Workers Struggles: Australia and the Pacific

1 February 2003

Union orders end to Indonesian public transport strike

Thousands of public transport drivers in North Sumatra ended a planned three-day strike against fuel and utility price hikes on January 28 after only 24 hours. Kesper-AU, the public transportation drivers and owners' association, called off the strike. Kesper-AU chairman Victor Nainggolan claimed that he ordered the return to work because the land transportation owners' organisation in Medan threatened to sack drivers if the strike continued.

The drivers, however, had defied earlier attempts to intimidate them, including a vicious thug attack allegedly organised by bus operators on the eve of the strike. Two men sustained serious head injuries in the assault and were hospitalised. One of those attacked said the assailants called drivers and students "provocateurs" for distributing leaflets calling for strike action. Members of a rival drivers' association, which split from Kesper-Au in 1998, worked during the walkout.

Philippines office workers demand unpaid bonuses

Local government workers employed by City Hall in Angeles (70 kilometres north of Manila) began daily lunchtime protests on January 30 to demand overdue bonus payments. City Hall agreed to pay 5,000 pesos ($US100) in December 2001 as part of a collective work agreement, but has not honoured the commitment.

The lunchtime protests are being organised by the Association of Government Employees for a New and Dynamic Angeles City (AGENDA). They are restricted to prayer meetings and noise-making to attract public attention. City administration officials have repeatedly refused to meet with AGENDA to discuss the bonus.

Filipino gin factory workers forced back to work

Striking workers at the La Tondena Distillery in Santa Barbara, Pangasinan (150 kilometres north of Manila) were ordered back to work this week by the Department of Labor and Employment. The workers, who are members of the Buklod ng Manggagawa (IBM), were demanding pay increases to bring their wages into parity with other employees at the plant. The higher-paid workers are members of the Alliance of Labor Union (ALU).

The company has refused to meet IBM delegates, claiming it has no legal right to represent the workers. Under labor law only one union can be party to an enterprise work agreement. A legal case is pending in the appellate court to determine which union should represent the workers.

Indian union ensures 11-hour blockade ineffective

Some 300,000 workers joined an 11-hour blockade of the Kerala government headquarters on January 28 to protest against the United Democratic Front (UDF) government's "anti-labour policies". This includes its use of the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) to attack striking government workers in 2002 and a strike ban on teachers. Workers also accuse the government of using the police to suppress industrial action.

Kerala police applied to the high court to stop the blockade. When the court refused the government called on the Centre of India Trade Unions (CITU), which organised the protest and is aligned to the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), to maintain order and ensure the mobilisation was "incident free". The CITU complied, rendering the blockade ineffective. Work was unaffected and employees reporting for duty were allowed to enter the premises.

The CPI-M governed Kerala until May 2001 when it lost elections to the UDF coalition. In April last year the Joint Convention of Trade Unions (JCTU) in Kerala, which includes CPI-M affiliated unions, shut down a 32-day strike by more than 500,000 state government employees and teachers, allowing the new state government to press ahead with budget cuts to a range of services.

Sri Lankan public service workers petition government

Public service workers in Sri Lanka campaigned outside the Labour Ministry on January 22 in protest against recent changes to the employee pension scheme. Workers collected signatures for a petition that they plan to present to the prime minister on February 10.

In line with International Monetary Fund demands, the Sri Lankan government moved last November to abolish a fully government-funded pension scheme in which retiring public servants were eligible for 75 to 90 percent of their wage.

Under the new arrangements, workers will be levied eight percent of their salary, while all new public service recruits after January 2003 will be excluded from the retirement benefits scheme. Under conditions were the average monthly wage of a government employee is only 6,000 rupees (just $US60), the pension levy constitutes a major attack on their living standards.

Approximately 0.1 percent of their monthly salary is already deducted from public sector workers' pay packets as a contribution towards an employees' insurance scheme. While workers can make claims on the scheme for medical purposes, there is widespread dissatisfaction over delays in processing applications.

