

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 January 2001

Indonesian hotel strikers face legal action

The management of the five-star Shangri-La Hotel in Central Jakarta has called for legal action against striking workers who occupied the hotel lobby for three days last week. General manager Peter Carmichael told the media on January 1 that the workers had “violated the laws by occupying the hotel and taking four expatriate managers hostage”.

The threat of legal action was followed by further intimidation. On January 3 management sent out more than 200 dismissal notices in an attempt to break the strike.

The hotel's 1,400 employees struck on December 22 and occupied the lobby in support of 11 demands. These included the establishment of a pension fund, an increased allowance for working during holidays and festivals and an equal distribution of money from hotel service charges. On Christmas Day police stormed the building and evicted the workers.

Following the police raid, the IUF, the international union body covering hotel, hospitality, food and catering workers, promised to organise an “international campaign” to back the Shangri-La strikers. But the organisation has done little outside of criticising the hotel management and making empty appeals to government officials.

This week the IUF's Asia-Pacific regional president Greg Sword pleaded with Indonesia's president Abdurrahman Wahid to intervene in the dispute on behalf of the workers. At the end of last year, Wahid called for the repeal of legislation that guaranteed minimal severance pay for laid off workers, declaring the law would deter domestic and overseas investors because it impeded them from freely eliminating jobs.

Hotel workers in Hong Kong protest layoff

Catering department workers picketed the New Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Hong Kong on January 2 to protest against their sacking on December 22. Forty-four workers were laid off after they called in the newly formed Catering and Hotel Industries Employees General Union to press management to pay outstanding wages and holiday entitlements.

The union claimed that any employee who worked more

than 18 hours a week over a period of three months at the hotel was entitled to annual leave, statutory holidays and other benefits under the country's Employment Ordinance. Many workers had been at the hotel for 2-4 years and were working up to 100 hours a week.

Malaysian textile workers demand union rights

More than 1,500 workers employed at Ramatex Textile Industries in Malaysia's southern province of Johor picketed outside the plant on January 5 to demand the reinstatement of 70 workers suspended for union activity.

At the end of December the company issued a suspension notice to the workers who are members of the local branch of the Textile and Garment Industry Employees Union (TGIEU). It demanded that the remaining workforce resign from the TGIEU and form an “in-house union”.

The management's action was in defiance of a government directive last month to recognise the union as it covered 69 percent of the 1,800 employees at the plant.

Junior doctors in India strike

An indefinite strike by junior doctors at India's government-run Medical College and at the college's auxiliary hospitals in Jammu and Srinagar has entered into its second week. The strike was called by the Junior Doctors Association to protest against the government's intention to give preference for advanced training to junior doctors from privately owned medical colleges. A spokesman for the Association said that the government's actions were illegal and in violation of procedures set by the Medical Council of India.

Tile workers fight lockout in Sri Lanka

A contingent of 250 workers from Lanka Wall Tiles in Meepe, about 30km east of Colombo, demonstrated in front of the company's head office on January 1 to demand the immediate reopening of the factory and the reinstatement of seven suspended workers.

The management shut the plant, imposed a lockout of the entire workforce and suspended the seven men in December after workers launched an overtime boycott and poster campaign to push for a 14,000 rupee annual bonus. Presently, permanent workers at the plant are paid only

4,100 rupees a month and casual workers 3,250 rupees.

One worker attending the protest said: "The company's profit last year was 25,800 million rupees. Even though it was us who made this profit, the company is refusing our demand."

Cambodian shoe workers oppose compulsory overtime

Hundreds of workers from the New Star shoe factory in the coastal town of Sihanoukville, 185 kilometres southwest of Phnom Penh, went on indefinite strike this week and picketed the plant to demand an end to compulsory overtime. Large numbers of police were on hand but no clashes occurred.

The action in Sihanoukville is just one of a series of disputes over chronic working conditions and bad pay that have erupted in Cambodia's clothing and footwear industry in recent months. In December, thousands of workers from a textile factory in Phnom Penh took to the streets to fight for better pay and conditions. On average workers in the industry are paid \$US40 a month.

Nurses stage protest stoppage in Western Australia

Government-employed nurses in Western Australia staged a lunchtime protest rally outside the Royal Perth Hospital in Perth this week, as part of a campaign for a new work agreement. The nurses are demanding a 16 percent pay increase over two years, an improved nurse-to-patient ratio, limitations on the use of casual and private nursing agency staff and improved long service and study leave entitlements.

The state government has offered only a 6 percent pay rise over two years, conditional on the nurses agreeing to "productivity improvements that can produce cash savings to the industry and a demonstrated commitment to workplace reform".

A recent survey by the Australian Nurses Association (ANF) of 2,300 registered nurses throughout Western Australia revealed widespread dissatisfaction with working conditions. Of those surveyed, 99 percent said they were unhappy with the amount of government funding for the public hospital system and 90 percent said that nurse staffing levels were not adequate.

According to ANF figures there are approximately 21,000 nurses registered with the WA Nurses Board, but only 15,000 are currently working because of a lack of government funding. Many of the state's hospitals are operating under capacity and have been forced to close wards and clinics.

Hundreds of nurses have left the public health system and signed up as casuals with private nursing agencies. Although casuals are paid a higher hourly rate they forgo a range of entitlements, including paid sick leave and paid annual holidays.

Nurses fight for back pay in Melbourne

Nurses at Kenilworth home for the aged in Melbourne walked off the job on January 4 after the management failed to pay wages owing to them for over four weeks. According to a union representative, the nurses are owed \$50,000 between them. Other nurses, who recently resigned, have still not received holiday pay and other entitlements.

Staff at another Melbourne nursing home operated by the same proprietor are also owed thousands of dollars in back pay. Kenilworth's owners claim they are unable to pay workers' wages and entitlements after losing government funding when the homes failed to meet accreditation standards.

Australian coal miner in critical condition

Justin Rowles, the 29-year-old miner who was badly injured in the December 20 roof collapse at the Bellambi West Colliery on the New South Wales south coast, remains in a critical condition and is on a life support system in a Sydney hospital.

Rowles was injured and his co-worker 42-year old Greg Aspinall was killed, when a large slab of stone fell on top of them as they were erecting roof supports six kilometres underground.

While the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) Southern District president Howard Fischer admitted the union had concerns about the roof bolting system employed at the mine, he said he does not believe it was the cause of the accident.

Safety in the Australian coal industry has deteriorated over the past decade due to the restructuring, staff cuts and speed-up overseen by the unions. According to figures from the NSW Coal Board three miners perished in the State's coal mines from June 1999 to June 2000.



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