

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 December 2002

Vietnamese workers attacked by management thugs

Late last week 20 factory supervisors wielding iron bars attacked striking workers outside the Dzoanh Duc furniture plant in Vietnam's Binh Dzuong province. Four workers were injured and hospitalised. The conflict ended when about 100 police arrived and broke up the running battle.

The night-shift workers went on strike on November 26 to oppose poor pay and working conditions, as well as breaches of labour laws by the factory's Taiwanese owner. Workers reported that they were regularly forced to work five hours overtime and do 24-hour shifts for no extra money. The company also refused to pay medical and social security insurance.

Incidents involving the abuse of industrial workers have been on the rise since the government opened the country to overseas investment. Companies are attracted to Vietnam by a plentiful supply of cheap disciplined labour and lax industrial laws. Last week, a female worker employed at another plant in the Binh Dzuong province was taken to hospital after being badly beaten by a South Korean manager. The province is an industrial centre near Ho Chi Minh City and hosts a number of foreign firms.

Japanese public sector workers demand labour rights

Ten thousand workers rallied outside the Japanese Diet (parliament) on November 29, in a demonstration organised by the Japanese Trade Union Confederation. The workers were demanding an end to restrictions on labour rights in the public sector, including those on collective bargaining.

The protest also called for "democratic reform" of the public sector, greater transparency in public services and the abolition of the existing unfair "career system". Speakers claimed that government restrictions on public sector workers breached International Labor Organisation (ILO) conventions.

Multiple deaths in fireworks factory explosion in China

Thirteen workers were killed last week when an illegal fireworks factory exploded in Jijahe village in China's northern Shaanxi province. The blast on November 30 collapsed the three-story building. One body is yet to be recovered.

The factory owner, Liu Mingzhao, disappeared after directing rescue teams to the accident. Local authorities had already closed two other fireworks factories owned by Liu due to safety breaches but because stocks of gunpowder were not confiscated, he was able to re-open his operations illegally.

China is the world's leading producer of fireworks. Manufacture mainly occurs in rural areas with much of it carried out illegally and in extremely unsafe conditions. Chinese authorities launched a crackdown on illegal operations last year after 42 children making fireworks were killed in a blast at a school in March 2001.

Pakistani gas workers demand unpaid wages

Workers employed by Sui Southern Gas demonstrated outside the Hyderabad press club on November 28 and 29 over non-payment of salaries for seven months. Action committee leaders warned that if the company did not act on the direction of the Supreme Court and the Federal Service Tribunal ordering payment, the workers will extend protests throughout Balochistan and Sindh provinces.

According to an action committee spokesman, the company has ignored Federal Services Tribunal orders on two occasions. The committee has asked the workers to continue daily demonstrations outside the press club.

Sri Lankan garment workers occupy factory

Workers are continuing an occupation of the Champion Apparel factory in Atampitiya (200 kilometres from Colombo) that started in late November. Police continually patrol the premises, conducting surveillance on workers and warning them not to damage any property.

The workers began the occupation in protest over company plans to sack 40 employees. They believe management wants to replace the older workers with new recruits on lower salaries. Workers also complain that the company has not paid Employee Provident Fund contributions since 2000.

The factory began production in 1992 with 500 employees but now has only 198 workers. Management continually responds to workers' demands with punitive action. When employees campaigned against the non-payment of salaries for the festival month of April, the company sacked six people. While an indefinite strike forced reinstatement of the six workers the April salaries remain unpaid.

In a separate dispute, about 165 workers staged a two-day sit-in at the F K Apparel on November 16 and are picketing the company owner's home. The workers are protesting against closure of the factory, which is on the outskirts of Colombo, and relocation of production to another company plant.

The workers were not paid their salaries and are uncertain if the owner has deposited contributions to the Employee Provident Fund.

Hospital clerical workers in a work to rule campaign

Clerical workers in Sri Lankan government hospitals have been conducting a work-to-rule campaign since November 29, after a two-day "sick leave" campaign in which they did not report for work. The workers are demanding two outstanding pay rises as part of a 10-item log of claims.

The campaign has seriously disrupted administration activities in all hospitals and caused delays in salary payments and festival advances. The workers have decided to take sick leave again next week and then re-impose the work-to-rule for a further week.

Centrelink workers strike over new pay deal

Federal government Centrelink workers across Australia went on strike on December 2 over the breakdown in negotiations for a new work agreement, which includes a pay increase.

