

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 January 2002

Hong Kong maids demonstrate against wage cut

At least 4,000 migrant domestic servants demonstrated in Hong Kong on New Years Day against planned government legislation that will cut their wages by more than 14 percent. On the grounds that Hong Kong's economic downturn has caused a fall in prices, the government is proposing to reduce the minimum monthly wage of \$HK3,670 (\$US470) to between \$HK3,120 and \$HK2,876.

An estimated 230,000 foreign domestic servants, mainly women from the Philippines and Indonesia, work in Hong Kong. They are recruited into jobs by contracting companies, which charge high placement fees. Most work six days a week and up to 16 hours a day. The money they send home to their families plays such a significant role that the Labor ministers of both the Philippines and Indonesia are scheduled to visit Hong Kong to formally protest over the pay cut.

Charie Tangalin, a Filipino woman who has worked in Hong Kong for six years, told the *Washington Post*: "Our salaries still aren't enough, so how can they cut them? We wake up early, stay up late and work so hard for so little. It's unfair to lower our wages any more. If they cut our pay, it means we will have less money to send home to our families and our children."

Sit-in at Taiwan shipyard

Hundreds of workers at China Shipbuilding (CSC), the major state-owned ship builder in Taiwan, are staging a sit-in outside the company's offices in Kaohsiung over the sacking of 2,800 workers and a 35 percent pay cut. Along with numbers of other state-owned enterprises in Taiwan, CSC is heavily in debt and was ordered by the government to implement sweeping cost-cutting measures. After only 2,300 workers volunteered for early retirement, the remaining lay-offs were carried out by forced redundancy.

The current round of retrenchments and wage-cutting

is likely to be only the first. CSC management has indicated it wishes to shed over 5,000 jobs. The government has threatened workers that if they do not accept the restructuring, it will not provide the funds the company needs to guarantee their pension plan or refinance its operations.

Chinese journalist arrested for covering strike

Police in Yancheng, Jiangsu province have detained Lu Wenbin, a 20-year-old textile worker and freelance journalist for the *China Textile Daily*, since December 22. Earlier in the month she traveled to the nearby city of Dafeng to cover a strike by over 4,000 workers at the recently privatised Huainan Textile Factory. The workers struck on December 10 after the new management cut the average monthly wage from 700 yuan to just 300 (\$US36). Lu documented the strike and interviewed workers but had not submitted an article, according to her father.

Since her arrest, Lu has not been seen. According to a Hong Kong-based human rights group, her arrest was ordered by state security agents in order to prevent her reporting on the strike.

Bank workers strike in India

Over 600,000 bank workers struck across India on January 4 against the proposed forced transfer of 30 administrative staff by the Standard Chartered Bank. The financial system was virtually closed down, with more than 70 percent of bank employees taking part in the strike. Management staff refused to perform any clerical functions in a show of solidarity.

Workers believe that if Standard Chartered is able to compel staff to relocate it will establish a precedent and be duplicated throughout the industry. Talks between bank unions and the bank failed to reach a settlement on January 2.

Indian teachers continue strike

School teachers employed by the Municipal

Corporation of Delhi (MCD) are continuing a strike they began on December 10 last year. They are demanding the reintroduction of a teaching allowance, which was abolished in 1996, and an increase in annual leave from 10 days to 30. The Joint Committee of Delhi Primary Teachers has threatened to initiate a hunger strike if their demands are not met. MCD officials are maintaining that the strike is illegal and over 600 teachers have been suspended.

Confrontation looms on Australian waterfront

Seventeen union crewmembers aboard the *Yarra*, an Australian-registered container ship owned by the Canadian Shipping Line (CSL), are facing company allegations that they sabotaged the ship by turning on a fire hose and flooding 700 tons of cement mix with water. The ship, now weighed down with solidified cement, is due to dock in Adelaide on January 6 and CSL has requested a police investigation.

Any attempt to prosecute the crew has the potential to trigger industrial action on the waterfront. CSL and the maritime unions are engaged in a dispute over its plans to sell the *Yarra* to an Asian subsidiary and register it in The Bahamas. The company intends to replace the Australian crew with a lower cost Ukrainian workforce. Legal action by the unions blocked CSL from proceeding with its agenda until after a Federal Court hearing in April. The accusations of sabotage are being viewed among workers as a crude frame-up attempt, aimed at creating conditions to sack the crew and bypass the court.

Fiji electricity workers strike over overtime payments

Fourteen workers employed by the state-owned Fiji Electricity Authority (FEA) walked off the job on December 28. They claimed they were not being paid overtime as stipulated in their contracts. The workers later returned to work after the FEA management agreed to enter discussions with their union, the Fiji Electricity Authority Allied Workers Union.



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