Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 February 2003

Miners strike at Philippines gold mine

Some 1,500 workers at Lepanto Consolidated Mining in Northern Luzon, the Philippine's largest gold mining firm, have been on strike since February 1 in defiance of a government no-strike order.

Members of the Lepanto Local Staff Union and the Lepanto Employees Union walked off the job and barricaded the main entrance to underground tunnels over "unfair labor practices". This includes, compulsory holiday work, unreasonable reporting times for underground workers and the hiring of more casual workers than full-time employees.

Despite incurring huge daily production losses, the company is refusing to negotiate and has handed the dispute over to the Department of Labor and Employment for mediation, claiming the industry is "indispensable to the national interest". Lepanto has already sacked the leaders of the two labor unions in an attempt to intimidate the strikers, giving them just 10 days to vacate company housing facilities.

South Korean watchmakers fight closure

Workers at watch-manufacturer Citizen Korea have been on strike since January 23 after learning that the company planned to shut it Mason Free Trade Zone factory. The company finally confirmed the plant closure with the South Korean Labor Ministry on January 27.

Citizen Korea began manufacturing in Mason, the country's largest free trade zone, in 1978. At its height the plant employed 2,300 people making 120,000 watches a month. As Citizen's head office in Japan relocated production to China and other cheaper labor zones, Citizen Korea drastically cut its workforce. It now employs only 200 people, producing 10,000 watches a month.

The striking workers are demanding the plant remain open and have organised themselves into three shifts to maintain around-the-clock occupation of the facility.

Civil servants in Japan penalised for work stoppage

Civil servants employed by the Kochi Prefecture in Japan were penalised for participating in a one-hour work stoppage in November last year. On February 3, Kochi Governor Daijiro Hashimoto announced penalties for 2,649 civil servants, including pay reductions and severe reprimands for 113 senior union members. Secretary of the in-house union was suspended for one month.

Strikes by government workers are illegal under Japanese law. Immediately after the November stoppage, which was called to protest the government's decision to cut pay retroactively from April 2002, Hashimoto threatened to punish all those who participated. He also demanded that strikers return a portion of their winter bonuses, known as a "diligence allowance", to compensate for lost time.

The last time prefecture workers struck was in 1996, to protest revisions of the wage system. About 3,900 people who took part in the stoppage suffered pay cuts or were given written warnings.

Pakistani workers protest against privatisation plan

On January 30, Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) workers in Pakistan demonstrated against the privatisation of the Faisalabad Electric Supply Company (FESCO). The workers gathered outside the press club in Quetta and chanted anti-government slogans.

Speakers at a later rally claimed that privatisation of FESCO would lead to increased electricity rates and impact on agriculture, industry and trade across the country. Union leaders who addressed the gathering called for negotiations with the authorities.

Workers in Sri Lanka demonstrate against bus sell-off

Workers from the Sri Lanka Transport Board (SLTB) picketed the Transport Ministry in Colombo on January 31 against the privatisation of SLTB-owned bus companies.

Presently there are 94 state-owned bus depots in Sri Lanka, employing thousands of workers. As part of its privatisation of public transport assets, the government has called for bids from private firms to take over regional bus operations. IBIS, a British consortium, has purchased a 39 percent share in six regional bus depots offered for sale last October. Shares in seven more regional companies will be traded on February 11.

The union covering SLTB workers wants a "negotiated settlement". Union leaders who addressed the January 31 picket complained that they have been unable to meet SLTB management. Opposition has been largely restricted to sending protest letters to the president and prime minister.

Sri Lankan teachers in former war zone demand transfers

About 300 teachers picketed the Provincial Education Ministry in Trincomalee on January 29. Trincomalee is situated in eastern Sri Lanka, 250 kilometres from Colombo.

The teachers want transfers for all teachers with four or more year's service in the former war zones in the country's north and east. They also demanded authorities provide a written assurance that they will introduce an improved system to govern transfers. Teachers from several areas in north and east provinces such as Vavunia, Trincomalee, Kantale, Seruwila, Mahaoya and Dehiattakandiya participated in the campaign.

Australian miners strike over pay deal

Mineworkers at the Xstrata-owned Narama Coal Colliery in the Hunter Valley, north of Sydney, walked off the job for 48 hours on February 3 to demand improved wages and working conditions be included in a new work agreement. The Construction Forestry, Mining & Energy Union (CFMEU) said that workers rejected the company's latest pay offer.

At the same time, striking miners at the United Colliery at Singleton

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returned to work on February 3, after being on strike for four days for a pay increase. They are planning another five-day strike at the end of this week. The CFMEU announced that United Colliery workers would meet on February 7 to discuss recent negotiations. The union has a financial interest in the mine.

