

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 January 2000

Japanese workers march against Nissan restructuring

Over 5,000 workers marched to the Nissan headquarters in Tokyo on Tuesday in protest at the company's plan to restructure its operations and eliminate 21,000 jobs or about 14 percent of its workforce over the next three years. The company intends to close three assembly and two engine factories. Nissan announced the plan last October, just six months after forming an alliance with French carmaker Renault.

The march was organised by the National Confederation of Trade Unions (NCTU), which is affiliated to the Japanese Communist Party. It was led by about 20 Nissan workers from the Murayama assembly plant near Tokyo, which is scheduled for closure in March 2001 at the cost of 3,100 jobs.

The march was dominated by nationalist denunciations of the restructuring as the work of foreigners. The main banner called for the removal of Carlos Ghosn, Nissan's chief operating officer brought over from Renault last year to carry through the restructuring. The same anti-French chauvinism was expressed by Yori Korayashi, NCTU leader, who told the rally: "Nissan was born in Japan and therefore Nissan must not become subordinate to Renault".

The Nissan-only group of unions, representing the bulk of Nissan's employees, boycotted the rally. The union group supports the restructuring plans and is working with the company to downsize the workforce through natural attrition, early retirement schemes and by pushing workers to accept part-time and casual employment.

Indonesian garment workers protest

Around 1,000 female workers from the PT Surya Indah Garmino garment factory in Semarang held a demonstration in front of the Central Java provincial legislative council on Thursday to demand better pay and working conditions, including a transportation allowance and the provision of hygienic drinking water in the factory. The workers also demanded that the company pay their social security insurance and allow them to join the labour union of their choice.

A spokesman said: "We want freedom to affiliate with any trade union. There are now many labour unions not just the SPSI". The SPSI is the All-Indonesia Labor Union Federation, the state-run labour organisation established under the Suharto dictatorship.

Council workers work to rule in Hong Kong

Over 100 council workers employed by the Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department began a work-to-rule campaign this week after they were given three days notice of changes in their duties, including new tasks such as cleaning and painting.

Up to 700 council workers were made redundant last year when the government scrapped the municipal councils and departments. The increased workloads and changes to work practices are a direct outcome of the downsizing. A spokesman for the workers said: "The

work to rule will continue until the employees' concerns are heard".

Pakistani teachers protest

Teachers in the northern Pakistan city of Rawalpindi will hold protests and demonstrations this week to voice their concerns over school closures and alleged corruption in the Education Department.

The Punjab Teachers Union Rawalpindi Chapter, who has called the protests, alleges that over 30 government schools in the district are threatened with closure, most of them in poor areas. The teachers have also accused the Rawalpindi Director of Secondary Education, Jamil Najam, of corruption and nepotism, and are demanding his removal.

A union spokesman said that outspoken teachers who disagree with Najam's policies are posted to teaching positions in isolated areas. "They are also having negative reports put on their personnel files," he said.

Sri Lankan co-operative workers demand job permanency

Casual workers employed by the Co-operative Wholesale Establishment (CWE) in Sri Lanka have staged several protests since they launched a campaign at the end of December to demand job permanency. CWE is a government-owned establishment that provides a consumer service and acts as a distributing agency for cooperatives. The company employs more than 3,000 casual workers who have between 10 to 15 years service.

The working conditions at CWE are poor. The casuals are paid on a daily basis, receiving only 110 rupees (\$US1.50) a day. In the festival seasons they have to work on public holidays without overtime payments or other special allowances. They are deprived of holiday leave, medical benefits, bonuses and other benefits. One worker said: "We are working like slaves".

Casual workers attached to the public service in the North and East provinces in Sri Lanka also took strike action on January 24 to demand permanent positions. The strike ended the next day, after the provincial governor agreed to make the workers permanent within three months.

Volunteer teachers launch protest campaign in northern Sri Lanka

Volunteer teachers in the Vavuniya district in northern Sri Lanka launched a campaign this month to secure permanent positions. The teachers were recruited six years ago under the previous government but are still not paid a basic salary. Instead they receive a monthly allowance of only 600 rupees (about \$US8). They do not receive the same entitlements as other government teachers, such as the provision of transportation to and from work.

One teacher said: "We do our duty under these difficulties. But the authorities are not concerned about us. Most of the volunteer teachers working in other areas on the island have already gained permanency."

