

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 January 2002

Hong Kong maids protest pay cuts

More than 1,000 domestic maids staged another protest march in Hong Kong last weekend over plans by the government to cut their pay by 14 percent. Thousands of supporters joined the maids as they marched through downtown Hong Kong. Most of the maids are from the Philippines or other parts of Southeast Asia and already endure long working hours for low pay.

The Hong Kong Employers of Overseas Domestic Helpers Association has asked the government to lower the maids' minimum wage from \$HK3,670 (\$US470) to \$HK3,150. The Education and Manpower Bureau will make a decision on February 1.

Bragas-Regalado, a spokeswoman for the Asian Migrants coordinating body, said: "This problem will not go away. Each year the government will be reviewing the minimum allowable wage and we will always be under threat. More and more workers are becoming aware of the issue."

Police attack Chinese workers' demonstration

According to reports published this week by *Agence France-Presse*, Chinese police were mobilised last November against a major demonstration of steelworkers in the northeastern industrial city of Liaoyang.

Hundreds of the 4,000 employees at the Liaoyang City Ferro-Alloy Factory took to the streets on November 25 when they heard the plant was to be closed down permanently. More than 500 armed police blocked the path of the demonstration and ordered them to disperse.

Workers opposed the closure and rejected management claims that the company was making a loss. They also accused management and local authorities of plundering its assets. The only compensation offered was a severance package of one

month's pay for every year worked. Most workers earned only 400 yuan (\$US48) a month and have little prospect of finding other jobs. Unemployment in northeast China is already over 25 percent due to the mass shutdown of state-owned industries.

Toyota workers strike in India

Toyota Kirloskar Motors (TKM) workers in India began indefinite strike action on January 10 after the company dismissed leading union members at the plant and called police to attack a factory gate meeting. TKM workers have demanded the company reinstate the union officials, pay bonuses to all workers for producing more than 50,000 vehicles up to December 2001, establish definite workload and production targets, and desist from forcing employees to do overtime.

Indian university teachers protest over policy decisions

Bangalore University teachers in southern India held a sit-down protest outside the regional joint director's office from January 15 to 19, in protest against changes in their working conditions. The university has permanently frozen vacant positions in privately-funded colleges and abolished exam remuneration for degree courses. According to the Bangalore University Teachers Association, these policy decisions will affect the quality of education and degree colleges in particular.

Indonesian fertilizer workers strike for wage rise

Over 150 casual workers at PT Pupuk Sriwijaya, the state-owned fertiliser company in the Indonesian port of Cirebon, struck for seven hours on January 17 demanding a 100 percent wage rise. The workers demanded management double the day loading fee to 1,500 rupiah (15 US cents) per ton and 2,500 rupiah per ton at night.

"Our daily income is far below the minimum wage,

that is why we held the demonstration. This is an old slavery practise that must be phased out of the modern age,” Cardi, a 30 year-old worker told a local newspaper.

Each worker carries between three and four tons of fertiliser a shift but earns less than 4,000 rupiah per day. The strike action forced PT Pupuk Sriwijaya management to agreed to increase the daily rate to 1,500 rupiah and the night rate to 2,000. The casual workers, however, are not provided with health or pension insurance or any of the basic allowances paid to fulltime employees.

Australian airline workers reject pay deal

Qantas maintenance workers in Melbourne and Sydney overwhelmingly rejected a pay deal negotiated by the unions and recommended by Australian Metal Workers Union national secretary Doug Cameron. The deal would have imposed a “wages pause” and introduced productivity-based wage rises into the maintenance division for the first time.

On January 15, 350 maintenance workers in Melbourne overwhelmingly voted down the union-management agreement. The next day two-thirds of the 614 workers at a Sydney mass meeting followed suit. Cameron was booed after he told the Sydney meeting that the deal was “the best offer they could extract from Qantas”. One worker told the media: “We don’t agree with him [Cameron], we want to keep on fighting.”

Under the deal, maintenance workers would receive a 2 percent pay increase from July 1 and then two six-monthly rises of 2 percent until July 2003. The pay increases are tied to strict productivity targets. The deal also includes a 3 percent productivity bonus after 18-months but only if the company matches last year’s profit of \$597 million. Maintenance workers in Melbourne have already begun re-imposing work bans and Sydney maintenance crews are expected to follow suit.

Building workers strike over use of asbestos

Building workers in Melbourne, Victoria, struck on January 14 for 24 hours over the use of asbestos at their construction site. The workers, who had just resumed work after the Christmas break, discovered asbestos gaskets, previously banned for use on building sites, had been installed by contractors. The chemical company Orica operates the site.

Asbestos products, which have been responsible for

the agonising death of thousands of workers, was banned from building sites more than 20 years ago by Victorian trade unions.

New Zealand health workers step up action

Nurses and other health workers employed by the Canterbury District Health Board in Christchurch will take industrial action over eight days next month for a new work agreement and pay increase.

Health workers at all 16 Canterbury district hospitals endorsed the strike action after rejecting the board’s latest offer of a four percent wage increase. The action is also in protest against the authority’s plan to close the Hillmorton Hospital, which currently cares for some 250 mentally ill patients, and the sacking of 40 nurses at the hospital. Staff have imposed bans on transfers and overtime.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact