

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 December 2000

Union leaders close down postal strike in India

India's postal unions called off a prolonged national strike by 600,000 postal workers on December 18 without achieving any of the strikers' demands.

The union backdown followed a December 13 ruling by the Delhi High Court that the strike was illegal. The court called on the government to use any "warranted means" to stop the strike in the "public interest". In an attempt to justify the unions' capitulation, the general secretary of Bharathiya Postal Union (BPU) said: "We cannot sustain the strike in the light of the court order and there has to be a compromise".

The strike was launched on December 5 to force the government to honour an agreement reached in May to grant postal workers the same wage increase as that given to other public sector workers. Strikers were also demanding a wage rise and the introduction of pension scheme for 3.2 million part-time rural postal workers.

From the outset, the government attempted to use the army to shift mail. Following the High Court order, the government invoked the Essential Services Maintenance Act and the Industrial Dispute Act, allowing a range of punitive measures to be taken against striking workers, including dismissal.

Indian bank workers strike against privatisation

On December 21 workers in India's public sector banks went on strike against the government's privatisation plans. The strike action, which paralysed the country's banking system, was the second in a month called by the United Forum of Bank Unions, an umbrella organisation of nine unions. Last week the government submitted a bill to parliament seeking approval to reduce its shares in 19 state-run banks to 33 per cent. Bank employees fear it will lead to substantial job losses.

Indian sanitary workers strike over pay increase

Some 410 sanitary workers at Pampa and Shannidhanam in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu went on strike on December 21, demanding a daily wage increase from 80 rupees to 125 rupees. According to the workers, who are recruited as temporaries during the annual mandalam-

makaravilakku pilgrimage season, daily working time has been increased from 8 to 10 hours without any pay increase.

Chinese garment workers picket closed factory

Hundreds workers from the state-owned Nanjing Down Products garment factory in China have been picketing outside the plant since they were laid off and the plant closed down in October.

The workers and their supporters have plastered the factory walls with posters denouncing the closure and demanding compensation. One poster reads: "We need to eat. We are out of work with no money". Another declares "State assets have disappeared".

The laid off workers have been paid only a small remittance but the payment will soon end. One of the workers outside the plant said: "I've been getting 230 yuan (\$US28) month. Work for a lifetime and this is what you get."

The workers claim that the factory, which employed 1,000 workers to produce garments and materials for export, has been sold to another state enterprise for 40 million yuan (\$US4.8 million).

An official with the Nanjing Municipal Economics and Trade Commission confirmed that the factory had been sold off but declined to name the buyer or the price. It is common practice throughout China for local authorities and management of state-owned industries to collude with private investors to sell off enterprises cheaply and make personal gains from the sale.

Cambodian garment workers strike

Over 1,000 mainly female workers from the Hong Kong-owned Flying Dragon Garment factory launched an indefinite strike on Monday and marched through Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh to protest against harsh working conditions and late salary payments.

The workers accuse management of forcing them to work a 15-hour day—from 6am to 9pm—and denying them time off on national holidays. Hen Rany, a 23-year-old worker, said: "At least five workers faint every day."

Such conditions are rife throughout the garment industry in Cambodia, which has rapidly expanded over the past five

years and now employs thousands of workers. Last month, accusations emerged that child labour was common in many of the country's garment sweatshops.

Civil servants protest privatisation in Hong Kong

Around 500 workers from the government survey and mapping office in Hong Kong held a protest march and rally on Monday to oppose plans to transform the department into an independent corporation.

Although the department will remain government-owned it will be run on commercial lines. The government is demanding the new corporation achieve a total operating surplus of \$HK583 million (\$US74.7 million) over the next decade.

One of the protest organisers said the changes would lead to a loss of jobs and benefits and that sensitive mapping data would be leaked to private corporations. Presently the department employs 1,200 workers and is Hong Kong's central authority for mapping, land surveys and setting real estate boundaries.

Over the past two years the government has carried out sweeping changes to Hong Kong's civil service including ending the "jobs-for-life" system of employment and privatising many government services. Last year the Housing Department was corporatised and a number of its services were outsourced to private enterprise.

Communication workers strike against layoffs in South Korea

More than 47,000 workers employed at Korea Telecom in South Korea went on strike this week after negotiations between the union and management over layoffs broke down. The company refused a union plea to delay implementing job cuts.

The company is seeking to shed 3,000 jobs before the end of this year, on top of the 12,000 layoffs it carried out in 1997-98. The government currently owns 51 percent of Telcom but is moving to sell its shares to private investors.

After calling the strike, the union leadership quickly returned to the negotiating table even though the company gave no indications it would change its stance. A union spokesman said: "We leave the door to dialogue open. The company should make concessions."

Sri Lankan rubber workers demonstrate to defend jobs

Workers at Associated Rubber Industries (ARI) in Kalutara, about 15 km south of Colombo, demonstrated on December 14 to demand job security. Management informed the 200 workers last month that it is going to close the factory. The company, which mainly produces tires and tubes for bicycles, claims the plant has become unprofitable because of market competition, higher production costs and the effects of the devaluation of Sri Lankan rupee.

The company has offered the workforce a voluntary

retirement scheme. Many have been at the factory for more than 15 years, but the maximum compensation payout under the scheme is only the equivalent of 12 months pay. The majority of workers voted against accepting the deal.

Ambulance paramedics impose bans in Victoria

Ambulance paramedics across Victoria imposed a series of work bans on December 20, including refusing to record the identity of patients or to bill them for being transported to hospitals. They also took all their allocated breaks, forcing the service to bring in extra crews.

The bans are part of an ongoing campaign for a new work agreement and increased staffing. The ambulance service is chronically understaffed, forcing paramedics to work 10-hour day shifts and 14-hour night shifts.

A union spokesman said: "It's routine in the city that they (ambulance workers) do not get a meal break and that is affecting their health and safety." Discussions on a new work agreement are continuing in the Industrial Relations Commission.

BHP miners strike over work agreement

On December 18, the 350 workers employed at BHP Coal's Appin, Cordeaux and Tower mines in New South Wales voted to reject the latest company offer for a new workplace agreement and went on strike for 48 hours.

The workers are demanding a 15 percent wage increase over two years. BHP is offering a 30 percent rise over three years in exchange for dramatic changes in working conditions, including the unlimited use of contract labour, the phasing out seniority rights and the introduction of 12-hour shifts.

BHP management claims that the trade-offs are in line with those already agreed to by the union at other mines. On October 25, the mining union signed a benchmark agreement covering workers at Rio Tinto's two open-cut mines in the NSW Hunter Valley allowing sweeping changes to work practices and abolishing the seniority system.



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