

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 December 2002

Indonesian communication workers protest

Five hundred Indonesian Satellite Corp (Indosat) workers demonstrated in Jakarta on December 23 in protest against privatisation of the communication company. The Indonesian government signed a \$600 million deal earlier this month selling 41.9 percent of its 56.9 percent share in the company to Singapore Technologies Telemedia. This is Indonesia's largest privatisation to an overseas buyer since the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis.

Indosat workers have threatened an indefinite national strike later this month unless the sale is cancelled. They fear the move will lead to major restructuring and job losses. Indosat currently employs up to 6,000 workers.

Philippine workers strike to defend jobs

Over 6,000 workers at Philippine Long Distance Telephone Co (PLDT), the country's largest telecommunications company, began national strike action on December 23. The company is using supervisors and managers to maintain the main domestic and international long distance operations in Manila.

Workers at 17 of the company's 327 work sites walked out after the management refused to abandon plans to outsource work and cut jobs. Outsourcing will destroy 503 operator and 43 department jobs by the end of the year with the closure of eight out of nine regional traffic operator service branches. The operator workforce will be further reduced from 1,206 to around 200 by 2004.

While the company claims the retrenchments are caused by a downturn in operator-assisted calls, a union spokesman said that at least six private call centres in Manila were already being used for outsourcing. Strikers are picketing PLDT offices in Cebu, Makati and Manila and have appealed to other workers for support.

Hospital union ends strike in South Korea

On December 25, the Korean Health and Medical Workers Union, which represents workers at three hospitals owned by the Catholic Medical Center in South Korea, called off a 217-day strike and sit-in protest at Myeongdong Cathedral in central Seoul.

The strike action began in May over wages and conditions

and was supported with national strike action by health workers, protest marches, hunger strikes and demonstrations. Hospital management used riot police to break up two hospital occupations in September.

Union officials attempted to justify their betrayal of the strike by claiming management refused to negotiate until employees went back to work.

College teachers strike against victimisation in Pakistan

Over 3,000 college teachers in Karachi joined strike action organised by the Sindh Professors and Lecturers Association (SPLA) on December 20. The teachers were protesting against unauthorised raids on colleges by government inspectors.

The SPLA claims the raids were an attempt to defame and vilify teachers and demanded that the government discipline the inspectors involved. It is inconceivable, however, that the raids would have gone ahead without official authorisation. The teachers are also demanding the provision of furniture at various colleges and appointment of additional teaching and non-teaching staff.

Pakistan irrigation workers oppose restructuring

Irrigation workers in Larkana, Pakistan demonstrated this week against government restructuring of the state irrigation system. The system is to come under the control of the Sindh Irrigation Development Authority, a move that will terminate 70 percent of the present workforce. The limited protest, which culminated in a rally and token sit-in, was organised by the Sindh Irrigation Muttahinda Federation.

Sri Lankan estate workers reject increased workload

Some 400 female workers at the Welioya tea plantation occupied the manager's office on December 16 in protest over increased productivity demands. The plantation is owned by the Wattawala Plantation Company and situated in Hatton, 160 kilometres from Colombo.

The workers were protesting against an increase in tea-picking quotas from 15 to 17 kilograms per day. The quota for Sundays was raised from 22 to 27 kilograms. Management enforces higher Sunday targets because workers are entitled to an additional payment.

The occupation ended on December 17 when Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) official M. Sivalingam promised to settle the dispute. Sivalingam is a deputy minister in the United National Front government. After negotiations between the CWC and the estate management failed to produce any settlement 900 workers began a go-slow protest on December 20.

The situation at Welioya is the result of a collective contract signed by the CWC with 22 plantation companies last June agreeing to increase estate productivity.

Government employees demonstrate against privatisation

Hundreds of employees attached to central and local government services and banks in Hambantota district, Sri Lanka demonstrated outside the main bus terminal in Tangalle on December 16.

The workers, including teachers, nurses and paramedics, oppose the ongoing privatisation of government services. They also want immediate payment of all salary arrears, approval of disaster loans, permanency for all junior workers and an equitable transfer policy for teachers.

Australian casino workers threaten strike action

Four thousand union members at the Crown casino in Melbourne voted for strike action this week over a new enterprise work agreement. The current agreement, which covers 8,000 employees, is due to expire on January 1.

Employees want a 24 percent pay increase over three years, an extra week annual leave, paid parental leave, improved sick leave and entry-level pay rates abolished. If the strike goes ahead on January 2, it will be during the casino's busiest work period. More than 45,000 people per day visit the casino complex, which includes a five-star hotel, cinemas, restaurants and shops.

Management has offered a 3 percent increase each year for three years and threatened layoffs if strike action goes ahead. Crown has already made 100 staff redundant, claiming a drop in profits due to a recent smoking ban in clubs and casinos.

While management has refused to improve its offer, the union is already attempting to avoid industrial action. Australian Hospitality, Liquor Trades and Miscellaneous Workers Union assistant secretary Connie DeNino told the media: "We have made it clear to Crown that we are quite prepared to negotiate on all of these issues and want to go back to the bargaining table."

New Zealand doctors to strike over work loads

Senior doctors at the South Canterbury District Health Board (DHB) voted 68 percent in support of strike action. The postal ballot vote follows a breakdown in collective agreement negotiations. It is the first time senior doctors, members of the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists

(ASMS) New Zealand, have voted for strike action.

The main issue is failure of the DHB to recognise the considerable work pressure and stress senior doctors are routinely subjected to. This includes being required to work high frequency after-hours emergency rosters with minimal staff support.

Doctors plan a series of six-hour work stoppages over a five-week period, which will affect non-urgent services. All routine services, including lists, clinics, ward rounds and administration, will be cancelled.

Despite the strong membership vote, the ASMS is attempting to head off stoppages if progress is made during negotiations, or if the DHB agrees to the union's request for arbitration.

Auckland mental health workers challenge injunction

Counties Manukau District Health Board (DHB) applied for an Employment Court injunction this week to prevent work bans by Auckland mental health workers over the Christmas break. The DHB took the unusual step of naming individual nurses as second defendants, suggesting they could be subject to punitive action if the injunction is successful.

The health workers, who are members of the Public Services Union (PSA), have been refusing to accept more than a set number of patients in the DHB's mental health units in protest against resource shortages and overcrowding.

The workers believe that lifting the bans over Christmas would further compromise the health and safety of patients and the community. They were also concerned about a directive from the DHB moving mental health clients to Middlemore Hospital emergency department when insufficient beds were available at the specialised unit. This would mean that patients would be under the care of staff without specialised training.



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