

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 January 2003

Police disperse demonstration in Indonesia

Police fired warning shots to disperse a rally on January 9 of some 1,000 laid-off workers from PT Doson Indonesia in Tangerang, a Nike contractor that closed last September. The workers responded by throwing shoes at the police. The rally followed a 20-kilometre march from the closed factory to the Social Affairs Agency office.

In all, over 6,890 employees lost their jobs at PT Doson after Nike ended supply contracts. The workers are demanding payment of outstanding severance entitlements and have called on the Tangerang regency and Banten province administration to order the company to pay the employees.

Two mine accidents in two days in China

The coal mining industry in China, which claimed over 5,000 lives last year, looks set to reap another grim harvest in 2003 after two separate mine blasts this month.

Eight men died in a natural gas explosion on January 10 at Songshu mine, near the city of Baishan in Jilin province. The blast brought down tons of rock on the men. Another gas explosion occurred at Boaxing Coal Mine near Harbin in the northern Heilongjiang province on January 11, trapping 30 men 1,700 metres underground. An official said that rescuers had not been able to reach the buried miners and it was not possible to say whether they could be saved.

The two mines, which are approximately 200 kilometres apart, are located about 1,000 kilometres northeast of Beijing.

Retired workers protest in China

One thousand retired workers from the Tieshy Textile Corporation blocked the Wuhan-Xiangfan train line for more than two hours on January 2. They were protesting against the company ending their retirement subsidy. One 54-year old worker died from a stroke during the picket.

Two days later, the Public Security Bureau declared the demonstration illegal and issued a notice demanding the protest organisers turn themselves over to authorities. A retired worker told the *China Labor Bulletin* that uniformed and plain-clothes police had been visiting homes attached to the factory complex looking for protest leaders. She also said that the factory union was not assisting workers but was "helping the management and government". The union is part of a working group to stop strikes and protests.

Korean worker suicides over repression

Metal workers across South Korea stopped work on January 16 after a factory employee committed suicide in protest against company attacks on workers' rights. Bae Dal-ho from Doosan Heavy Industries burned himself to death on January 8 outside the company offices in Changwon, South Gyeongsang Province.

Doosan Heavy Industries is known for taking a hard-line against any industrial action. Management responded to a strike over working

conditions last year by harshly disciplining 89 union members. Bae, who was among those disciplined, was suspended from work for three months, causing his family severe hardship. His suicide letter accused Doosan of "excessive oppression".

According to the Korean Metal Union, the company has fired, suspended or cut the pay of workers involved in industrial action. But the unions share a great deal of responsibility for this situation by allowing the victimisation of workers to continue. On numerous occasions the unions have ended industrial disputes even though their membership face persecution.

Vietnamese workers demand shorter working hours

More than 800 workers at Titco, a state-owned garment and footwear factory in Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City, went on strike for 24 hours on January 13 in protest against excessive working hours. Titco employs over 3,500 people to produce clothing and shoe soles for the Taiwanese market.

Titco workers are required to work up to 100 hours extra each month and claim they are either not paid or receive very little for working overtime. For example, they were only given 100,000 dong (about \$US7) for working on Chinese New Year and 50,000 dong for overtime worked in December.

The strikers demanded a reduction in working hours and improved benefits and working conditions. Employees ended the industrial action after being reassured by company officials that they would not be victimised.

The Vietnamese government prohibits strikes in the public service and industries designated vital to defence and the national economy.

Sri Lankan porcelain workers demonstrate against anti-labour bill

Eight hundred workers from the Matale Noritake porcelain factory in Sri Lanka's central province protested on January 7 against the government's Industrial Disputes Bill. The bill was being presented to parliament for ratification that same day.

Workers demanded withdrawal of the bill, which gives wide powers to employers and the Labour Commissioner to sack workers, and called for cost of living salary increases.

Hospital workers demand improved conditions

About 25,000 auxiliary hospital workers in Sri Lanka reported in sick on January 2 to demand a 5,000-rupee (about \$US50) annual salary increase. Other demands included a 7,500-rupee uniform allowance, permanency for casual employees and a training course for hospital attendants. Workers gathered at Colombo's central Viharamahadevi Park and marched to the prime minister's office to present a petition outlining their demands.

On the same day, police used tear gas to disperse workers from Colombo North Teaching Hospital at Ragama who were

demonstrating over the same demands. A union branch leader was taken into custody during the police attack.

