

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 February 2002

Labour groups protest expulsion of Indonesian workers from Malaysia

Labor activists and non-governmental organisations protested in front of the Malaysian Embassy in South Jakarta on January 29 to denounce the Malaysian government's plan to expel tens of thousands of registered Indonesian workers from the country and stop any further recruitment. There are currently around 900,000 registered Indonesian workers in the country and the government intends to deport as many as 450,000. The Jakarta rally called on all Indonesian workers in Malaysia to hold a three-day mass strike.

The Malaysian authorities unveiled the deportation plan following violent clashes between Indonesian workers and police on January 17. Fifteen Indonesian textile workers were arrested and four have been sentenced to 30 months jail for causing damage to state-owned vehicles.

Drivers and labourers block port in Indonesia

Dozens of container truck drivers and labourers blocked the entrance to the Tanjung Priok port on January 29 over rising food prices. They also demanded that the provincial minimum wage be set at 591,600 rupiah (\$US57.50). The laborers, members of the Indonesian Port Transportation Labor Union, rallied at 4am, while drivers used their trucks to block the port entrance.

Indonesian bank workers protest against privatisation

Several hundred employees of Bank Central Asia (BCA) demonstrated outside the Indonesian parliament on February 7 against government plans to sell 51 percent of the company. Potential buyers include the British Standard Chartered Bank and the US-based Farallon Management Capital.

BCA went bankrupt during the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis and was taken over by the government. Billions of dollars in state funds were injected to restore its liquidity. The objective of the sale is to recover some of the bailout cost. Workers fear that mass layoffs and restructuring will follow any takeover by a major transnational financial institution.

Police crack down on striking Indian doctors

On February 4 police attacked striking resident doctors at the Nizams Institute of Medical Sciences in the western state of Gujarat. Five doctors were seriously injured and hospitalised.

The doctors have been on strike for three weeks to demand the recognition of 17 medical courses. Police accused them of trying to forcibly enter the hospital superintendent's office and throwing stones at a police vehicle. The doctors denied the charges. Four medical associations have condemned the attack and threatened to hold protest strikes if the police are not prosecuted.

Calcutta Jute mill workers demonstrate

Thousand of workers at the National Jute Manufacturing Corporation in Calcutta demonstrated against the company's planned privatisation on January 28. Workers also submitted a seven-point charter of demands including the removal of inefficient management and the immediate payment of outstanding wages.

Kerala government employees on strike

Government employees in the south Indian state of Kerala launched an indefinite strike on February 5. The strikers are demanding the payment of salaries on time and the restoration of benefits removed as part of austerity measures. The action has closed public offices and schools.

The Kerala Chief Minister, A.K. Antony, has threatened to arrest and prosecute workers and declared it unlikely that they will be paid until March due to the state's financial crisis.

Sri Lankan cable workers strike

Workers at Alucop Cables in Kaduwela, near the Sri Lankan capital Colombo, launched an indefinite strike on February 1 to demand the reinstatement of 17 suspended colleagues. After the company ceased providing transport services, workers formed a trade union branch. The company refused to recognise it and stood down the 17 in an attempt to break the unionisation effort. The workers have threatened to launch a hunger strike if the management does not meet their demands.

Victorian railway workers strike over job cuts

Hundreds of rail workers employed by the public transport company, Connex, took strike action in Melbourne on February 7 against plans to shed up to 71 customer service staff, including 48 forced redundancies from four major stations. All suburban rail services in the city's eastern and northern suburbs stopped from 12-4pm as delegates from the Rail, Tram and Bus Union met to discuss further industrial action. A spokesperson for Connex declared it was reducing staff numbers due to falling revenues.

Workers have threatened to take further industrial action, including strikes during peak hours, if the job-cutting goes ahead.

Auto parts workers strike in Melbourne

Workers at Suspension Components, a factory in Melbourne, took strike action for four days this week in support of a 10 percent wage claim. The company, formerly Henderson Springs, which produces auto stabiliser bars and other components, has only offered a five percent wage rise to its 86 employees. The dispute threatened to stop production lines at four car companies in Victoria and South Australia.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union organised a return to work on February 4, without revealing details of the settlement. AMWU state secretary John Camillo said with the car industry returning to full production in the New Year “the last thing anyone wanted was a stoppage”.