Sri Lankan contract harbour workers strike

Some 200 workers employed by private contractors to work in Colombo harbour struck for three days from January 20. The workers demanded a pay increase for loading cement from ships onto waiting lorries. Before the strike they were paid 35 rupees for every metric tonne of cement loaded. The strikers succeeded in lifting the rate to 40 rupees per tonne.

Sri Lankan porters demand pay increase

Some 200 porters employed at Old Moore Street, a busy commercial center in Colombo, held work stoppages this month demanding better wages. The porters are paid 3.50 to 4.50 rupees for loading or unloading a single item. They are seeking an increase to between 5 and 7 rupees per item.

Michael Paul, a father of three who has worked as a porter for seven years, said that the workers had asked the Old Moore Street Traders Association to increase the pay rate three months ago. "The present payment is not enough because the cost of living is sky-rocketing." The Association agreed to revise the payment by January 1, but has not done so. Paul said that if the Association failed to respond in the next few days the porters would intensify their campaign.

Union calls off plantation strike in PNG

Over 2,500 members of the Amalgamated General Workers' Union (AGWU) in Papua New Guinea went on strike on January 17. The union members are among 5,000 workers employed on plantations owned by the New Britain Palm Oil Limited (NBPOL), a PNG subsidiary of a Malaysian company, Kulim (Malaysia) Berhad. The union has suspended the strike even though no progress has been made towards securing their demands.

The union approached the company in January 1999 about pay rates and safety issues following the death of a worker in a tractor accident in September 1998. The company refused to talk to union delegates and embarked on a campaign of verbal abuse and threatening behavior. When the union approached the police and asked them to investigate these matters, including the death of the worker, the company sued the union and its national general secretary, Andrew Kandakasi, for defamation.

In the meantime the union submitted a log of claims for wage increases, better housing, annual leave and maternity leave, and requested that negotiations for a collective agreement begin. As a condition of settlement the union included the withdrawal of the court action. Last July, after negotiations failed to produce any progress, workers overwhelmingly voted in a union ballot to strike.

The union repeatedly delayed the date of the strike "to give the company a chance to respond positively" before it finally called the action on January 17.

PNG nurses to vote on industrial action

More than 4,300 members of the Papua New Guinea Nurses Association (PNGNA) will vote in a secret ballot this week on nationwide industrial action.

The nurses are demanding that the terms of their work agreement be reviewed. The union has lodged a claim for improved pay and working conditions, including increases in shift loading, over-time payment, uniform allowance and hardship allowance.

The nurses registered the dispute with the Industrial Registrar's office last December following a breakdown in negotiations and continued delaying tactics by the government.

Hospital managements are preparing to employ strikebreakers if the industrial action goes ahead. The Angau Memorial Hospital in Lae, Papua New Guinea has called on all unemployed nurses in the area to

register with the hospital so they can be quickly recruited.

The dispute is taking place amidst a funding crisis of the Papua New Guinean public health system. Hospitals such as Angau have already announced staff layoffs, claiming they do not have enough funds to pay wages.

Boram General Hospital is threatening to lay off casual employees and cut services if the government fails to pay last year's fourth quarter funding allocation by the end of this week. Only emergency services in the children, surgical, labour and medical wards would remain open.

Glass workers locked out in Australia

Workers at ACL, a glass mould manufacturer in Victoria, Australia, have been picketing the plant for five weeks since being locked out on December 20, 1999. The workers refused to accept a new enterprise work agreement, which would involve the introduction of additional duties with no extra pay, and the casualisation of the workforce.

The company has refused to release the workers' holiday pay and the government has deemed them to be on strike and denied them unemployment benefits. No attempt has been made by unions representing the workers to widen the dispute or organise any industrial action in support.

Victorian building workers campaign for shorter hours and pay

A number of construction unions in Victoria this week directed their members to stop work on every second Monday in support of a 36-hour week or nine-day fortnight, and for pay increases. The action comes before the start of an official launch of a statewide building industry campaign due to begin next month.

The move has sparked threats of retaliation from a coalition of construction employers, including legal action and lockouts of building workers on some of the state's major sites.

Despite union claims of a unified campaign, officials are striking separate deals with major building companies. Two weeks ago Boulderstone Hornibrook, head contractor on the Docklands' Colonial Stadium project, agreed to a 36-hour week and a 24 percent pay increase spread over three years.

The dispute follows predictions that the Victorian construction industry will experience a severe decline this year and that construction spending will drop by 35 percent by 2002.



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