More than 500 employees from the teaching hospital began indefinite strike action the next day to demand the union leader's release. Other medical staff at the hospital, including doctors, nurses and paramedics, joined the strike action on January 4, forcing authorities to release the unionist four days later.

Pakistan sugar workers protest attack on union activist

Workers at Ansari Sugar Mills in Pakistan's Badin district demonstrated in Hyderabad on January 13 in protest against a physical attack on labour activist Saleem Khaskheli by the factory's technical manager. They also demanded immediate payment of a delayed two-yearly bonus.

The protesters shouted slogans condemning the assault and demanding the manager's arrest. Speakers at the rally alleged that the manager tried to kill Khaskheli for speaking on behalf of other workers. Police have refused to arrest the manager despite an assault case being filed against him.

Pakistani doctors demand confirmation on appointments

At least 100 doctors from various parts of Sukkur and Larkana in Sindh demonstrated outside the press club in Sukkur on January 12. They were demanding official confirmation of contracts for doctors appointed six months ago and have called on the government to pay salaries outstanding for the past 19 months.

Over 50 doctors from the Chandka Medical College, Larkana, in Sindh, also rallied in front of chief minister's house in Ghotki where they presented a memorandum outlining their claims.

Indian irrigation workers stage hunger strike

Eleven irrigation workers from the Maharashtra Krishna Valley Development Corporation in the Indian state of Maharashtra began an indefinite hunger strike January 8 to demand payment of salaries for October and November.

The protest was ended on January 13 after state irrigation secretary Nandkumar Vadnere made arrangements for payment and requested the workers' action committee stop the hunger strike. The committee has insisted that the government give a written assurance that outstanding December salaries will also be paid.

Australian coal terminal workers strike

Workers at the MIM Abbott Point coal terminal near Bowen in North Queensland went on strike on January 10 against company demands that employees have drug tests. The union has not opposed the arbitrary drug testing of its members but asked for paracetamol and some other prescription drugs to be removed from the company's banned substances list. Drug testing by employers has become more commonplace, especially in the mining and transport industry.

Miners strike over new pay deal

About 115 coal miners at United Mine near Singleton in New South Wales walked off the job for 72 hours on January 16 in a dispute over wages and working conditions. It was the second 72-hour strike since a breakdown in negotiations for a new work agreement.

The Construction, Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) is meeting with United Mine management to resolve the dispute. Miners plan to impose overtime bans when they return to work on January 19. The CFMEU has financial interests in the mine.

New Zealand paper mill workers meet work changes

Some 280 production workers at Carter Holt's Kinleith pulp and paper mill in New Zealand stopped work on January 17 to discuss work changes that could pave the way for further redundancies. The paper workers rejected mill management demands that they hold two

separate stop-work meetings to ensure continued operation of the plant's boilers. To date there has been not indication they will return to work.

Last year the company destroyed 380 jobs when it outsourced its maintenance operations. This was achieved with the assistance of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which directed workers' opposition into a series of futile legal challenges.

Unions in Papua New Guinea threaten national strike

Sixteen public sector unions, covering 77,000 workers in Papua New Guinea, have called for a national three-day strike on January 27. The PNG Trade Union Council has also indicated it may join the strike, expanding it to include all unionised workers.

Chairman and president of the Public Employees Association, Napoleon Liosi, said the action was called because the government had failed to address issues submitted in August. Unions are demanding the government end a public service wage freeze. Other major concerns include, declining health and education standards and escalating cost-of-living increases.

The Industrial Registrar has delayed registering the unions' strike notice, declaring that the registration request will be "treated as information". This allows the government to declare the strike illegal.

Solomon Islands High Court forces end to aviation strike

Striking public servants employed by the Civil Aviation and Immigration and Meteorological Ministry were forced back to work on January 11 after a High Court order declared their strike illegal.

Employees began indefinite strike action on January 9 and vowed to stay out until the government responded to a Trade Dispute Panel (TDP) recommendation that officers be paid \$US3,700 in harassment and danger allowances.

The High Court ruled the strike illegal claiming workers were required to give 28-days notice before taking any industrial action. The High Court met again on January 14 to hear submissions from the Attorney General and the union on the legality of the strike and TDP recommendations. Results of the hearing have not yet been made public.



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