

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 December 2002

Korean subway workers vote to strike

Subway workers in Seoul have voted overwhelmingly to strike from December 16 in protest against the city government's extension of subway operating hours by one hour, until 1 am. Over 74 percent of workers voted in favour of industrial action. A spokesman for the workers said: "Extended operations will result in a heavier workload for subway employees and therefore jeopardise passenger safety."

The workers have begun to collect signatures opposing the changes and are refusing to work on trains that start their routes after midnight. On December 9, 250 subway workers occupied the platform and rails at Kwangjin station in Seoul but were dispersed by police.

Korean bank union calls off anti-privatisation strike

A strike planned on December 12 by 5,400 workers at the state-owned Chohung Bank in South Korea has been cancelled by the union. The bank workers are campaigning against the government's plan to sell its controlling interest in the bank.

The strike was postponed after the government said it would delay making a final decision on the sale. The government, which owns 80 percent of Chohung Bank, put off selecting a buyer until late December, after the union refused to release documents to the bidders. A government emphasised, however, that the sale would still go ahead and would not be "thwarted by any obstacles or resistance from the labor unions".

Shinhan Financial Group, South Korea's fourth-largest financial group, offered to buy the entire government stake in the bank, while New York-based Cerberus and its partners made a bid for 51 percent.

Indian coir workers on strike

Coir workers in the southern Indian state of Kerala struck on December 7 over poor salaries, excessive workloads and breaches of the government-sanctioned

general work agreement. Coir is a natural fibre made from coconuts and used for matting, screening, baskets and other products.

Nearly 400,000 workers from the Thiruvananthapuram, Ambalapuzha, Chertala, Karthikapally, Vaikkom and Cherthala Taluks districts have joined the strike and are blocking the movement of coir goods from export companies. Some small-scale factory owners have also joined the strike.

A spokesman for the strikers said workers' conditions were "pathetic" and condemned the government for "not taking any steps to find a solution for this crisis". According to the spokesman, some companies had recently cut wages.

Indian transport workers fight privatisation

Transport workers in Chennai (formerly Madras), capital of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, began a hunger strike protest on December 7 over state government moves to privatise 50 percent of the bus routes. According to recent press reports, the government wants to eliminate up to 30,000 public transport jobs through privatisation.

The protest begins a series of actions, including legal challenges, to force the government to abandon the plan. The campaign is being organised by the Labour Progressive Federation.

Security guards attack workers' demonstration in Pakistan

Faran sugar mill workers in Hyderabad clashed with security guards and police on December 3. The workers were demanding payment of salaries before the Eid festival (a Muslim religious event) this month.

When management ordered security guards to fire shots into the air and baton-charge employees, the workers responded by throwing stones. Police later threatened to arrest union leaders. Management has also threatened to sack union organisers and militant

workers.

Sri Lankan female family health officers campaign for improvements

Female family health officers picketed the Ministry of Health in Colombo on December 4. The workers are demanding increased government funding, higher wages and standardised rosters. They also want improvements in the style of uniforms and a 7,000 rupee (\$US72) uniform allowance. The protestors presented a memorandum demanding action on their demands to the Health Minister's private secretary.

Crew walk off ship after assault in Australia

The 14-man Indonesian crew of the *Myron N* walked off the job this week after the chief officer assaulted a worker. The flag of convenience ship was docked at the Port Waratah Coal Services in Newcastle harbour, New South Wales.

It is believed that the assault occurred after a dispute with the crew over wages. The crew, which is still ashore, is currently discussing whether they will resign and return home. Local police are investigating the assault allegation.

Centrelink workers strike for better pay

Over 24,000 Centrelink workers struck on December 13 for the second time in two weeks over a new national work agreement. The commonwealth government workers want improvements in wages and working conditions.

Centrelink offices, which process social security payments, Austudy allowances and invalid pensions, were closed from midday. It is not clear if staff will resume duties on Monday. Workers have already rejected a government pay offer as inadequate but Centrelink management is refusing to negotiate.

Emergency dispatch centre workers defend conditions

Emergency communications workers at the Victorian Police Dispatch Centre in Melbourne struck on December 5 in a dispute over a new work place agreement. The workers, who are members of the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union, decided to strike after a break down in negotiation between union, management and state government representatives.

At the centre of the dispute is a management demand for 12-hour shifts with no penalty allowances. The centre already operates 24 hours a day, seven days a

week.

Mass walkout closes New Zealand paper mill

The Carter Holt Harvey-owned Kinleith paper mill was forced to shut for two days from December 10 when 292 production workers walked out over company delays in negotiating a new employment agreement.

An Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) spokesman said the company had changed work patterns to create redundancies. Even though the collective contract expired last March, the company had refused to meet and discuss the changes.

The EPMU has separated the present dispute from impending mass redundancies at the mill that will cut the workforce from 770 to 415. This week the union filed an application with the Employment Relations Authority, challenging the validity of the system used to select the first 43 production workers to be laid off. An industrial court hearing on December 19 will decide whether the company negotiated "fairly" over the production job losses.

Most of the 355 layoffs, mainly maintenance staff, are expected to take place in the next month. The company claims that about 173 displaced workers will be re-hired by contractors.

New Zealand polytechnic staff picket over pay

Non-teaching staff at Whitireia Community Polytechnic near Wellington have begun industrial action over lack of progress in pay talks. About 36 members of the Tertiary Institutes Allied Staff Association (TIASA) picketed the polytechnic council meeting on December 4. They are also refusing to work overtime.

The staff, mainly administrators, technicians and secretaries, represent about 10 to 15 percent of the polytechnic's total workforce and are demanding a 3.5 percent pay increase. Management has only offered two percent, even though the institution posted a \$12 million surplus for 2001.



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