

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

27 January 2001

Malaysian plantation workers demand decent housing

About 250 workers from 13 plantations in the Malaysian state of Selangor protested outside state government offices on January 19 over inadequate accommodation or being left homeless by the government and property developers.

Waving placards such as “We want terrace houses” and “Enough of policy, make laws”, the workers demanded a meeting with Mentri Besar (Selangor Chief Minister) and Dr Mohd Khir Toyo. Officials from several non-government organisations accompanied them.

After several hours protesting in the sweltering heat Khir's public relations received the workers' seven-point memorandum and gave his word that he would arrange a meeting in early February, after the Chinese New Year holidays.

But estate workers have waited more than 10 years for developers and employers to provide them with decent housing. In some cases, workers were evicted from their homes to make way for new property development.

The government, which claims to support their right to alternative housing, has refused to enact legislation to force developers and employers to honour their commitments.

The workers' memorandum calls on developers to provide proper accommodation, not tiny “matchbox-style” houses and flats. They want affordable houses, less than 25,000 ringgit (\$US6,578), rather than the 40,000 ringgit price imposed by developers. The workers are also demanding proper compensation for having worked for many years for the plantations.

Workers threaten to occupy Shangri-La hotel

Hundreds of striking hotel workers rallied outside the Shangri-La Hotel in central Jakarta last Thursday. A

spokesman said that at least 1,200 workers and their families were prepared to occupy the hotel if management refused to reinstate 420 workers sacked during the strike that began on December 22.

The strikers are demanding a wage increase from 280,000 rupiah a month (\$US29.47) to the official minimal level of 384,000 rupiah and the establishment of a pension fund. They are also seeking equal distribution of all monies collected by the hotel for service charges, which are currently allocated according to seniority and rank.

Last week Shangri-La rejected an Indonesian Manpower Ministry suggestion that management withdraws the dismissals and begins government-mediated negotiations with the union. The union claims that management has begun recruiting casual workers to break the strike.

Adidas workers rally over pay and conditions

Workers employed by PT Prima Inreksa Industri, an Adidas contractor in Indonesia, have re-launched their campaign for improved wages and working conditions. On January 5 over 6,000 workers rallied outside the Legislative Council in Jakarta during negotiations between company representatives, the union and the council.

Last year 9,300 workers employed at the plant began a campaign of industrial action, including a 24-hour strike, for a minimum monthly salary of 426,250 rupiah (\$US44.80), increased maternal leave allowance, the provision of transport to and from work, and meal allowances. The dispute erupted again because the company reneged on an agreement last September to meet these demands.

Sri Lankan port workers wage sick note campaign

Some 900 port workers in Colombo launched a three-day sick-note campaign last Saturday demanding a 51 percent increase in night allowances. Authorities

refused to negotiate and used naval personnel to keep the port operating.

At the same time, the government-controlled media waged a vicious campaign alleging the action was an anti-government conspiracy by the opposition United National Party. The workers belonging to the Colombo port mooring crew are members of the UNP-controlled National Employees Union. Most unions in Sri Lanka are connected to a political party.

Indian railway workers protest over poor working conditions

Railway workers demonstrated outside the Central Railway general manager's office in Bombay last week over poor working conditions. According to a spokesperson, a number of vacancies have not been filled for years resulting in serious setbacks to the operation, maintenance and safety of railway traffic. At the same time staff have been deprived of their normal promotions.

Australian steelworkers end strike

Over 800 maintenance workers from BHP's Port Kembla steelworks on the NSW south coast returned to work on Wednesday ending a two-day strike against the company's decision to contract out plant maintenance. Under the plan 500 workers would be retrenched and forced to find employment with whatever company wins the maintenance contract.

Over 100 protective services employees from BHP's security and ambulance section also joined the strike in protest over the company's aim to outsource some of their work threatening up to 50 jobs.

Maintenance workers struck for 24 hours last June over the proposals but ended industrial action after the steel union agreed to a six-month "contracting-out review process," telling workers that the company could be persuaded to change its mind.

Management claims that the contracting out of "non-strategic maintenance work" will save the company 15-25 percent on annual maintenance costs and is essential to make the plant "viable". Similar arguments have been used for the last two decades to slash tens of thousands of jobs throughout BHP's steel operations.

The Port Kembla dispute is due to be heard on Monday in the State Industrial Commission in Sydney. Workplace delegates will meet at Port Kembla on Tuesday to discuss the outcome.

Oil workers protest lockout

Workers from the Qenos refinery at Altona in Victoria have maintained a picket line since October 14 in protest over a company lockout. Workers were locked out after campaigning against threatened staff cuts and safety issues. Over 100 people rallied outside the plant on January 22 to mark the 100th day of the lockout. The company is continuing the lockout because workers refuse to sign a new work agreement that would allow a staff cut of 10 percent, undermining safety in the hazardous workplace. Qenos is a joint venture between Orica and Exxon.

Cement workers in New Zealand strike over job cuts

Maintenance fitters employed at the Golden Bay Cement plant in Portland, New Zealand struck on January 23 in protests over job cuts. Management wants to halve the maintenance workforce from 12 to six and outsource most of the work currently done by in-house fitters.

Although the strikers have established up a picket line outside the plant's main entrance, the engineering union is allowing traffic to pass through it. The workers have refused a management offer to take the dispute to mediation and are demanding that the company immediately withdraw its job shedding plan.



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