

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 December 2000

Indian court demands action against postal strike

On December 13, the Delhi High Court declared a national strike by postal workers illegal, opening the way for the Indian government to invoke emergency legislation. This would allow for tougher measures to be taken against the strikers and their unions.

About 600,000 postal workers, members of the Federation of National Postal Workers Organisation and the National Federation of Postal Employees, began an indefinite strike on December 4. Their demands include a wage increase, the filling of all vacant posts and full benefits and pensions for 300,00 part-time employees.

The Delhi Court stated that if the workers did not return to work by December 15, "it will be open to the government to take whatever action it deems fit to end the strike, including invoking the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA)". However, the government is reluctant to invoke the ESMA fearing the dispute could widen.

In an attempt to break the strike, the central government began using the army home guards and National Cadet Corps to move mail this week. The strike has closed 146,000 post offices across India but the government has managed to keep 7,000 centres open by using army and scab labour.

Indian power workers call national strike against privatisation

Indian power workers staged partial strike action on December 12 against government legislation due to be tabled next year that will clear the way for the privatisation of state electricity boards. The plan to privatise electricity boards is in line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund and overseas investors for the sale of major sections of India's state-owned industry.

Like other public sector unions, the power unions have not mounted any serious struggle to block privatisation or to defend the tens of thousands of jobs. The All India Power Federation (AIPF) general secretary, B. S. Meel, described this week's strike action as an "awareness campaign" and assured the government it was not a "move to disrupt power supplies".

Earlier this month 100 delegates from 40 unions, representing thousands of workers in government-owned industries facing privatisation, including the manufacturing, chemical, textiles, airline, airports and hotel industries, held a meeting to discuss the issue. The meeting failed to agree on any campaign and merely requested that the "disinvestment" minister, Arun Shourie, allow more union and employee participation.

Nepalese government suspends hotel workers' strike

The Nepalese government, headed by Prime Minister G.P. Koirala, imposed a suspension order on a hotel workers' strike scheduled for December 11. Faced with the impending action, hotel owners closed their premises, locking out guests as well as workers, to pressure the government into making the strike illegal.

The union representing the workers accepted the government suspension order and agreed to forgo strike action for two months. Union leaders also agreed to the establishment of a government-appointed committee to "consider the workers' demands". The hotel workers began a campaign of industrial action earlier this month, calling for a 10 percent service payment to boost their low wages.

Indonesian furniture workers demand better holiday pay

Over 1,300 workers employed by furniture export company PT Wintrad Jaya in East Jakarta, Indonesia, staged a series of protests last week to demand an improved holiday entitlement scheme.

The workers are seeking a holiday allowance based on years of service with employees with between one and three years service receiving the equivalent of one month's salary, and those with over three years receiving the equivalent of two months wages. The workers are paid an average of \$US36 per month.

The dispute began on December 6 when 1,000 workers began to protest in front of the factory. The following day, the workers pelted the company office with stones after the management distributed leaflets threatening a lockout and stating that it would only pay a one month salary holiday allowance. A company car was also set on fire in the car park.

The workers continued to picket the offices on December 8 despite the presence of dozens of armed police and security guards.

Taiwanese workers demand shorter hours

Hundreds of workers from across Taiwan marched through the capital Taipei last weekend demanding a reduction in their working hours to 84 hours per fortnight. The working week in Taiwan is still 48 hours.

The protesters held up placards and banners that read, "Human rights of workers must not be abused" and "Unemployed workers support 84 hours a fortnight".

The workers were angered by the decision of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government, headed by President Chen Shui-bian, to retable a proposal to reduce the working week from 48 hours a week to 44.

This overturned a parliamentary recommendation that the maximum working hours be 84 hours per fortnight. The 84-hour

motion was put by the Kuomintang or Nationalist Party, which enforced appalling conditions on Taiwanese workers for some 50 years.

During elections earlier this year, the DPP promised the working week would be reduced to 40 hours. Under big business pressure, however, the government has repudiated its pledge, claiming that a major reduction will lead to labour shortages and demands for improved wages and working conditions.

