

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 March 2000

Indonesian hotel workers continue occupation

Hundreds of employees are continuing their week-long occupation of the Melia Bali Hotel over management mistreatment of staff. Putu Widiana, a spokesman for the 680 workers, told journalists: "They [the managers] often impose sanctions on us, or arbitrarily make new policies that are discouraging to the workers."

The workers are demanding that the hotel's general manager, Daniel Lozano, and three other senior executives be dismissed. They have refused to negotiate with the local management and the hotel chain was forced to fly in three top directors from its holding company PT Suryalaya Anindita in Jakarta last Thursday in an attempt to resolve the dispute.

The directors, however, have claimed that they had no power to carry out dismissals or "interfere in management affairs" because the Melia Bali is under the control of Sol Melia Spain, a hotel management service provider.

Taxi drivers protest in China

Up to 1,000 taxi drivers staged two days of protests last week in the city of Dachuna, Sichuan province, against taxes on their operations. The drivers blockaded roads and disrupted traffic in the centre of the city. On the second day, police broke up the protest and detained about 10 drivers.

The provincial government has begun enforcing a tax of 8,000 yuan (\$US970) per year. A drivers' annual income amounts to barely 15,000 yuan (\$US1,800). The tax had been waived in the past but the government now claims it needs revenue for highway repairs.

Indian bank employees plan to fight privatisation

The All-India Committee of the Bank Employees Federation of India (BEFI) met last weekend in Madras and voted to launch a series of actions to oppose the government's plan to privatise state-owned banks. Union members across India will hold a rally in Delhi this week to begin the campaign.

The government has announced its intention to reduce

state ownership in public sector banks to 33 percent and to sell shares to large multi-national companies. Presently, state banks have over 7,500 "bad loans" amounting to 350 billion rupees. The government intends to establish a financial restructuring authority to oversee cost cutting, including the slashing of thousands of jobs.

Indian college teachers begin pay campaign

Teachers from pre-university colleges in Mangalore, a coastal city in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, began a campaign last week for improved conditions. The teachers are demanding a pay increase, the recruitment of librarians and physical education teachers needed in all colleges and the withdrawal of the present promotion system in favour of one that provides for more rapid advancement.

As part of the campaign the teachers picketed in front of the Deputy Commissioner's office in Mangalore on March 6. The protest was organised by the South Kanara District Committee of Pre-University Lecturers and Teachers' Association.

Sri Lankan tire workers demand pay increase

About 200 workers at the Ratnayake Tire Industries in the suburb of Boralasgamuwa, Colombo, are conducting a protest campaign for a 2,000 rupees a month (\$US14) pay rise. Some of workers have worked for the company for 13 years, but are only paid \$40-45 per month. The workers are picketing in front of the factory during their lunch hour and putting up posters outlining their grievances.

This week the workers' union warned it would withdraw its support if the workers attempted to broaden the dispute or sought support from other organisations. The workers are covered by the All Ceylon Commercial and Industrial Workers Union, affiliated to the Lanka Sama Samaja Party.

Chinese contract workers go on hunger strike in Fiji

Chinese women workers, contracted to work in the Eastern Apparel garment factory in Suva, Fiji, are on a

hunger strike over the company's refusal to pay four months wages owing to them. The 55 women were bought to Fiji in 1998 to work for Easter Apparel and its sister factories, Livia Garments and Silver Star Apparel, on a three-year contract.

The women walked out of the plant on February 29 after the company's managing director manhandled a worker who confronted him over the unpaid wages. In retaliation the company locked them in their billets in a Suva suburb and denied them food for two days.

When the management sent food on March 2, some of the women decided to go on a hunger strike to draw public attention to their plight. The protest has forced the Fiji government to order an investigation into the workers' complaints and send a government doctor to examine the health of the hunger strikers.

This is not the first time contract Chinese workers in the garment industry in Fiji have been forced to take action over non-payment of wages and atrocious working conditions. A year ago 30 workers demonstrated at the Chinese embassy in Suva and in 1998 some 40 workers in a garment factory in Lautoka also staged a hunger strike.

New Zealand meat workers continue strike

Workers on strike at Progressive Meats in Hastings, New Zealand, rejected a revised proposal for a new work contract this week and resumed picketing outside the plant. The 160 workers began their industrial action almost two weeks ago after negotiations over the introduction of a new skills-based performance rate of pay broke down.

The scheme would cut pay by up to \$50 a week. Under the management proposal workers would not be paid if work stops for any reason, such as a mechanical breakdown or tea breaks. A union spokesman said that the company's new offer still retained the same proposals and was "unacceptable" to the workers.

In the course of the dispute the plant management warned it would sack the entire workforce and hire new labour but later withdrew the threat. This week a company spokesman threatened that "jobs could be lost if the strike continues."

Teachers union threatens further legal action in PNG

On February 15, the Papua New Guinea Teachers Association (PNGTA) won a court case against the national government, the Teaching Services Commission (TSC) and the Eastern Highlands provincial government, forcing the payment of 200,000 kina (\$US65,000) owed for leave entitlements to the province's teachers. Teachers

in the province were involved in a number of work stoppages last year to press the government for payment.

The PNGTA is threatening to take broader legal action against the government, the TSC and other provincial governments if they fail to pay biannual leave fares owing since 1994. Biannual travelling allowances are paid to teachers in far-flung districts so they can return home during leave. More than 5,000 teachers are still owed money.

Australian teachers to vote on work-bans

Teachers in Queensland will vote next week on whether to impose a range of work bans as part of their campaign for a new Enterprise Bargaining work agreement. One of their central demands is for a reduction in class sizes. According to the teachers' union, over 1,300 primary and 700 secondary school classes in the state are oversized and 50,000 students are affected by overcrowding. The work-ban, if approved, will mean teachers at certain schools will not enroll new students in overcrowded classes from early next month.

A spokesman for the Queensland Teachers Union said that the union had raised class sizes, staffing and a range of other issues at negotiations "but the government refuses to even acknowledge these in the EB process."

Other actions being considered include bans on statewide testing (Years 3, 5 and 7), new syllabus implementation, lodging school annual reports, Core Skills Test supervision, conducting opinion surveys and certain professional development activities.

The union said that teachers might also consider limiting attendance at meetings outside rostered duty times to one hour a week and ensure that all staff have a continuous 45-minute lunch break.



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