

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 December 2000

## Indonesian workers demonstrate for a wage increase

Over 30,000 industrial workers demonstrated on Tuesday in the city of Surabaya, East Java, to demand the provincial government increase the minimum wage level. The workers came from a number of major factories, including the household equipment producer PT Maspion and shoemakers PT Fortune and PT Cahaya Cemerlang.

The workers were protesting against a recently-passed ordinance setting a minimum wage in Surabaya lower than in other cities and towns in the province. The demonstration started early in the morning, with workers gathering outside their factories before marching to the governor's office.

Once at the office, workers overturned vehicles belonging to provincial government officials. Two companies of riot police armed with water cannon were used to disperse the workers and at least one was detained. Tuesday's demonstration followed four days of smaller protests and work stoppages.

Following negotiation between unions and the Deputy Governor Imam Supardi later in the week, the provincial government agreed to "provisionally" raise the minimum monthly wage for Surabaya workers from 328,300 to 330,700 rupiah.

## Cigarette workers strike over conditions

More than 20,000 workers employed by Gudang Garam, Indonesia's largest cigarette producer, went on strike for 24 hours on Monday demanding they be given a daily ration of cigarettes and be provided with work uniforms. The strike halted production in three work units at the company's plant in Kediri in East Java. The workforce in the units is mainly engaged in hand rolling cigarettes and produce up to 100 million daily.

The workers returned to work after the management agreed to supply uniforms. A management spokesman claimed the company could not provide free cigarettes because the practice ran contrary to government regulations.

## Textile workers block rail line in central China

About 1,000 striking workers from the state-owned Chuzhou Textile Factory in China's central Anhui province blocked the main Beijing-Shanghai rail line on Tuesday, holding up rail traffic for some eight hours.

The workers were protesting over plans to sell the plant and retrench half of the 3,600 strong workforce. The loss-making

factory is being sold to the Wanxiang Group, a private shareholding company from neighboring Jiangyin City, in the eastern Jiangsu province. The workers also fear that they stand to lose a substantial amount of back pay and retirement entitlements.

The workers held up banners and shouted slogans accusing the factory management of widespread corruption. Over 200 armed police were sent to suppress the demonstration and a number of key strike leaders were arrested.

## Chinese electronic workers strike for one day

Workers at the Japanese-funded Uniden Electronics factory in Shenzhen held a one-day strike on November 25, in opposition to the company's practice of paying below the legal minimum wage. The workers were also protesting against the beating of workers by a Japanese supervisor.

Shenzhen's labour regulations stipulate a minimum monthly wage of 419 yuan (\$US50) and an hourly wage rate of 3.6 yuan for overtime. The workers say that they are often not paid this rate and that their take-home pay is reduced because the employer deducts rent and food. After these deductions, they earn less than 230 yuan a month.

The protest was called off after the company agreed to increase wages and transfer the offending supervisor. Most workers in Shenzhen are migrants from other regions and the practice of food and rent deductions is widespread.

## Philippines government department locks out 1,700 workers

The Philippines Department of Health (DoH) locked 1,700 employees out of their offices this week in an attempt to force them to accept redeployment to other departments. The Department wants to relocate the workers to various hospitals and research institutes located throughout Metro Manila.

While the Department claims that the redeployment is part of a plan to streamline services, in reality it is a move to cut costs. The DoH budget has not been increased since 1992, causing a severe shortage of funds for health services.

## Sri Lankan plantation workers demand factory reopened

Some 600 workers at the Glaso Estate in the Nuwara-Eliya district of Sri Lanka went on strike on November 23 demanding the immediate reopening of the estate's tea factory. The plant was closed 18 months ago. When workers objected to the closure, management told them that machinery had to be

repaired and the factory would be reopened when the work was completed.

The workers picketed the factory gate last week when the management tried to remove the machinery from the premises.

### **Indian teachers march on parliament**

Staff at a number of Indian universities have taken industrial action this week over working conditions and increased student fees.

Over 1,300 teachers from the Delhi University Teachers' Association (DUTA) marched on parliament on Tuesday, continuing their campaign to force the government to honour a promise made over a year ago to introduce an improved promotion system. The government withdrew from the agreement describing it as an "error of judgement".

The Association of Mangalore University College Teachers has written to the state government to protest against the increase of student fees for degree courses. Teachers and students boycotted classes this week to demand the increase be withdrawn and have threatened an indefinite strike and exam boycott over the issue.

Teachers from Lucknow University placed bans on academic and administrative work on Thursday and held a demonstration on campus to demand part-time teachers be made permanent. The campus executive council approved the measure in February but administration authorities have refused to implement it. The teachers are also protesting against wage discrepancies and are calling for an improved promotion system.

### **Cadbury Schweppes fails to break strike in Melbourne**

Cadbury Schweppes ran into trouble this week when the company attempted to use casual workers to maintain production during an industrial dispute at its soft drink factory in Melbourne. About 130 workers went on strike on November 20, after negotiations for a new work agreement broke down.

Safety inspectors from Victorian WorkCover, the state government's workplace health and safety agency, closed down operations in the plant's syrup room. The company was issued with a prohibition notice for breaches of the health and safety laws because it was using "unqualified workers" to perform work that involved the handling of toxic chemicals used to clean the syrup room area after production.

A union spokesperson James Weissman said that the strike would continue because the management had not addressed the workers' concerns about job security, the use of casuals and the outsourcing of work.

### **Victorian council workers in pay dispute**

Around 300 workers employed by the Ballarat City Council in Victoria have endorsed bans on indoor and outdoor work if negotiations between the management and the Australian Service Union fail to resolve a wages dispute.

The workers stopped work on Tuesday for 30 minutes to discuss a campaign for a new enterprise agreement, including a 5 percent wage increase. The council management retaliated by

docking the workers' wages for the time of the stoppage. Another stopwork meeting is planned for next week to consider the outcome of negotiations.

### **ABC workers discuss job cuts**

Workers at the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) held a series of national stop-work meetings on November 29 to discuss budget cuts that will lead to the loss of 200 jobs. The cuts will affect all areas of the public broadcaster, including television production, radio, technology and distribution, news and current affairs. The ABC managing director, Jonathan Shier, acknowledged that the budget cuts would result in staff reductions.

It is expected that 100 jobs will be axed in television production alone, with 60 of these going in New South Wales. There is also speculation that major current affairs programs such as *Four Corners*, *The 7.30 Report* and *Foreign Correspondent* could be axed because the budget for the news and current affairs division was cut by \$8 million. Between 20 to 30 jobs are expected to go from ABC radio.

### **Supervisors assault garment workers in American Samoa**

Asian workers at the Daewoosa Samoa garment factory clashed with management staff this week when they came to the assistance of a worker being dragged from the factory by Samoan supervisors.

Twelve of the workers were injured and one lost her eye when the supervisors, backed by a group of Samoan employees, attacked the Asian workers. In a calculated move to divide Asian and Samoan workers in the factory, the owner recently gave approval for the Samoan supervisors to discipline workers as they see fit if they do not obey their orders.

The owner, Kil Soo Lee, was fined recently by the US Department of Labor and ordered to pay \$US250,000 in back wages to 200 workers, most of them Vietnamese.



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