A cabinet spokesman stated that the government's decision on the working week was driven by the need to "protect investment in the island's industry".

Pilot action in Hong Kong forces flight cancellations at Cathay Pacific

A threat of strike action by 1,000 pilots at Cathay Pacific has forced the airline to call off plans for extra flights over the lunar New Year, costing the company millions of dollars in lost fares. Talks between Cathay Pacific and the Hong Kong Aircrew Officers Association over rostering broke down on December 13.

Pilots claim that the company is stalling on the implementation of conditions agreed in June last year. In 1999 the pilots accepted pay cuts in a negotiated trade-off for stock options, better rostering arrangements and an agreement that overtime would be calculated monthly rather than annually.

The Hong Kong Aircrew Officers Association accused Cathay Pacific of "continued reversals and delays" in honouring the agreement.

Buttercup strike ends in Canberra

Drivers employed by the Goodman and Fielder-owned Buttercup Bakeries in Fyshwick, Canberra, ended a six-day strike this week after the Industrial Relations Commission directed the company and the union to reopen negotiations on outsourcing and a wage increase.

The workforce went on strike on December 8 over plans by the management to outsource 20 drivers' jobs. The company said that the displaced drivers could set up as contractors and make a bid to do carting for the bakery.

The drivers are demanding the insertion of a no-contractor clause in a new work agreement, a five percent wage increase and an improved redundancy package.

A striking worker was injured when four Buttercup trucks, driven by contractors and loaded with fresh bread, sped through the picket line outside the Fyshwick factory. The worker was struck in the leg and right shoulder by a truck's front bumper bar. Police, who were present at the picket line, did nothing to apprehend the offending truck driver.

Despite the incident, many of the contract drivers cooperated with the strikers and refused to cross the picket line even though their action was in breach of a court order and exposed them to legal action.

The striking workers also staged a demonstration in one of Canberra's plazas where bread had been delivered. The workers distributed leaflets pointing out that the Buttercup products on sale had been transported across a union picket line and urged shoppers not to buy them.

The drivers' wives sent an open letter to Mrs. Holmes A'Court, one of Australia's richest women and a senior Goodman Fielder

director, condemning the company's actions as an insult. "This has been our husbands' reward for up to 20 years of delivering bread for Goodman Fielder. This is what we are told after years of hearing them get up in the middle of the night to turn up at work by 2am (or some other ungodly hour) five or six days a week".

Email workers demonstrate over plant closure in Melbourne

About 200 people held a demonstration on December 10 outside the closed Email Chef oven-making factory in Brunswick, Melbourne, to protest the loss of 520 jobs.

Email announced the closure in October along with plans to relocate production to Adelaide to take advantage of business concessions and tax breaks being offered by the South Australian state government.

The demonstration of sacked workers, residents and local councilors, endorsed a proposal to blockade the Brunswick plant and stop any attempt to shift equipment and machinery from the factory to Adelaide. Some of the workers had worked for Email Chef for over 30 years.

The Australian Workers Union (AWU) is attempting to attract a buyer for the factory by promising to police higher productivity and deliver increased profits. One of the potential buyers is Swedish company Electrolux.

Speaking at the rally, AWU spokesman Bill Shorten said: "We make this offer to Electrolux, you license the making of ovens to a Victorian operation and we will deliver you a 15 percent profit within 24 months". Shorten boasted that the AWU had ensured that there had not been a strike at Email Chef in 30 years.

PNG court workers stone government building

On December 14, a thousand court officials employed in the Eastern Highlands Province (EHP) of Papua New Guinea gathered in front of the EHP administration building in Goroka demanding the provincial government pay outstanding allowances. In some cases the allowances have been owed to the workers for five years.

Other government workers and teachers joined the demonstration, swelling numbers to over 3,000. Tensions flared when the provincial administrator Charles Goto refused to come out of the building. The workers began throwing rocks and bricks at the building after they were informed that the court coordinator had spent six weeks in Port Moresby trying to secure money to pay them but had failed. The protest ended after the police were called in to disperse the rally.



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