

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 December 2001

Strikes sweep South Korea

Over 16,000 autoworkers at Hyundai Motors, South Korea's largest auto manufacturer, struck on December 5 and 6 to demand an 11 percent pay rise and consultation about the company's restructuring plans. The walkout followed a week of rolling stoppages involving 38,000 of the company's 50,000 employees.

On December 4, strikes took place at Daewoo Motors' sales division and Orion Electronics. The day before, 5,000 employees of the National Health Insurance walked out for 24 hours and 4,700 workers at Doosan Heavy Industries and Construction struck against possible layoffs. On December 2, 12,000 workers and students rallied in Seoul against the job destruction now underway in South Korea.

Next week, 40,000 workers at six state-run companies, including the railways and the gas utility, plan to strike against privatisation plans and job losses. The government has threatened to declare any action illegal and use strike-breakers to maintain services. Some 10,000 unionised taxi drivers are also preparing to strike next week to demand the introduction of a salary system.

Indonesian workers protest over minimum wage rate

Some 4,500 workers from 24 companies in the North Sumatra region struck and demonstrated outside the provincial governor's office in Medan on December 3. Police were called in when some of the workers attempted to force their way into the building.

The strike was triggered by a government decree setting the minimum wage to 464,000 rupiah (\$US45.50) per month. Workers are demanding that the minimum wage be doubled or, at least, increased to the subsistence level of 709,876 rupiah a month. The workers are also demanding a bonus of two months salary and better severance pay in lay-off cases.

A spokeswoman for the Medan Independent Workers Union, one of the labour groups involved in the strike, told the *Jakarta Post*: "If the government and the businessmen do not respond... then we will encourage all elements of the workers' unions in the province to hold a massive strike."

A similar action took place in Bandung, West Java on December 4. Over 1,000 workers, belonging to nine different unions, marched on the governor's office against the minimum wage being set at 470,500 rupiah. The administrations of both

provinces have rejected the workers' demands.

Catering workers protest sacking in Hong Kong

Eighty laid-off catering workers at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (UST) demonstrated at the campus on December 5. Their former employer, Lyson International, operated two restaurants within the university grounds. Following the rejection of its tender renewal application last month, Lyson closed down and sacked the staff.

The workers are still owed over \$HK2.6 million in unpaid wages and severance pay and are calling upon the UST to cover their entitlements from company finances it is holding. The university has refused, declaring that the money will be used to cover outstanding rental payments and water charges.

Coal miners in India strike against privatisation

Over 600,000 miners employed by the state-owned Coal India and its subsidiaries struck from December 3 to 5 against the planned privatisation of the company and the non-payment of wages. The strike affected production at mines in Jharkhand province and West Bengal, with company losses estimated at \$US20 million per day.

Workers at the state-owned Singareni Collieries also launched a three-day national strike against privatisation and wage arrears on December 3. About 40 percent of the 105,000 strong workforce walked out, nearly halving coal production.

Indian beedi workers march for better wages

More than 20,000 beedi workers from Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka marched to the Indian parliament in New Dehli on November 27. Beedi is a popular cigarette in parts of India, rolled from the leaves of the beedi plant. The workers demanded the government legislate a minimum wage of 50 rupees (\$US1) per 1,000 cigarettes rolled and equal wages for women workers.

They also called for the banning of a contract system under which beedi leaves are sold to middlemen, who then hire workers to produce the cigarettes. The employment method encourages a bitter cost-cutting competition for work by the contractors, who then pay very low wages to the workers.

BHP steel workers to strike in Australia

Over 6,000 BHP-Billiton steel workers will walk out for 24 hours on December 10. The company has refused union demands for job security guarantees and negotiations have broken down over a new wage and conditions agreement.

BHP is attempting to repudiate a “no forced redundancies” clause in any new agreement. The clause has been in place since the 1983 Steel Plan agreement between BHP, the Australian government and unions. In exchange for continuing steel production in the country and agreeing to no forced layoffs, BHP won union collaboration in eliminating 20,000 jobs through voluntary redundancy, productivity increases and dispute settling procedures to prevent strikes.

BHP now views “no forced redundancies” as a barrier to its ongoing restructuring plans. The company is preparing to outsource all maintenance work at the Wollongong steel plant to outside contractors, at the cost of over 400 jobs. Steel workers struck against this last month.

Latrobe Valley power workers walk out

Sixty-five maintenance workers at Yallourn power plant in Victoria’s Latrobe Valley walked off the job on December 6. They intend to stay on strike until December 10 against an industrial court decision upholding the refusal of their employer, Yallourn Energy, to re-negotiate a proposed workplace agreement. The workers wanted a commitment from the company that it will not replace their jobs with outside contractors. According to the company, the Electrical Trade Union is now threatening to extend the strike until December 17.

The Yallourn plant produces 20 percent of Victoria’s electricity. While the current action is unlikely to affect energy supplies, the company has threatened that if there is a protracted dispute it will shut off power to parts of the state.

Migrant workers picket hotel in inner-Sydney

Twenty room attendants at the inner-Sydney Crest Hotel, which operates an up-market Korean Ginseng Bathhouse, picketed the building on December 5 over an attempt to transfer their jobs to a contract cleaning company. Most of the workers are Korean migrants who do not read or speak English. They are paid \$12 an hour to clean up to 18 rooms per day when the industry average is around 12 rooms.

Workers feared their conditions would deteriorate further under a contractor. Within hours of the picket beginning, hotel management agreed to drop the proposal. Disputes over contracting are now brewing at other hotels, including the North Sydney Harbour View.

New Zealand health workers strike

Three thousand nurses and allied health workers employed by the Canterbury District Health Board (CDHB) struck for 48 hours on December 2 in New Zealand’s biggest health strike for more than a decade. Hundreds of workers picketed the main hospitals, while more than 2,500 nurses, hospital staff and supporters rallied and marched in central Christchurch during the strike action.

Nurses are seeking pay rises of 11 percent, while allied staff want a 6.5 percent increase. Salaried doctors, radiographers, pharmacy staff and physiotherapists are also seeking increases. The board has only offered staff an average 4 per cent rise.

Nurses will be holding stopwork meetings from December 17 to consider the next move in the five-month dispute. The union says it will put forward a range of options including further strikes, but not before Christmas. Industrial action is continuing at all hospitals, with staff refusing to transfer patients out of busy wards and maintaining bans on overtime.

New Zealand radiation therapists plan new strikes

A four-day strike by 90 radiation therapists in Auckland, Waikato and Palmerston North is set to proceed on December 14 after the collapse of contract negotiations on December 4. The therapists, who struck for 48 hours last week, rejected a new pay offer from their employing boards.

The therapists’ union wants rises of 20 to 25 per cent to help stem the flow of staff overseas, which is causing serious treatment delays for New Zealand patients. There are currently 36 full-time vacancies out of 150 positions in the country’s six cancer centres. Some patients are forced to wait for more than 20 weeks to receive radiation treatment, while others are being sent to Australia.

Some hospitals have so far offered increases of 14 to 21 per cent over two years, but this includes automatic annual increments already in the expired contract. Auckland and Palmerston North hospitals have offered increases of only 3 percent.

Fiji communications workers strike for pay increase

Striking employees of Telecom Fiji returned to work on December 3, after Fiji’s Permanent Arbitrator, John Semisi, refused to continue hearing their case while they remained on strike. The workers, members of the Fiji Post and Communications Union, are seeking an 8 percent wage increase as part of a cost of living adjustment and performance management agreement. In talks with Telecom Fiji, workers indicated they would accept a 7.5 percent adjustment but management refused.



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