

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 January 2002

## Demonstrations across Indonesia

Workers and students have demonstrated across Indonesia during the last 10 days in protest over the impact of a 22 percent price increase in fuel which has pushed up the cost of food and other basic commodities.

Hundreds of fishermen and their families protested outside the Mataram district legislature in West Nusa Tenggara on January 22, demanding increased government assistance. The protest was directed against a number of local officials whom the fishermen accuse of misappropriating relief sent to the province to assist the poor. While the local government promised to provide between 15 to 20 kilograms of rice to each fishing family, only five kilograms has been distributed.

In the West Java town of Indramayu, public transport minivan drivers went on strike and held protests. Student groups supported the strike. The drivers said increased gasoline and diesel fuel prices had pushed up operational costs and that passengers could not pay more than the established bus fares. Indramayu administration officials hired contract drivers and deployed buses and trucks in an attempt to break the strike.

Drivers also struck in the South Sulawesi capital of Makassar where rice has increased from 62,500 rupiah (\$US6) a sack to 70,000 rupiah. Cooking oil has also risen from 3,500 rupiah a litre to 4,000 rupiah.

## Indonesian textile workers strike for pay increase

Thousands of workers employed by textile producer PT Great River International in Cibinong, Bogor, Indonesia struck on January 22, demanding that the company immediately increase their monthly pay from 412,000 rupiah to 576,000 rupiah (\$US55).

Management claims the workers had agreed to a four-stage implementation of the pay rise over the next 12 months. Workers allege that management promised to pay the increase in full in January but reneged on the commitment.

## Company frame-up defeated in Indonesia

On January 21, the Tangerang District Court in Indonesia found Sofyan Bedot and Surjito, two union representatives at footwear manufacturer PT Dwi Naga Sakti Abadi, innocent of "anti-social behaviour".

The two men were charged after a heated exchange with management over workers' demand for an increase in their meal allowance from 1,250 rupiah to 2,500 rupiah.

The charges are part of an ongoing campaign to force workers out of the union. The company has sacked 35 union members, claiming they were "inefficient" and instructed security guards to

"convince" workers to quit the union.

Earlier this month a union activist was sentenced to two-and-a-half month's jail after he was alleged to have stolen a pair of sandals. The sandals were production rejects and had been thrown into a scrap bin. Workers have held a number of protests to demand the charges be dropped.

## Retirees protest against low pensions in China

Some 2,000 retired workers demonstrated on January 21 in Luoyang, Henan province, to protest against low pensions. The retirees chanted slogans denouncing government officials who had recently awarded themselves a pay increase.

Retired workers' pensions average only 400 yuan (\$US48) per month. While adult children previously assisted in supporting their retired parents, mass job losses caused by the closure or restructuring of state-owned industries in the region have pushed many pensioners and their families into extreme poverty.

## Telecom workers launch protest campaign in India

Workers at Indian Telecom Services (ITS) have decided to launch a nationwide protest campaign on January 28 after the government abandoned a pledge to ensure job security at the telecommunication company. Government officials made the pledge following major strike action in 2000 against the corporatisation of ITS. Workers now fear that thousands of jobs will be shed over the next five years.

## Indian day-labourers ransack corporation office

Hundreds of day-labourers employed by the Ahamedabad Municipal Corporation in the western Indian state of Gujarat, ransacked the corporation's office on January 21, after they were refused work.

Many of the temporary workers were laid-off without notice and have not been paid outstanding wages. Nearly 1,000 workers will lose their jobs because the municipal authorities have not allocated funds for new infrastructure development projects in their 2002-2003 budget.

## Pakistan teachers demonstrate against sacking

Female primary teachers in Hyderabad demonstrated on January 21 against job losses. Education officials have suspended some 814 female teachers since 1998, claiming that the teachers used forged documents to achieve job appointments in 1995. The dismissed teachers, who were not paid their salaries from October 1997 to September 1998, have strenuously denied the charges.

## Australian airline catering workers reject pay freeze deal

Transport Workers Union (TWU) members employed in the catering section at Qantas, Australia's main airline, voted this

week to reject a wage freeze deal. According to media reports the union had made a “strong recommendation” to the workers to accept the freeze.

The rejection comes a few days after the airline’s maintenance workers voted down a union negotiating committee recommendation for productivity-based wage increases. Maintenance workers have reimposed work bans on overtime and higher duties and are conducting a work to rule.

