Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 December 2001

Migrant workers demonstrate in Hong Kong

Up to 2,000 migrant workers in Hong Kong, employed as maids and domestic servants, demonstrated in the city's central Victoria Park on December 16 against attacks on their working conditions. Under new legislation passed by the Hong Kong government, foreign domestic workers will be banned from living away from their employers' homes and will have their pay reduced.

Thousands of young women from India, the Philippines and elsewhere in Asia work in Hong Kong. More than 60 percent are paid below the minimum wage and they are not entitled to days off or public holidays. One worker told the *South China Morning Post* she had been paid just $1,700 in two years, for working from 6.30am to 1am, seven days a week.

A spokeswoman for the workers said: "The government actions are a blatant form of racial discrimination: they attack foreign workers and ignore their fundamental right to equal treatment."

Philippines tyre workers fight for union rights

Workers at Yokohama Tyres in the Philippines picketed in front of the Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE) on December 17 against a delay in releasing the results of a certification ballot held at the factory over union recognition. The workers claim the results will show 131 votes for unionisation and 117 against.

The Yokohama Employees Union was registered with DOLE two years ago, but the management refused to recognise it and filed a petition to cancel the union's registration, forcing the workers to hold the poll.

A DOLE spokesman said the department could not release the results because the company had officially protested the vote and it was waiting on a counter-protest from the union. The workers will maintain their picket until the ballot results are released.

Hospital employees demand entitlements

About 400 nurses and ancillary staff at the Western Visayas general hospital in the Philippines struck on December 17 to demand the immediate payment of a hazard allowance and an end-of-year bonus. The hazard allowance amounts to 12 percent of workers' base salary.

The action followed a management claim that a shortage of funds was preventing it from making the payments. The claim contradicted an earlier statement that the funds were available but the Department of Health had not authorised their release. The hospital has received approval but is still refusing to pay.

Taiwan car park attendants demand five-day week

About 150 city-employed car park attendants in Taipei demonstrated outside the city hall on December 20 to demand two days off each week. The workers currently work a six-day week.

The Office of Car Parking Administration had agreed in writing to the demand in January, but claimed the agreement was provisional on the approval of the city's Bureau of Transportation, which oversees personnel policies. The bureau did not inform the union until November that it had decided only office workers within the department were entitled to a five-day week.

Following the demonstration, a City Hall spokesman said new negotiations were "most likely to take place within seven days".

Bombay teachers vote for indefinite strike

The Coordination Committee of Teachers Organisations in Bombay passed a unanimous resolution on December 12 to launch an indefinite strike from January 15. The teachers are demanding that the state government implement the recommendations of the Fifth Pay Commission, which granted them a salary rise. They are also opposing a reduction in funding to educational institutions, as well as the appointment system being used by the state government.

Indian revenue employees protest

Revenue employees in the Punjab staged a sit-in strike on December 18 over an assault by two lawyers on two of their colleagues on December 13. The two officers were attacked while inspecting the registers of deeds.

A Punjab Revenue Officers spokesman said the December 13 attack was not an isolated incident and that "revenue officers face this kind of incident frequently in their duties". As a result of the protest campaign, including the sit-in at the deputy commissioner's office in Mansa, police have charged the lawyers involved in the incident.

Power workers continue strike in Australia

Maintenance mineworkers at Yallourn Energy in Victoria's Latrobe Valley are continuing their strike against attempts by management to implement forced redundancies and increase the use of contract labour. The 65 maintenance workers voted this week extend their action for another seven days. The strike has led to the closure of equipment that conveys coal to the Yallourn station.

The company has appealed to the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) to order the workers back to work. A court hearing is scheduled in January to decide on an application by Yallourn Energy to end the official negotiating period for a new enterprise work agreement. If successful, the order will make any further industrial action illegal and leave the unions and individual

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workers open to fines and damages claims.

The company refused to withdraw its application to the IRC even after the unions offered to cease all industrial action until March.

Qantas maintenance workers protest pay freeze

Qantas maintenance staff struck on December 19 and demonstrated outside the Melbourne airport. The strike occurred after workers learnt of a company memo outlining that Qantas was deliberately seeking to escalate a dispute over wages. The airline, Australia's largest, is attempting to force its staff to accept an 18-month wage freeze. Last weekend the workers overwhelming rejected the freeze in a secret ballot.

The workers also protested against the company decision to send its Boeing 767 fleet to Singapore next year for servicing. They handed out leaflets to passengers, calling on them to support their demand for a cost-of-living pay rise of between 4 and 6 percent.

Sydney rail workers call snap strike

About 20 CityRail train controllers and signalmen at the busy Strathfield signal box in Sydney called a snap stop-work meeting on December 20 after rail inspectors demanded one employee submit to a breath test.

The stoppage affected all trains in the inner city and metropolitan areas, as well as inter-state services, and some trains were stranded between stations. Operations resumed after the workers accepted a union recommendation to return to work. However, many metropolitan area services continued to run 20 to 30 minutes late.

Freightcorp workers strike over sacking

Thirty rail maintenance workers at the state-owned Freightcorp in Lithgow, west of Sydney, voted on December 18 to begin an indefinite strike over management plans to sack three employees and its policy of only employing new workers in temporary positions.

For the past five weeks, the workers have staged walkouts, placed bans on overtime and worked-to-rule. Freightcorp is being privatised by the New South Wales Labor government, a move that has received the backing of rail unions.

Woolworths butchers strike over pay

Meat supplies to 25 Woolworths supermarkets in Tasmania were cut this week when butchers struck for 72 hours. The strike forced the company to import meat from New South Wales and other states in an attempt to overcome the shortages. The 150 workers are demanding improved pay and working conditions. A spokesman for the butchers said there would be further strike action if the company refused to negotiate an adequate settlement.

Protest closes Noumea Club Med

Some 40 members of the Union of Kanak and Exploited Workers (USTKE) picketed outside Noumea's Club Med Resort on December 14, barring all access to the hotel.

Last month, Club Med management announced that it would close by January at the latest. It cited the global slump in tourism following the September 11 attacks in the United States and revenue losses over the past two years. Known as the "Château Royal", the resort is one of two Club Meds in New Caledonia.

USTKE, one of the three unions with members at the resort, is contesting the severance pay packages offered to the 160 employees. Talks initiated late last week ended in a stalemate.

Bank strike looming in Fiji

Workers employed at the ANZ bank in Fiji stopped work for half a day on December 18 to discuss their campaign for a 6 percent increase in a work allowance known as COLA. The meeting endorsed a call for strike action. Workers at the Colonial National Bank informed the union that they would join in the ANZ staff's action and press for a similar demand.

In response, the Fiji Bank and Finance Sector Employees Union rushed into talks with the management in the hope of winning an agreement that will stop any action. The union national secretary said the last thing he wanted "was for workers to go on strike". Negotiations between the banks and the union are continuing.

New Zealand radiation therapists strike

Radiation therapists in three main centres of New Zealand began four days of industrial action on December 14. Therapists in Auckland and Palmerston North went on strike, while those in Hamilton banned overtime. The action follows a 48-hour strike last week.

The therapists are seeking a 25 percent pay increase to stem the flow of qualified personnel to better paid jobs overseas. Staff shortages are causing critical delays for cancer patients requiring treatment.

A union spokeswoman said the union wanted further negotiations with the District Health Boards. While the DHBs acknowledge that therapists should have a base salary of $40,000, they are not prepared to begin paying it until 2003.

Teachers reject pay deal

Last week, the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) reached an agreement with the Ministry of Education to end an eight-month dispute over pay and conditions. Education Minister Trevor Mallard and PPTA president Jen McCutcheon both welcomed the agreement, saying the school year would start with the prospect of a more "settled environment".

However, the agreement is still to be ratified by meetings of union members and it has already been rejected by some PPTA branches. Teachers say the deal does not address excessive workloads or the shortage of secondary teachers. Some union branches are calling for industrial action to continue up to next year's general election.

The deal offers secondary teachers the same pay rise given to primary teachers earlier this year. The offer amounts to a 2 percent increase now, with a further 1.5 percent in July, far below the claim for $2,500 increases each year for three years. Teachers will decide on the contract settlement at a round of meetings to be held in February.

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