

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 January 2000

Oil union calls off strike in India

Union officials have shut down a strike by 140,000 workers in 13 state-run oil firms in India. The workers walked out on January 11 because the government has repeatedly delayed negotiations on a new pay scale and other allowances that were due for adjustment a year ago.

The workers decided to take action in defiance of court decisions outlawing the strike and cleared the way for the imposition of fines on the union and the imprisonment of strikers.

Even though the government has given no commitment to implement a revised wage package, a spokesman for the Oil Sector Officers Association representing the workers said: "We have called off the strike in view of the oil minister's assurances".

The strike was closed down just as it began to affect oil supplies. Production had come to a standstill at seven refineries, oil platforms had ceased functioning and crude oil production at an offshore rig near Bombay had also stopped.

Daily workers to launch a campaign in India's Karnataka state

Members of the Karnataka State Government Daily Wage Employees' Federation plan to launch a campaign over coming months to protest against their working conditions and other injustices. Union president K. S. Sharma warned that daily wage workers around the southern Indian state of Karnataka would lay siege to the houses of their respective legislators on January 26 in the opening phase of the campaign. "If the government will not respond to our demands we have no option left but to organise a demonstration and gherao (strike) during the assembly session," he said.

Subway workers in South Korea go on strike

Technicians employed on the subway in the industrial city of Pusan engaged in rolling work stoppages on

Monday after management refused to meet a series of demands, including the reinstatement of fired workers. Scores of subway workers in Seoul and Pusan were sacked last year during strikes against mass layoffs. The workers were abandoned by their unions, who called off all industrial action and agreed to the job losses.

Earlier this month, the Subway Workers Union executive reached a no-strike agreement with the Seoul Subway Corp to allow the destruction of 1,621 jobs by the end of 2002 and substantial changes in work practices. The agreement, yet to be voted on by union members, will be a benchmark to be imposed throughout the country's transport systems.

Millions of jobs to be destroyed in China

As many as 12 million workers in state-owned enterprises in China will lose their jobs this year as the government presses ahead with privatisation and closures according to a statement issued by the Minister of Labour and Social Security, Zhang Zuoji.

The job destruction is leading to a rapid rise in class tensions across China. Jobless workers live on about 100 yuan (\$US12) a month, paid by their former companies, but many managers are failing to make the payments. A number of demonstrations have taken place over unpaid benefits.

Over the past months there have also been growing reports of demonstrations by retirees whose company pensions are not being paid. Even though the government claims that 98 percent of workers who retired last year had been paid their full pensions, it is common knowledge that many state firms had siphoned off employees' pension funds to address cash-flow problems or use it for stock market speculation.

BHP steel workers strike over individual contracts

Over 5,000 workers employed at BHP's Port Kembla steelworks in New South Wales went on strike for 24

hours on Wednesday over attempts by the company to introduce individual work contracts at its iron ore mines in the Pilbara in Western Australia.

The strike went ahead despite an Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) order to call the action off. BHP succeeded in having the IRC order granted by claiming the strike would cost it \$3 million in lost earnings and jeopardise its market share. The IRC ruling will remain in place for the next three months and also covers a stoppage planned at the company's Sydney Steel Mills.

The company's human resources manager, Rob Crawford, said that the strikes by the steel division would not stop the company from pressing ahead with its plans for the Pilbara.

Another 100 workers at the Pilbara mines reportedly signed individual contracts in December, after the company increased its bonus offer for those who signed up before the end of the year from \$1,000 to \$5,000. This brings the number of workers now on individual contracts to 500, about half the total workforce.

Union officials have insisted throughout the week that the company did not need to resort to individual contracts and that any changes in work practices could be achieved through collective union agreements. Over the last 15 years the unions have worked with BHP to restructure working conditions and eliminate tens of thousands of jobs in its steel mills and mines.

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Australian power workers stood down

Yallourn Energy in Victoria locked out 80 maintenance workers at its Yallourn W power station in the LaTrobe Valley on Monday after talks between the company and unions over a new work agreement and a pay increase broke down.

The privately owned company is demanding the workers accept changes to shifts and the abolition of shift penalties in exchange for a 22.5 percent wage rise over three years. Management is also seeking the increased use of outside contractors. The company also promised that there would be no forced redundancies for the next three years.

A company spokesman said the cost-cutting changes were needed to "help fund a \$500 million investment project," including the development of a new coal mine. Yallourn Energy has scheduled a hearing in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission next month

to seek to terminate the present work agreement.

Maintenance workers have condemned the offer because it will reduce their take-home pay by thousands of dollars a year and because they believe that the increased use of contractors will undermine permanent jobs. On January 2 they voted to reject the company's offer and imposed a series of work bans. Despite the lockout the power unions have not called out workers at the three other power stations in the region.

Earlier this week the body responsible for the security of power supplies in Victoria, the National Electricity Market Management Company, said that if the dispute continued into next week and power demand increased during hot weather, power shortages were likely. The power station supplies 20 percent of Victoria's energy.

In a separate dispute, workers at the Torong power station in New South Wales will meet next week to discuss the government's refusal to negotiate a new pay scheme and concerns over privatisation.

Nurses to strike over pay and staff shortages in Fiji

Nurses in Fiji warned this week that they would go ahead with an indefinite strike if the government did not resolve the problem of staff shortages and meet their demands for a wage increase.

The nurses have already imposed a series of work bans over delays in negotiations for a new work agreement. They claim that poor pay and working conditions have caused an exodus of nurses, severely increasing workloads. The government has refused to discuss the nurses' demands and warned that their industrial action is illegal.

The Fiji Teachers Association said this week that teachers would take industrial action in support of the nurses if they go on strike. A spokesman said teachers strongly believed that the nurses had a "legitimate complaint" and warned that the "government should not take the threat of a strike by nurses lightly". Teachers are seeking pay increases of up to 10 percent and have threatened to walk out at the end of the month if the government does not make an acceptable offer.



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