Technical college lecturers take action over downgrade

Lecturers at 37 government technical colleges in Sri Lanka held a "sick leave" campaign on January 23 and 24 to protest a circular issued by the director general of government technical colleges. Taking sick leave en masse is a popular form of action in Sri Lanka and used by government employees to circumvent anti-strike laws.

© World Socialist Web Site

A spokesman for the Technical Education Lecturers Union claimed the circular degraded lecturers by scaling them down to the category of ordinary office workers. The lecturers took action after several discussions with the authorities failed to resolve the dispute. They also expressed concern over attacks on the conditions of technical college students, such as ending a daily allowance and concessionary bus fares. The campaign to oppose the downgrade includes members of several unions.

Pakistani university teachers oppose new ordinance

University teachers in Pakistan held a nationwide protest on January 29 to demand the government drop its proposed model university ordinance. The Federation of All Pakistan Academic Staff Association called the one-day protest.

In Peshawar, a large number of teachers marched from the Peshawar University Teachers Association (PUTA) office. PUTA leader Arbab Khan Afridi told teachers that the ordinance was aimed at transforming universities into profit-making institutions and would result in the loss of education rights for many youth. At Karachi University, students joined their teachers in a mass rally. Teachers at Mehran University of Engineering and Technology in Hyderabad also marched.

Pakistani water and power workers demonstrate against job losses

Workers at the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) in Larkana demonstrated on January 27 demanding the authority end retrenchments and forced retirements. A rally was staged at the local press club. The Pakistan Workers Confederation has accused the management of sacking hundreds of employees and stripping workers of union rights under laws enacted in 2000. The demonstrators demanded that the laws, which allow workers to be sacked with no right of appeal, be revoked.

Australian casino workers to strike after negotiations break down

Hundreds of unionised workers at the Crown Casino entertainment complex in Melbourne are due to strike today, February 1. The action was called after the management refused to grant a 15 percent wage increase over three years and negotiations broke down. Crown has offered only 12 percent.

The workers, members of the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union, have timed the strike to disrupt the company's busy Chinese New Year activities. The strike will be the second at Crown Casino within four weeks. On January 3 around 500 workers walked out over the same issue.

Brisbane plumbers strike for pay increase

Building industry plumbers in Brisbane went on strike for 48 hours on January 30 to demand a new work agreement, which includes a 15 percent wage rise, $24 travel allowance and a 36-hour working week.

On the same day Brisbane electricians took industrial action in support of a new work agreement and placed work bans on several commercial and residential construction sites. Work bans are already in place on about a dozen other sites. According to union spokesman, up to 300 sites across Queensland could eventually be affected. Statewide meetings of electricians will be held from February 3 to determine further industrial action.

Thousands of New Zealand teachers excluded from salary increase

A decision in early January by the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) to hand over a pay parity dispute to an arbitration panel for resolution has resulted in thousands of teachers being barred from salary increases.

The panel ruled this week that teachers without degrees in specialist areas, such as art, technology, physical education and computing, would barred from reaching the top level on the new salary scale negotiated by the union last year. Only those with qualifications equivalent to level 7 on the National Qualifications Framework can access the higher salary bracket.

The PPTA urged teachers to accept the contract deal it cobbled together with the government last year to close down a bitter 14-month dispute. Many teachers voted against the final settlement because it excluded non-degree teachers from higher pay. In January, fearing calls for renewed industrial action over the pay discrepancies in the settlement, the PPTA threatened legal action against the Ministry of Education and demanded the reconvening of the arbitration panel to rule on the issue.

The non-degree teachers hold a range of diplomas, trade certificates and advanced trade certificates in the technology and trades areas. They teach in curriculum areas that are already short-staffed and under conditions where general teacher shortages are the highest in recent history.

Fiji teachers sacked due to lack of funds

Over 200 unemployed teachers in Fiji are planning legal action against a number of school managers and principals. Teachers claim that their contracts for this year were not renewed even though there are vacancies in schools. To compensate for the lack of government funding, schools have reduced teacher numbers and increased class sizes. Teachers who go on maternity or sick leave are not replaced.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site