These votes are a blow to the airline unions and to Qantas management, who have worked closely since last October to impose the wage freeze. Qantas has signed agreements with five unions and has in-principle agreements with four others, including the TWU, affecting some 4,500 workers.

#### **Miners refuse to cross picket**

Miners at BHP Billiton’s Tower and Appin collieries, near Wollongong, refused to cross a picket line established by 10 locked-out electrical maintenance workers this week. The electricians were locked out following a breakdown in negotiations between the Electrical Trades Union and their employer, Energy Development, for improved wages and conditions. The company is refusing to hold further discussions with the union.

#### **BHP steel workers strike**

About 2,000 workers at BHP Billiton’s Port Kembla steel plant walked off the job on January 23 to attend a stop work meeting on a new work agreement. The company attempted unsuccessfully to obtain an order from the NSW Industrial Relations Commission to stop the strike action.

Negotiations over the agreement are stalled over the company’s insistence that workers accept “forced redundancies”. This would mean that the company only has to give workers 13 weeks notice of dismissal. BHP Billiton currently retains displaced workers until they are relocated within the corporation or until they have found suitable work with another company.

Concerns were also raised at the mass meeting about BHP Billiton’s intention to outsource its superannuation plan, a move that steel workers believe might jeopardise their interests. The meeting voted to resume work the same day. The dispute is set down for a hearing before the Industrial Relations Commission in early February.

#### **Engineering workers launch industrial action**

About 400 workers at Walkers, a heavy engineering company in Maryborough, Queensland, voted this week to take industrial action as part of a campaign for a wage increase.

While management and unions reached an agreement on January 23 over measures to protect employees’ accrued entitlements in the case of company bankruptcy, workers rejected the company’s pay offer. Immediately following the vote, workers imposed work bans, including a complete ban on overtime and on working rostered days off (RDOs).

#### **Hotel housekeeping staff walk off the job**

About 60 housekeeping staff at the Gazebo Hotel in Sydney’s Kings Cross struck for 24 hours on January 24 over the management’s refusal to provide severance pay for long-term employees. The hotel workers are demanding one week’s pay for each year of service. Police were called to remove the workers when they occupied the hotel foyer. The 23-year-old hotel closes

next week and will be converted into plush apartments.

Management has refused to provide any severance pay because the workers are employed as casuals, even though they have worked for the hotel on a daily basis for between 15 to 20 years. The casuals are mainly immigrants from Greece, the Philippines, Latin America and the Ukraine.

On current rates of pay, the redundancy payout would be no more than \$20,000 per employee. A spokeswoman for the housekeeping staff said: “For millionaire yachtie, Syd Fischer, who owns the Gazebo Hotel, this is pocket money.”

#### **New Zealand nurses extend strike**

Over 2,000 New Zealand nurses employed by the Canterbury District Health Board (CDHB) have rejected a 6 percent pay offer and issued notice increasing a foreshadowed 7-day strike by a further 8 days. The strike is due to begin on January 30.

The resolution to extend the strike was passed at a mass meeting held on January 23. Nurses and allied health workers have been campaigning for seven months for a pay rise of up to 10 percent and improvements in leave provisions.

The Labour government’s Minister of Health, Annette King, denounced the workers, saying the pay offer was “fair” and told nurses they should “look at what has been put to them”.

On January 22, unions settled a contract with the CDHB covering a separate group of 1,400 health workers after strike action threatened to close Christchurch’s Hillmorton psychiatric hospital. The settlement included an immediate 3 percent pay rise, with a further 1 percent increase in July. Workers want a 6.5 percent rise.

#### **Construction worker crushed in Auckland**

Workers walked off the job and Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) representatives suspended construction at an Auckland building site this week after a building worker was crushed to death and another injured when a concrete retaining wall collapsed. Sub-contractors were excavating the city site in preparation for the construction of a 19-storey apartment complex.

OSH’s Auckland manager, John Forrest, said the department was working to ensure the ground at the site was stable and “workers would not return to the job until this happens”. Site employees are being interviewed to determine the cause of the collapse.

Work-related deaths in Auckland are on the increase with 12 fatalities in the past six months, compared to three last year. Three workers have been killed in accidents in the city during the last 10 days. Besides the construction site death this week, a textile worker was killed when he fell into an industrial knitting machine and a 29-year-old mother of three was killed while cleaning a meat-crushing machine.



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