According to the Community and Public Sector Union, Centrelink staff voted overwhelmingly for the strike. Centrelink workers, who have not received a pay rise for over 18 months, service social welfare payments, student entitlements and invalid pensions.

Miners strike to defend union delegate

More than 2,000 coal miners across Australia walked off the job for 24 hours on December 2 over the sacking of a union delegate at the Bulga open cut mine coal near Singleton in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales.

The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) claims that the company used a recent downsizing of the workforce at the mine to get rid of union delegates. There have been about 86 redundancies at the mine in recent weeks.

The union previously abandoned any struggle to defend jobs, demanding that coal companies improve redundancy payments and that jobs be eliminated on the basis of seniority. Over last period, however, the CFMEU has dropped demands for companies to abide by seniority when carrying out layoffs.

Construction workers strike against non-union work contracts

Building workers employed on Grocon construction company's sites in Melbourne went on strike on December 7 to attend a mass meeting. The meeting was called to discuss the company's attempt to place its entire 650 workforce on non-union enterprise work agreements.

The company has attempted to bypass the union and directly offer its workers, members of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), a pay offer in exchange for more flexibility. Grocon wants greater control over rostered days off, sick leave, annual leave and working hours.

Federal Workplace Relations Minister Tony Abbott, together with the Master Builders Association, backed Grocon's move toward individual work contracts, declaring he was pleased with the company's resolve to stand up against the CFMEU.

Grocon had a close working relationship with the union and relied on it to enforce industrial peace on its building sites. Relations with union began to sour, however, after the company attacked the CFMEU during the Liberal government's Royal Commission inquiry into the corruption in the construction industry. It is believed the move to non-union contracts is driven by company claims of productivity problems at several sites, including the \$420 million Melbourne Cricket Ground restructuring project.

Queensland construction workers strike to defend entitlements

Thousands of construction workers walked off building sites in Brisbane, Queensland on December 4 to attend a mass meeting at the Roma Street forum in the city. The workers were protesting against moves by the Master Builders Association to cut the number of annual rostered days off by six. The workers are also campaigning for a 36-hour work-week.

Strike action continued the next day when hundreds of construction workers from some 50 construction sites attended meetings on the Gold Coast, Queensland's main tourist area.

Truck drivers blockade main highway

Truck drivers protesting unsafe conditions in the industry placed four rigs across both lanes of the busy Hume Highway on December 2, disrupting traffic between Sydney and Melbourne for nine hours.

The protesters, members of the Long Distance Owner-Drivers

Group, are demanding the government introduce a national code of conduct for long-haul driving.

Companies who hire the owner-drivers take advantage of cut-throat competition in the industry to drive down costs. In turn, owner-drivers are forced to work extended hours and take risks to meet impossible deadlines.

A spokesman for the truck drivers told the media: "We've been trying for two-and-a-half years to get the federal and state government to listen to us. This year, 115 truckies have died trying to do their jobs; last week five, three in one night."

New Zealand medical academic staff settle pay talks

This week medical and dental academic staff at Otago University's three schools of medicine have accepted a four percent pay offer. The Association of University Staff said the settlement, which came after protracted negotiations and industrial action, is in line with the four percent given to other academics at the university.

However, a staff spokesman admitted that the settlement did not begin to address serious salary anomalies, such as a \$15,000 per annum difference between university and hospital clinical salaries. Under the Labour government's present funding arrangements, it is estimated that the differential will increase to around \$40,000 within the next eight years.

Many of academic staff leaving the university cite dissatisfaction with salaries and the failure of the government to address the funding problem as reasons for taking jobs elsewhere.

Union deal sees many teachers miss out on pay increase

The New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) has filed a case with the Employment Court, claiming the Education Ministry is failing to abide by an arbitration decision which ended a long-running contract dispute earlier this year. The 12-month dispute saw extensive industrial action, including wildcat strikes by teachers and walkouts by students.

The PPTA claims that the ministry, at the behest of Education Minister Trevor Mallard, is refusing to extend the full pay rise to teachers designated as "G3" on the salary scale. These teach in areas such as technology, workshop, home economics and arts subjects and have qualifications other than university degrees. About 10 percent of the union's 14,000 members are affected.

In July, when the contract was settled, many teachers voted against the deal because G3 teachers were likely to be left out in the cold. The union leadership promised that the matter would be settled through discussions.



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