

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 January 2003

Indonesian communication workers clash with police

Hundreds of workers from Indonesian Satellite Corp (Indosat) clashed with police on December 27 while demonstrating outside an extraordinary shareholders' meeting at the company's headquarters in Jakarta. Five workers were injured in the confrontation.

The Indonesian government has signed a 5.62 trillion rupiah (\$US634 million) deal selling 41.9 percent of its 56.9 percent share in Indosat to Singapore Technologies Telemedia (STT). The December 27 meeting was called to vote in a new board of directors in preparation for STT's entry.

While the Indosat sale could lead to massive downsizing and restructuring, Tris Budi Suroso, the Indosat workers' union, is organising only limited protests and has diverted opposition into legal challenges. The union has announced it will mount a class action lawsuit against the government and Indosat.

The privatisation is Indonesia's largest state-owned asset sale to an overseas buyer since the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. Indosat was originally a subsidiary of US communications giant Telephone and Telegraph Corporation (ITT), which sold the company to the Indonesian government in 1980 for \$US43.8 billion.

South Korean stock exchange workers strike

Over 300 stock exchange workers walked off the job on December 30 in the first-ever strike at the Seoul bourse. The strike was called to protest government plans to transfer stock futures and options trading to the Korea Futures Exchange in Pusan by 2004.

The move to consolidate stock exchange operations, one of President Kim Dae-jung's campaign pledges for the 1997 presidential election, will destroy jobs in Seoul. The union is appealing to the government to reverse its decision on the basis that the move will "undermine the country's futures market". Trading at the Seoul bourse is being maintained by 30 staff members, some of whom are union members exempted from the industrial

action.

Immigrant workers sacked for striking in Thailand

Some 600 Burmese garment workers at Rian Thong Apparel in Thailand's Mae Sot district were sacked after they struck against the dismissal of 40 employees on December 13. The 40 workers were fired when they demanded payment of outstanding wages and improved working conditions.

Management seized the strikers' work permits and called police to the factory. Without permits, the workers could be deemed illegal and ordered to leave Thailand.

Some employees are sheltering at local temples due to extreme financial hardship. On average, the workers are paid 1,000 to 1,500 baht (\$US23 to \$34) per month. The company deducted three percent of their wage for unspecified reasons, and another 300 baht for a work permit which the employer paid in advance.

Indian railway workers strike

About 1,600 ticket reservation staff at Central and Western Railways in Bombay stopped work on December 30, closing 16 railway reservation centres. The workers were protesting against a government decision to allow three private agencies to issue rail tickets.

The transport ministry granted permission for Harrison Travels, Mahavir Travel and Meenakshi Tours and Travels to issue tickets directly from their offices and gave the companies terminals linked to the railway reservation system.

The National Railway Mazdoor Union (NRMU) and the Central Railway Mazdoor Sangh, which organised the strike, called off all industrial action the following day after overnight talks with the Railway Board. Justifying its decision to scotch the strike, a union spokesman said the board had issued assurances that the move was only a pilot project.

Meanwhile, thousands of transport workers in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu demonstrated in Chennai (formerly Madras) on December 30 against

moves by the state government to privatise transport services. According to union sources, privatisation will destroy nearly 75,000 jobs.

Sri Lankan bank workers oppose closure

About 100 laid-off employees from the recently closed Pramuka Bank have launched a campaign to demand the bank be reopened. On December 24, they picketed the bank's former head offices in Colombo. Employees are also demanding that the government and the Central Bank of Sri Lanka take measures to protect workers' accounts in the Employees Provident Fund and Employees Trust Funds. The Central Bank closed Pramuka Bank in December.

Tasmanian food workers strike over entitlements

About 350 production workers at the McCain Food Processing plant in Smithton, Tasmania, took strike action for 24 hours on December 22. The workers were demanding improved entitlements, including long service leave, holiday loading, sick leave payments and increased penalty rates for Friday night overtime.

The improvements being sought by the McCain workers would bring them into line with existing conditions in the Tasmanian food industry. The company has said it will not meet to discuss the dispute until later this month.

Casino workers strike for wage rise

About 500 workers at Melbourne's Crown Casino stopped work and picketed the building's main entrance for four hours on January 3 after negotiations over a wage contract broke down last week.

The strike action, which involved hospitality, gaming and security guards, took place during the Australasian Poker Championship, a \$3 million event widely promoted by the casino owners. About 2,700 of Crown's 4,000 staff are members of the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union.

Casino management has refused to increase its offer of a 10.25 percent wage increase over three years. Workers initially demanded a 24 percent wage increase which union officials lowered to 20 percent. Further negotiations are due to take place over the weekend.

New Zealand teachers pay dispute put into mediation

The New Zealand Labour government has agreed to a demand by the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) to reconvene a mediation panel on a pay dispute. The union represents about 14,000 secondary teachers. The mediation panel will be asked to determine if thousands of teachers without full degrees can access pay increments in a new work agreement that comes into

effect on February 5.

The teachers concerned are being excluded from accessing salary increments negotiated with the government following a protracted industrial dispute last year. The government has so far refused to pass on pay rises for teachers with full degrees.

While the government had previously refused the PPTA's demand for mediation, Education Minister Trevor Mallard changed his stand after the union filed a legal appeal in the Employment Court. The union has pushed for mediation in an attempt to avoid any repeat of the unauthorised teachers' stoppages that erupted last year.

Christmas lockdown called off after strike cancelled

A dispute over a collective agreement that threatened the lockdown of 52 power line workers in Kaikohe, New Zealand, during the Christmas holiday period has been settled. Kaikohe-based Top Energy withdrew lockdown notices after the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union agreed to discuss company's demand for "increased flexibility around working hours" early in the New Year in return for pay rises of between four and six percent.

Fiji taxi drivers strike over pay and conditions

About 20 taxi drivers at Sanyo Cabs struck on December 28 demanding the right to unionise. A number of public service vehicle drivers joined picket lines in support. On December 31, the Transport Workers Union met with Labour Minister Keneth Zinck who agreed that if the striking workers were the majority at Sanyo Cabs then the TWU could represent them.



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