

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 February 2001

Hotel workers protest in Bali

Thousands of workers from 40 hotels in Bali, Indonesia's popular holiday resort, protested on Wednesday in support of 600 employees from the Kartika Plaza Beach Hotel who have been strike since December 18.

The protest began early in the morning when workers gathered at the offices of Bali's governor chanting, "Stop defending big corporate interests! Start paying attention to our needs". More than 1,000 police were deployed to stop the demonstration from entering the administration building.

Speakers at the rally demanded that the Bali provincial administration act to force the owners of the Kartika Plaza to negotiate a settlement. A spokesman said: "We give the administration one week to settle the matter. If the hotel owners refuse we will return with larger crowds."

Bali's deputy governor Alit Putra has agreed to mediate a meeting on February 5 between the hotel's employees and the owners. The strike began when the hotel refused to discuss workers' demands for improved wages, claiming that the operation was suffering financial losses. The union alleges that the management is planning to sack several workers for initiating the strike.

Estate workers demand guaranteed housing in Malaysia

About 500 estate workers protested on January 31 in Kuala Lumpur outside of the Golden Hope Plantation, one of Malaysia's largest plantation companies, demanding a guaranteed housing scheme promised by the owners. At present, companies evict workers when they reach the age of 55 or when land is sold or developed.

Among the demonstrators were elderly men and women carrying placards and banners reading, "Golden

Hope, implement the housing scheme you promised us", "It's been 12 years" and "Make good your promises". The protestors included workers from estates in Negri Sembilan, Selangor, Perak and Kedah who have lost their housing and not been compensated.

A spokesman said: "We want a concrete reply from the management or else we will do this over and over again. The workers are losing their patience. It's shameful that one of the largest plantation companies in this country cannot solve its workers' problems." Another speaker told the gathering that "workers at the Braemar estate in Kajang were promised housing but never got any". On January 19 estate workers from Selangor protested over similar grievances.

Sri Lankan port workers protest against compulsory leave

Some 700 workers employed by the Sri Lanka Port Authority demonstrated on January 29 to demand the immediate reinstatement of 270 of their colleagues in the mooring division.

The mooring workers were put on compulsory leave after they began a three-day sick note campaign and then imposed an overtime boycott. The workers are demanding an increase in their night-shift allowance.

The management refused to negotiate with the National Employees Union that had organised the campaign and used naval personnel in an attempt to break the campaign. As a result of the protest the authorities have agreed to reinstate the suspended workers by February 5 without taking any disciplinary action.

Sweet factory workers on strike in Sri Lanka

Workers employed in two plants owned by Dainty, a sweet manufacturer in Colombo, have been on strike since January 15 demanding a monthly wage increase of 1,500 rupees (\$US15), the introduction of an attendance allowance and the provision of medical and

transport facilities.

The management, backed by local politicians from the ruling People Alliance, is using hired thugs and the police to intimidate the strikers. Recently, when the workers formed a factory union branch the management responded by sacking seven workers, including the branch secretary and his deputy.

Working conditions and wages at the factory are extremely poor. Workers have to work 12 hours a day and do shift work. The average monthly wage of a permanent worker is only 2,800 rupees (\$US28). Unskilled casual workers are paid only 105 rupees a day and cannot apply for permanency until unless they have worked at the plant for at least 18 months.

Airline workers stop work in Sydney

Maintenance workers from Qantas, one of Australia's major airlines, attended stop work meetings on Thursday and Friday to discuss the company's threats to relocate its Sydney-based Boeing 767 maintenance operations unless 20 percent in cost cuts are agreed to.

Qantas management confirmed this week that it has already checked out possible sites in Melbourne and Brisbane, as well as in Auckland, New Zealand. Relocation overseas would result in the loss of over 300 jobs.

A union spokesman said that by cost cutting "the company will compromise on maintenance and in turn could compromise safety". In the past, however, the unions have agreed to and enforced a number of deals with the airlines slashing jobs and working conditions, including in maintenance.

Building workers strike over safety

Over 800 building workers went on strike on January 31 at the \$450 million Visyboard construction site at Tumut in New South Wales. The workers were protesting over unsafe working conditions following a spate of accidents, including the electrocution of a worker this week. A preliminary inspection carried out by Construction Forestry Mining Energy Union safety officers this week revealed over 30 serious safety problems with electrical systems on the site.

Bike-hire company victimises union members in Western Australia

Six workers employed by Rottnest Island Bike Hire were sacked on January 26 after they attended a union stop-work meeting. Rottnest Island is a popular tourist island not far from Perth, in Western Australia.

The workers have been in a dispute with the company for months, protesting the non-payment of penalty rates for working on weekends and public holidays and cuts to other working conditions. Some 20 casual workers are employed by the company to maintain a fleet of 2,000 hire bicycles.

Tristan Demmler, a senior bike mechanic employed by the company for over three years, said he received a letter from the management threatening him with the sack or a lockout if he attended the union meeting.

Australian steelworkers to stop work

Workers at BHP's Port Kembla steelworks, south of Sydney, will attend a stopwork meeting on Monday following the breakdown of negotiations over management plans to contract out plant maintenance, security and ambulance services. The move threatens up to 900 jobs.

Over 4,000 workers are expected to attend the meeting, which will vote on a union recommendation to strike for 24 hours. Last week union officials ended a strike by maintenance workers claiming that the union was on the verge of an agreement with the company.

BHP management has sent individual letters to all employees in the Steel Flat Products division urging them to vote against the proposed strike.

Government vets to strike in New Zealand

Vets employed by the New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture are planning to begin industrial action from Saturday in support of their claim for a 14 percent pay increase. The vets must be present at abattoirs during the slaughter of animals and the impending bans and stoppages will seriously disrupt meat production at the height of the export season.

The decision to take industrial action was taken after mediated negotiations between the union and the Ministry of Agriculture broke down. The vets called off a strike in January after the government agreed to begin talks. The Ministry has now applied to the courts for an injunction to stop the industrial action from going ahead. The case was to be heard on February 2.



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