Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

25 January 2003

Migrant workers protest across China

With the Chinese New Year approaching, migrant workers across China are launching protests to demand the payment of outstanding wages. The workers, many of whom are from rural areas, need the money to travel home for the holiday season.

Protests have already taken place in Beijing, Shenzhen, Jinan, Nanjing and Guangzhou. In Beijing, over 1,000 workers barricaded themselves inside a luxury villa demanding the payment of two years' outstanding wages. In Nanjing 300 construction workers took to the streets.

Action by workers in other regions was more desperate. In Jinan, Shandong province, a worker set himself on fire when his request for unpaid wages was denied. In Shenzhen, in one of China's major free trade zones, a dozen workers threatened to leap from an unfinished skyscraper.

Surveys reveal that the problem of unpaid wages is widespread with a reported 72.5 percent of workers stating that they faced salary payment problems. According to one estimate, construction workers in Beijing were owed 2.2 billon yuan ($US242 million) in wages at the end of last year.

More killed in Chinese mines

Sixteen coal miners were killed in a gas explosion earlier this week at the Lishu Coal Mine, near Jixi in China's Heilongjang Province. Another 97 miners were underground and narrowly escaped injury when the blast ripped through the mine. The accident occurred within a week of two other explosions that left eight men dead and 30 missing. In June last year Jixi was the site of the fourth worst accident in China's mining history, which claimed 115 lives.

While the majority of fatalities occur in small privately owned or illegal mines, the highest fatalities have mainly been in large state-owned enterprises. The official figure for mining deaths for 2002 stands at over 5,000 but the number could be far higher as many deaths are covered up or go unreported.

Pilots at Garuda Indonesia begin action for pay

Over 600 pilots at Garuda Indonesia will begin a six-day "slowdown" on January 26, causing one-hour delays to all flights. The industrial action will be increased to five-hour delays, followed by a strike on February 10 if the company continues to reject demands for pay increases, improved bonuses and working conditions. Bans will also be placed on the recruitment of new pilots during the dispute.

Pilots earn between 7.9 million rupiah ($US887.60) and 22.8 million rupiah a month but since September 2001 have demanded salaries of 47 million to 88.8 million rupiah. Garuda management has refused to budge from its offer of 13 million rupiah to 24.6 million per month.

A Garuda Pilot Association spokesman said that even if the full pay demand was met, salaries for Indonesian pilots were 50 percent below the international standard. After years of financial crisis, Garuda began to record a profit in 1999. In 2001 the airline made a 262 billion rupiah profit.

Pakistani teachers protest over salary non-payment

Teaching staff at all primary and middle schools in Gujranwala attended protest meetings on January 16 over non-payment of December salaries. Speakers demanded all arrears be paid and the Finance Department to withdraw a planned 25-rupee (about $US0.40) "service charge" on teachers' pay. Teachers have warned that they will stage public demonstrations if they are not paid within a week.

Indian arts college lecturers strike over pay

Around 250 lecturers from 19 state-aided arts colleges in the western state of Maharashtra have been on strike since December 9. The lecturers have never been paid benefits recommended by a pay commission over seven years ago. Salaries are still based on previous commission recommendations but the teachers' provident fund and professional tax deductions are calculated on the new pay scale.

There have been no classes at any of the colleges since the industrial action began and parents and students are continuing to express support for the strike. The colleges have approximately 11,400 students.

Sri Lankan hunger-striker in critical condition

A rubber plant worker who climbed a 15-metre tower and began a hunger strike on January 6 is now in a critical condition. Fifty-two-year-old Ariyadasa is protesting over the inadequate compensation package offered by the government when it closed the plant. The hunger striker is being supported by 56 of his fellow workers.

The state-owned rubber factory is situated in Ketapola, Elpitiya in Southern Sri Lanka, about 100 kilometres south of Colombo. While most workers accepted the government redundancy package, Ariyadasa and his supporters refused, demanding an improved offer.

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Maintenance workers protest Australian CEO payout

One hundred and twenty maintenance workers at the BHP-Steel coil and coated products factory in Hastings, southeast of Melbourne, went on strike for 24 hours on January 21 in protest against a $30 million payout to Brian Gilbertson, the company's former CEO. Gilbertson resigned after six months in the position.

The workers are also angry over the company's decision to place apprentices on fixed-term contracts with no redundancy entitlements. Hastings maintenance workers struck last year demanding improved conditions but the strike was ended when the union made a deal allowing the company to use more contract, casual and part-time maintenance staff.

Coal-loading workers strike over safety

Workers at the Dalrymple Bay coal-loading terminal in Queensland struck on January 16 over safety concerns. They walked out when more than 100 tonnes of coal was dumped on the terminal's platform, causing a safety hazard. They remain on strike and are demanding payment for all lost time, claiming the incident is the fault of management. The company has only offered one day's pay.

Air New Zealand cabin crews to strike over flight hours

Air New Zealand cabin crew, members of the Flight Attendants and Related Services Association (FARSA), gave notice to strike for 24 hours on February 5. The strike, involving 1,000 workers, will be followed by a series of 48-hour stoppages.

The attendants are demanding a 24-hour midnight-to-midnight break for working 13-hour trans-Pacific flights from New Zealand to Los Angeles. Contract negotiations between Air New Zealand and FARSA broke down last week.

Airline management is refusing to discuss the "clear day" issue in contract negotiations, claiming it is a health and safety question and should be "resolved outside the industrial forum". However, a large part of the long-haul flight attendants' employment contract is taken up with duty-time limitations. A fatigue study established six years ago in agreement with the airline found a wide dissatisfaction among FARSA members over hours.

Air NZ has attacked the proposed strike as "unnecessary" and "unlawful" and claimed that it was timed to undermine tourism during the America's Cup in Auckland. FARSA has left the door open to cancel the industrial action, declaring that the strike notice is simply a mechanism "to get negotiations under way again".

Striking New Zealand paper workers ordered back to work

Striking workers at the Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) Kinleith paper mill were directed back to work last week by the employment court. A CHH legal spokesman said the court order represented "a great result". CHH applied for an injunction when 280 production workers began an indefinite strike on January 17. Employees are opposing the introduction of new work procedures that will destroy half the mill's 750-strong workforce.

Some 300 maintenance and stores employees lost their jobs last week under an agreement accepted by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU). CHH has handed their work over to ABB Maintenance Services.

EPMU officials said they were "not disappointed" with the court order ending the strike and looked forward to a substantive hearing in February. The union's main complaint is that it has not been "consulted" over how the mill will operate with only half the existing workforce.

PNG garbage collectors protest over wages

About 20 council employees in Mindi, in Papua New Guinea's Southern Highlands, dumped three loads of rotting rubbish at the gates of the district administration centre late last week. The workers have not been paid for 94 weeks and are refusing to remove the garbage until they receive full payment. Office workers have been unable to enter the building and no other council employees will remove the rotting trash. The council is attempting to find contractors willing to do the job.

Fiji electricity workers strike over work conditions

About 22 workers employed by the Fiji Electricity Authority workers walked off the job at the company's Navutu depot on January 22 in protest over management refusals to fix a malfunctioning air-conditioning unit. The unit broke down last November but the company has ignored repeated requests for its repair.

Employees have become ill working in the enclosed depot's extremely hot and humid environment. A union spokesman said there would be no resumption of work until the conditioner is operating.

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