Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 December 1999

Doctors and nurses oppose cost cutting in South Korea

Thousands of South Korean doctors and nurses went on strike and staged a march through Seoul this week, in protest at a government policy banning hospitals from directly dispensing medicine. The move is a cost-cutting measure aimed at forcing patients to buy medicine through private dispensaries.

Large contingents of riot police stood by as the health workers marched through the city centre shouting anti-government slogans. The strike closed down services at a number of Seoul's hospitals and clinics.

Chinese construction worker jailed

Chen Xianggui, a construction worker, was recently convicted and jailed in China on charges of “gathering people to disturb the social order”. The charges relate to his union activity while working on a building site in Kuwait.

Chen went to Kuwait in 1996 as one of thousands of Chinese overseas labourers and joined a union for foreign workers. He helped organise a one-week strike in Kuwait in 1997 over unpaid overtime. The strike was legal under Kuwaiti law.

However, Chinese authorities revoked Chen's passport in early 1998, forcing him to return to China. He was then arrested and held in detention until October this year, when he was put on trial in Jintang County in his native Sichuan province.

Chen has appealed against the sentence to a higher court in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan.

Hong Kong housing workers continue campaign

Housing department staff in Hong Kong voted on Monday to continue their campaign against a government plan to privatise housing estate management. The workers believe that the move will cost hundreds of jobs and have demanded a written assurance from the department guaranteeing job security for two years.

Over the past four weeks over 800 staff have imposed bans on work relating to the district council elections that were held this week. These included refusing to process candidates' applications for campaign visits to housing estates.

A spokesman for the workers said: “If the government continues to neglect us, we will escalate our industrial action. We will stop carrying out other duties, such as asking public housing tenants to pay unpaid rents.”

Thousands of Indian workers protest new insurance legislation

About 10,000 employees of state-run Indian insurance firms and banks held a march through the streets of New Delhi on Monday to protest insurance “reform” legislation that went before the parliament last month. The Bill is designed to open up the state-run financial institutions to private investment and is seen as a major step towards full privatisation.

The workers, carrying banners and chanting "take back the bill", marched through the capital to a rally at the parliament building, where the winter session of the Lok Sabha, or the lower house of parliament, was in session. A petition signed by 15 million people opposing the Bill was handed to the speaker of the Lower House.

One worker addressing the rally said: “Privatisation is a mode of selling the economy to a handful of corporations”.

Bank workers protest cuts to pensions in Sri Lanka

State bank workers in Sri Lanka have voted to launch an island-wide campaign against branch closures and cutbacks to their employee pension scheme.

Both the Peoples Bank and the Bank of Ceylon announced that they will abolish the pension scheme for employees hired after 1996, and slash payments by 60 percent for all other staff.

At the same time, the banks revealed that they plan to close down branches deemed to be “unprofitable” and that they will not fill existing vacancies. There are currently nearly 900 vacancies in the People's Bank and

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900 to 1,000 in the Bank of Ceylon.

Sri Lankan union leaders agree to job cuts

Union leaders signed an "voluntary" retirement agreement last week with Kiriya, a dairy products company in Colombo, that will enable it to cut the workforce by 50 percent.

Under the agreement, the company has agreed to pay one and half months pay for every year of service as compensation to those who accept retirement.

The settlement came after workers went on strike on November 10, seeking a 3,000 rupee wage increase, an end to job cuts and permanency for 97 workers who have recently completed their probation period at the company. The management has only agreed to pay a wage increase of 500 rupees and refused to meet any of the other demands.

Kiriya is a joint venture between the Sri Lankan government and the Amul Company of India. Earlier the company had operated as the National Milk Board and was fully government owned. In 1996, it was privatised by the government.

New South Wales firefighters stop work for wage increase

Firefighters across New South Wales held a three-hour stoppage on Thursday to discuss their campaign for a 12 percent pay increase and a new work agreement.

The NSW Fire Brigade and the NSW state government have refused to enter into negotiations on advice from the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC). The IRC has insisted that firefighters lift industrial bans they presently have in place.

Those bans, which include a refusal by officers to do relieving work at short-staffed stations, were imposed in August as part of a dispute over inequities in compensation rights for firefighters who are seriously injured or killed. The firemen have been campaigning for the 1,500 firefighters who joined the service after 1985 to receive the same death and disability benefits as those employed before that date.

NSW teachers continue industrial campaign

On Wednesday up to 55,000 teachers in 2,200 government schools in New South Wales held another two-hour stoppage, the fourth in the past two weeks. The teachers are fighting for a 7.5 percent wage increase and are demanding the State Labor government withdraw planned changes that would seriously undermine working conditions.

The stoppage went ahead in defiance of a directive from the Industrial Relations Commission that the teachers cease all industrial action.

A month ago, the Education Department issued a detailed document outlining changes to the way schools and the teaching service would operate. Under a proposed new award teachers would face a substantial increase in working hours. The government has also refused to increase its pay offer of little more than 2 percent.

Australian ship workers strike

Shipyard workers at the Forgacs floating dock in Newcastle walked off the job on Wednesday over a pay claim. The workers are demanding that they be paid a 110 percent loading for weekdays and 185 percent for weekends during the four-day sea trials of the HMAS Manoora.

The management informed the 220 staff earlier this week that they were expected to be on around-the-clock call while the sea trials were underway. The ship has been under repair at the dock for three years and was due to begin trials this weekend.

Solomon Island workers reinstated

On November 22 the Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (SINUW) reached a settlement with Earthmovers (Solomons) Limited, a Malaysian-owned logging company, ending a prolonged dispute.

In September 1997, 412 workers employed by the company went on strike after the management refused to recognise the workers' union and enter into negotiations over a new work contract.

The company responded by sacking the entire workforce and denied them any compensation. Despite a ruling by the Trades Dispute Panel, Earthmovers would not reinstate the sacked workers. The company has now agreed to reinstate the sacked workers and to give them one year's back pay. It has also agreed to recognise the union.

Financial support from Solomon Island workers allowed the strikers to purchase rice and other basic necessities to sustain themselves and their families during the long dispute.

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