Brisbane bus drivers' strike

One thousand Brisbane council bus drivers called a snap strike in the early hours of February 6. The workers were furious that the Council sacked 64-year-old Graham McKean, a driver for 19 years, just eight months before he was scheduled to retire.

McKean had been on workers compensation for 18 months after he injured his shoulder at work in July 2000. He has had two operations, been medically assessed as unable to drive and was employed as a customer relations officer at the Garden City depot. On February 21 the council gave him an ultimatum of resigning or being sacked.

McKean told the press: “I don't often get emotional but I was devastated when I got the termination letter. I've never had that done to me in my whole life. Retirement with dignity is all I want and I think I'm entitled to it.”

On February 8, the council agreed to reinstate McKean on the proviso that he resign and be paid 60 percent of his salary until he reaches retirement age.

Brisbane Lord Mayor Jim Soorley rejected union claims that it had forced a backdown. “We have established the principle that after six months [on workers compensation] we have a right to terminate. It is in Queensland law, we have now established it as a principle, and the union has agreed with that,” Soorley told the local media.

There are now calls in the Queensland parliament for stricter laws against public transport workers calling snap strikes.

Hospital workers rally in Cairns

Some 250 doctors and their supporters rallied outside Cairns Base Hospital on February 4 in protest against overcrowding, staffing problems and inadequate resources and funding.

Physician Robert Bird told the rally: “In an advanced country like Australia sick people should expect to have a hospital bed and appropriate care. Without appropriate additional funding, the people of far north Queensland will not get the hospital they were promised.”

Patients are moved several times a day or kept in recovery rooms long after surgery due to bed shortages.

New Zealand teachers vote on contract

A series of union meetings to ratify the New Zealand secondary teachers' employment contract began on February 1. Meetings of the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) will be held over the next two weeks, with the result to be announced on February 15.

Voting on the contract settlement will be carried out by a secret ballot. A number of PPTA branches have already indicated that their members will oppose the deal drawn up by union and government negotiators just before Christmas.

The union has hailed the settlement as an “historic” victory because the contract includes guaranteed non-classroom time for the first time. This includes three hours in 2002 and 2003, four hours in 2004 and a further provision that schools “endeavour” to

provide five non-contact hours from 2005. However, this is current practice in most schools and serves to entrench existing conditions of overwork and stress.

The deal also includes a 3.5 percent pay increase over two years, significantly less than the \$2,500 per year over three years originally sought by teachers.

New Zealand nurses dispute settled

The New Zealand Nurses' Organisation (NZNO) has agreed to a settlement with the Canterbury District Health Board (CDHB) which will end a seven-month dispute between the board and 2,000 general nurses. The deal involves a 10 percent pay rise for the nurses, spread over 22 months. The nurses had sought pay rises of up to 13 percent and improvements in their conditions.

Voting on the settlement was conducted at several union meetings earlier this week. The NZNO claims a two-thirds majority approved it. The deal was made after the union called off a 15-day strike approved by the nurses and resumed negotiations with the CDHB.

Meanwhile nurses in Auckland, with whom the Canterbury nurses were seeking pay parity, have begun a campaign this week for a 10 percent pay rise.

New Zealand doctors stop work over rosters

On February 4, 20 senior doctors at the 150-bed Whakatane Hospital held a two-hour stopwork meeting to protest their onerous workloads. Without the registrar backup of larger hospitals, specialists can be rostered on call two or three nights a week. The frequency of callouts requires them to remain close to the hospital for most of the time.

The issue of doctors working on high frequency emergency rosters has festered for a long time. Low staffing levels have plagued the busy hospital, which serves a wide geographical area with poor health and entrenched rural poverty. It has serious recruitment and retention problems. The hospital's two obstetricians and gynaecologists recently resigned due to overwork.



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