

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 January 2003

Indonesian workers protest price hikes

Thousands of workers and students protested in cities across Indonesia this week against fuel, electricity and telephone price increases. In Surabaya, the country's second largest city, workers from over 500 companies struck on January 9. Workers are particularly angry over the 22 percent increase in the cost of fuel, which will lead to higher bus and motorised rickshaw fares.

The government slashed subsidies on essential services on January 4, following demands from the International Monetary Fund for increased austerity measures to bring the state budget under control. There have been reports of clashes between workers and police in a number of centres.

Taiwan postal workers protest privatisation moves

About 300 postal workers in Taiwan protested on January 1 outside a ceremony marking the end of Directorate of General of Posts (DGP) control over postal distribution on the island. Services will be handed to the recently created Chunghwa Post Company (CPC).

While CPC is a state-owned company, workers fear that transfer of postal services from the DGP, once a department under the Ministry of Transport, is a step towards privatisation. They are also concerned that the CPC will restructure operations and cut jobs to make the company competitive with private operators in telecommunication and express delivery services.

Already, the 27 units that existed in the DGP have been cut back to 15, and three large bureaus supervising the postal services in north, central and south Taiwan abolished. Workers who retire will not be replaced. CPC also announced this week that it would outsource some mail sorting and delivery to private firms. "More complicated reforms are still in order, but we are off to a good start," an official said.

Dispute continues over Korean subway hours

The Seoul Metropolitan Subway Corporation's labour union is encouraging its members to take leave in protest over longer subway operating hours. The union has also threatened an all-out strike on January 14 if the Seoul Metropolitan Subway Company (SMSC) has not complied with its demand for a temporary halt to the extension of operating hours from midnight to four in the morning. Seoul's local government responded to the threat by announcing strike-breaking

operations to keep the subway running, including the recruitment of 6,501 temporary engineers and the provision of free shuttles.

While the union initially declared total opposition to the changes, which will lead to longer hours and shifts, it has backed away and begun negotiations over new shift working conditions. The union allowed new work schedules to proceed, even though the discussions over working conditions had not been completed.

Philippines government intervenes in telecommunications strike

The Department of Labour and Employment has ordered 6,700 striking employees of the Philippines Long Distance Telephone Company (PLDT) to end their two-week strike in support of 350 dismissed operators. Labour Minister Santo Tomas has ordered the PLDT to take back the striking workers under the same conditions as before the strike.

The workers, members of the union Manggagawa ng Komunikasyan ng Pilipinas, struck on December 23, after PLDT closed eight regional call centres and contracted work to a Manila-based call centre operator. PLDT refused to negotiate with the union, claiming the strike was not having any effect on their operations. The case has been referred to the National Labour Relations Commission but no date has been set for the hearing.

Postgraduate doctors on strike in Pakistan

More than 200 doctors attached to the Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre (JPMC) in Karachi struck from January 1 to January 4 to demand a monthly salary. The strike ended after the federal health minister gave assurances that payments would be instituted within three weeks. Doctors also formed a committee to pursue the matter.

According to the Postgraduates Action Committee, postgraduate doctors are paid a monthly allowance in all other provinces of Pakistan. Postgraduate doctors constitute more than 50 percent of the total strength of the JPMC.

Sri Lankan workers demonstrate against new labour legislation

Over 2,000 workers demonstrated outside Fort Railway Station in central Colombo on January 6 to protest against new labour legislation being discussed in the Sri Lankan parliament.

The legislation will cut the time for workers or their unions to file labour court action from six months to three.

After a 30-minute demonstration, the workers marched to the prime minister's office to present a petition signed by one million people opposed to the labour law reforms. The All Ceylon Trade Union Federation, Socialist Workers Union and Inter Company Workers Union organised the demonstration.

Workers also called for a reduction in food prices, an end to public service cuts, protection of pensions and retirement funds, an increase in base salaries and cost-of-living wage rises to match the rate of inflation.

Garment workers campaign against factory closure

About 250 employees from Colmans Garments in Katubedda, a suburb on the outskirts of Colombo, picketed the factory on January 4 to demand their jobs back. Management closed the plant on December 28, claiming a shortage of orders. Workers have rejected a compensation offer of one month's salary per one year of service.

The factory was founded in 1984 and production exported to Europe and America. The company had two other plants in Sri Lanka, one at Kotahena in Colombo and another at Panadura, 25 kilometres south of Colombo. The Kotahena factory was closed a year ago, eliminating 150 jobs.

Melbourne casino workers face legal action

The Crown Casino in Melbourne applied to the Federal Court this week for an injunction to stop hundreds of workers striking this weekend. The casino claims the threatened industrial action in support of a pay claim is illegal. The strike threat emerged after pay talks between the casino and union representatives broke down.

Employees struck for four hours at the end of last week when the company refused to budge from its 10.25 percent pay offer. Workers were seeking 24 percent but the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union has reduced the claim to 20 percent.

New Zealand wharfies protest casual labour

Waterfront workers began picketing South Port, in Bluff, this week after casual workers from the North Island-based Mainland Stevedoring loaded the *Leo Forest* with wood product from Southland Veneer company. Mainland workers are on lesser pay and conditions than the permanent workforce. According to the Waterfront Workers Union (WWU), local stevedoring workers were denied the work.

The *Leo Forest* is chartered by Carter Holt Harvey (CHH), which contracts Mainland exclusively to load timber. A series of pickets against Mainland operations were organised at Bluff, Timaru, Nelson and Port Chalmers during a seven-month period about two years ago.

The WWU has attempted to divert the struggle into a "locals" versus "outsiders" campaign. WWU Bluff branch president David McKay said Southland workers usually loaded Southland Veneer 's cargo and that the "bone of contention" was "Southland jobs for Southland people".

New Zealand mill redundancies to proceed

The first of some 400 workers to be made redundant at the Carter Holt Harvey (CHH)-owned Kinleith pulp and paper mill will lose their jobs on January 17. The long-planned redundancies, half the mill's workforce, have been the subject of a series of legal challenges by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), all of which have failed to defend the jobs.

In a just-released decision, the Employment Relations Authority found that CHH breached certain statutory and contractual obligations but refused to order the company to withdraw the redundancy notices. The EPMU had asked the authority to rule against the first 36 lay-offs on the grounds that CHH failed to consult properly during the process to select the workers to be made redundant. The union has been seeking voluntary redundancy as an option.

The EPMU has declared that it will abide by the order, preferring "to resolve the issue by agreement with the company rather than through the courts".

Papua New Guinea teachers angered over lost pay

Teachers in the West New Britain region of Papua New Guinea protested outside the provincial education office last week over their payment with worthless wage cheques for the holiday period. When more than 100 teachers presented their leave entitlement cheques at the bank they were told there was no money in the government account.

The education office was to have made funds available this week. The teachers have warned that commencement of the new school year will be chaotic if they have not been paid. Authorities have admitted that many teachers throughout the province are facing financial difficulties.

Fijian cabbies continue strike

Twenty striking taxi drivers employed by Sanyo Cabs in Fiji have refused to return to work after their employer failed to appear at a court hearing over their right to unionise. The employer said he would not go to court until the drivers returned his taxis to the depot. Transport Workers Union general secretary Attar Singh, who is representing the drivers, said he would continue to attend court until the drivers' grievances were heard.



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