Strike at State Library of Victoria

More than 100 librarians, technicians and IT staff at the State Library of Victoria in Melbourne walked out on strike for 24 hours on February 5 to demand pay parity with library workers in other Australian states. According to union sources, Victorian librarians are paid 11.7 percent less than their counterparts in South Australia and New South Wales.

The strikers demanded an immediate six percent increase in pay—an average rise of $900 per year—and changes to the career classification system that would deliver workers higher pay scales sooner. The State Library has offered a three percent rise—barely above the rise in the cost-of-living. Workers picketed the library and held a public rally.

Melbourne bus drivers strike over unfair dismissal

Around 280 workers at National Bus in Melbourne went on strike on February 6 to protest the unfair dismissal of a bus driver involved in a minor accident late last month.

The workers, members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU), picketed the company's head office to support the sacked driver, who was due to appear before the Industrial Relations Commission that day.

Bill Noonan from the TWU said the driver was sacked after his bus rolled at low speed into a wall during the Australia Day holiday. Noonan said no one was injured in the incident and although it was a driver error, "it's a matter of the punishment not fitting the crime". He pointed out that the driver had a 10-year unblemished record.

Union calls off strike at Crown Casino

The Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers' Union called off industrial action at Melbourne's Crown Casino planned last weekend. The union scotched the stoppage after settling a new enterprise work agreement with the company.

The agreement provides a 12.5 percent pay increase over three years. Crown said the pay deal might be increased to 13 percent, depending on the state of gaming revenues. The union was seeking 15 percent over three years after revising the claim down substantially. The dispute has been in progress since late last year. On January 3, over 500 workers went on strike over the issue.

Vegetable factory workers to place work bans

Workers at McCain's vegetable processing factory in Smithton, Tasmania, will impose work bans from February 7 in a long-running dispute over a new workplace agreement.

The 350 workers are demanding improved entitlements—including long service leave, holiday loading, sick leave payments and increased penalty rates for Friday night overtime—to bring their sub-standard conditions into line with existing norms in the Tasmanian food industry.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union called off strike action in January even though workers' demands had not been met. The union claimed it had been "happy" with the company's response to improved sick leave and protective prescription eyewear. Since then, negotiations have failed to resolve the other issues.

Electricians back state-wide industrial action

More than 100 construction sites in Queensland, including the massive Suncorp Stadium project in Brisbane, will be hit by strikes later this month. More than 350 electricians in Brisbane voted on February 4 to support a proposal for state-wide industrial action beginning with a 48-hour stoppage on February 14.

This will be followed by a 10-day stoppage on February 26 if a satisfactory solution is not found to a dispute over a new enterprise work agreement. The electricians want seeking a $2.64 per hour pay rise.

New Zealand academics protest over pay

More than 250 staff from the University of Canterbury staff rallied on February 3 and voted to reject a two percent pay offer by the university. The staff voted to strike for 24-hours and hold two stop-work meetings sometime during the enrolment week between February 17 to 21. Academic staff will also refuse to carry out enrolment administration.

According to the Association of University Staff (AUS), the two percent offer is the lowest made by teaching institutions in the country and represents a wage cut in real terms. The university administration declared it will "not budge in the face of industrial action". The AUS has announced it is ready to resume negotiations.

NZ doctors strike for improved pay and conditions

About 30 senior doctors at Timaru Hospital began industrial action on February 3 over pay and workloads. The doctors are planning weekly 24-hour strikes over the next five weeks. The action is the first-ever strike action by senior doctors in New Zealand's history.

Due to a lack of medical registrars, doctors at Timaru are on call one night in every three. Even though they work long hours and weekend rosters the doctors remain among the lowest paid in the country and claim they get little recognition for their efforts.

The doctors are demanding the District Health Board (DHB) hire more registrars and increase on-call payments in the meantime. The DHB has offered pay rises of up to $NZ13,000 per annum, but the doctors say this is insufficient to attract the new staff required. According to the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists, attempts at mediation had "achieved nothing".

The DHB claims the pay offer is "generous" and says it is all that can be afforded under the Labour government's budget restraints. Health Minister Annette King has refused to comment, saying "industrial matters" must be dealt with by the health boards.

PNG waterfront workers protest unfair treatment

Waterfront workers in Port Moresby struck for four hours on February 4. The workers were protesting the general manager's practice of ignoring the chain of command, overriding immediate job supervisors and interfering in the work process.

The workers, many with 20 years service, claim the manager treats them "unfairly" and disrupts work allocated by the supervisors. A spokesman for the workers described the situation as "unbearable".

Director for Port Services Darren Young told the Papua New Guinea Maritime Workers Union it would take a month to sort out the problem but promised that procedures would be established to stop any reoccurrence. Workers have demanded the general manager be sacked.

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