

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 December 2002

Public transport strike in the Philippines

Over 1,500 taxi and jeepney drivers in Cebu City and surrounding suburbs began an indefinite strike on December 16 to demand the city transport authority (CITOM) stop trying to collect outstanding traffic fines from the drivers. The drivers, who are members of the Transport Unity Forum (TUF), are also protesting over a recent 200 percent increase in fines.

The Cebu City mayor said he would not collect the penalties if fined drivers were banned from working inside city limits until they paid and the TUF expelled those with the worst number of violations. Drivers say the fines, which total over 122 million pesos (\$US2.35 million), however, are invalid because they were not registered by CITOM within the required 60-day period.

Retired teachers demonstrate in China against wage and pension cut

Around 100 retired teachers demonstrated in Pizhou, Jiangsu province on December 11 against a 20 percent reduction in public servants' wages and pensions. Under recent changes, the national Chinese government only covers 80 percent of the payments, with local authorities responsible for the remainder "if and when" their budgets permit. The Pizhou local government claims it cannot meet the expense.

The demonstration is the first report of opposition to the recent sweeping restructure of public servants' wages in China.

Indian taxi drivers strike in New Delhi

Tri-shaw (three-wheel) taxi drivers in New Delhi struck on December 9 in protest against legislation forcing them to install electronic meters in vehicles before collecting new fare increases. Despite state government attempts to negotiate a delay, the taxi drivers' union recommended workers proceed with the action. Some 50,000 drivers had struck a week earlier

demanding the fare increase.

Indian pharmacists demonstrate

Pharmacists employed by the Indian national government demonstrated near parliament in New Delhi on December 10, demanding a pay increase, better promotion avenues and appointment of a pharmacy advisor to the Minister of Health. They also demanded the inclusion of pharmacy services in the national Health Care program.

Pakistani teachers and medical professionals demonstrate against privatisation

Teachers, students and medical professionals demonstrated outside the Sindh Provincial Assembly building in Karachi on December 12 against government plans to deregulate health and tertiary education. The provincial government has established governor boards to operate hospitals and universities, this move expected to lead to austerity measures and job cuts. Further demonstrations are being planned.

Sri Lankan hospital staff launch sick note campaign

Over 25,000 attendants, lift operators, cooks, cleaning workers and other ancillary staff in Sri Lanka's public hospitals called in "sick" on December 17, demanding a 7,000-rupee (\$US70) uniform allowance, improved training and permanency for 5,000 casual workers. Thousand of workers joined a lunch-hour picket outside the Health Ministry head office in Colombo.

Some surgery was postponed and cleaning, food supplies and other hospital services were affected by the protest. The hospital workers union is threatening to call an island-wide strike if the government does not meet its demands.

Australian shop-fitting workers picket over entitlements

Two hundred and sixty five workers sacked by Melbourne shop-fitting company, Trollope, Silverwood

and Beck, on December 16 have begun protest action to demand payment of their entitlements. The firm has been placed into receivership with debts of more than \$20 million. Employees established a picket outside one director's home when it became clear that the company was not going to pay any of the \$5.5 million owed to sacked staff.

Workers claim the company traded whilst insolvent by using accumulated staff entitlements. Those employed for more than 20 years stand to lose between \$40,000 and \$75,000 in outstanding holiday pay, long service leave and other benefits.

Queensland construction workers strike after worker dies

Building workers in Brisbane and the Gold Coast walked off the job last week after 27-year-old scaffolder Darren West plunged five floors to his death on December 16. The accident occurred on a construction site at the University of Queensland's St Lucia campus. Initial investigations indicate that too much weight was put on a swing stage, causing the scaffolding to collapse. Workers are demanding safety harnesses be provided for work on such platforms.

Garbage collectors strike over safety

Seventy garbage collectors in Brisbane went on strike again on December 17 over safety concerns. One worker was recently trapped inside a garbage truck for over 30 minutes when the pickup arm of the vehicle hooked onto an overhead power line which then fell across the truck.

Brisbane City Council signed on with a new garbage contractor (Environmental Solutions) in 2002 and introduced a new line of trucks. While the vehicles can collect recyclable and non-recyclable material, the pickup arm is longer than on older trucks. Since they were introduced, the new trucks have become entangled in power lines over 100 times, threatening workers with electrocution. There were only 16 such incidents in five and a half years with previous vehicles. Workers held a rally to discuss the issue and then marched to the city council chambers.

New Zealand university staff pay negotiations continue

Collective employment agreement negotiations continued at Lincoln University this week, with management lifting its salary offers from 2 percent and 1.5 percent for general and academic staff respectively

to 3 percent for both groups. The offer for academic staff, which would take effect from April next year, comes on top of a previously negotiated two percent salary increase effective from January 2. The offer to general staff will, if accepted, take effect on March 1. A number of other issues, including retirement, study leave, job evaluation and promotion, have been referred to working groups. Ratification ballots are still to be held.

At Canterbury University, cleaners, maintenance, general and academic staff strongly rejected a two percent salary offer at ratification meetings held during the last week. It is unlikely negotiations will resume before Christmas.

Paper mill strikes ended

Production workers at the Kinleith pulp and paper mill at Tokoroa returned to work late last week after a two-day strike. The 292 workers walked off the job for 48 hours on December 10 over a collective employment agreement and company restructuring plans that will slash the 730-strong workforce by half.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) announced this week that it has agreed to consult with management on the job cuts. The EPMU began a case to the Employment Court on December 19, claiming the first group of 48 workers who have received redundancy notices had been treated unfairly.

Auckland construction workers injured in fall

Two building workers were seriously injured when they fell nearly six metres onto a slab of wet concrete at a Downer Engineering apartment block construction site in Auckland on December 16. The two men are in Auckland Hospital, one with a damaged pelvis and broken leg. Two other workers narrowly escaped injury when a support they were standing on collapsed during a concrete pour. Work stopped for the day while Occupational Health and Safety inspectors examined the site.



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