper mine were informed that operations at the mine will only continue to mid-March. A potential new buyer for the mine, Indian company Sterlite, will announce in March if it intends to take over operations.

Australian software company fires then hires

Mincom, Australia's largest software developer, has began taking on more staff barely a week after it retrenched 110 full-time workers. The redundancies included 55 jobs from the company's Brisbane office and 55 from other offices around the world.

This week the company took on 18 new programmers supplied by the contract hire company Computer Power for a four-month period. The workers will undergo a five-day training course at Mincom without pay.

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