

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 March 2003

Philippine miners reject agreement to end strike

Over 1,200 miners are continuing to strike after rejecting a memorandum of agreement (MOA) signed by union officials and the Lapento Consolidated Mining Company. The miners struck on February 1.

The MOA failed to satisfy most of the miners' demands. These include an end to compulsory working during holidays, payment for unused vacation time and rest days, granting of long overdue promotions and an end to the outsourcing of work to contractors. The company has also refused to reinstate a number of union officials it had sacked.

The union entered mediated talks last week despite an attack by 100 police on the miners' picket lines, during which dozens of workers were injured. The National Conciliation and Mediation Board is meeting with both parties this weekend.

Indonesian workers rally for severance pay

Some 650 workers sacked by bag manufacturer PT Tasindo demonstrated outside the Tangerang regency council office in Tigaraksa, Indonesia. The workers demanded the council force the company to pay the severance amounts stipulated in state labour laws. Management said it would only pay the equivalent of one month's salary in severance, far below the legislated minimum.

The workers were sacked after they held a rally last month demanding the company increase their monthly wage from 590,000 to 628,000 rupiah (\$US66 to \$US70).

In a separate dispute, 350 security workers from PT Tri Otomat Pratama Guard demonstrated outside Tangerang municipal council offices on February 24 after learning that they would be laid off when a contract to provide airport security ended. The company will not provide any severance pay, even though many employees have more than three years service.

Indonesian workers rally to oppose labour bill

Hundreds of workers demonstrating outside the House of Representatives in Jakarta on February 25 clashed with baton-wielding police. The protest was called to oppose the passage of controversial new labour legislation that will undermine workers' rights, including the right to strike, and restrict severance payments.

A government representative said the legislation, previously known as the labor protection and development bill, was aimed at creating a "positive investment climate in the country".

Having passed the House of Representatives, the bill now goes to President Megawati Sukarnoputri to be signed into law. Even if Megawati fails to endorse the bill, it will automatically become law after 30 days.

Korean workers and security guards clash outside engineering plant

On February 25, about 300 workers clashed with 70 security guards outside the Changwon plant of Doosan Heavy Industries and Construction (DHIC), in South Korea's Kyongsang province.

Employees, some carrying steel pipes, arrived at the main gate to confront guards who had beaten a union member earlier in the day. The worker had been attempting to hang a banner condemning the company's

anti-union actions outside the main administrative building. Thirty-two security guards and four unionists were injured in the clash.

The dispute has been simmering since the death of 50-year-old DHIC worker Bae Dal-ho, who set fire to himself outside the plant's main gate in early January in protest against company policies toward its workforce.

An official inquiry has confirmed union claims that DHIC had drawn up plans to undermine labour rights in the plant, including a black list of union activists and "pacification activity" to intimidate workers. The company's "pacification" plan included the hiring of a small army of security guards.

Taiwan rail workers rally against privatisation

About 2,000 rail workers occupied the main station in Taipei in Taiwan on February 24 to protest against government privatisation plans. Under a deal recently signed by the Transportation Ministry, the state-run Taiwan Railways Administration will hand over, free of charge, four rail services and two of the station's main platforms to the private operator Taiwan High Speed Rail.

Workers believe the deal could cripple the debt-ridden administration and lead to job losses. Even more jobs could be axed after the private company begins a high-speed service in 2005. A workers' spokesman said they were considering industrial action to close down the rail network if the government does not annul the agreement.

Maids take to the streets to protest pay cuts

Over 10,000 foreign-born maids demonstrated through the streets of Hong Kong on February 23. The demonstration was in opposition to government plans to levy a new tax on those employing guest workers as domestics, and to cut the minimum wages of maids.

The plan will see the salaries of Hong Kong's 240,000 maids slashed by \$HK400 (\$US51) a month, reducing pay to just \$HK3,270. While the employers will have to pay the new tax levy in October, maids believe it will simply be deducted from their pay packets.

Maids are already among the lowest paid workers in Hong Kong. In 1999, despite massive protests, the government cut their wages. Most are women from the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and the Indian subcontinent.

Indian workers protest attacks on labour rights

Over 50,000 workers from a range of unions marched through New Delhi to the federal parliament on February 26. The workers were protesting against the government's Second National Commission of Labour legislation. One union declared that the legislation "dismantled all rights of workers and has facilitated hire and fire of employees, indiscriminate outsourcing of jobs and closure of industrial units".

The workers also denounced the sale of public sector enterprises. A union spokesman alleged that no single privatisation deal had been free of corruption. In speeches laced with nationalist rhetoric, union officials accused the government of the "surrender of the country's economic sovereignty to international financial institutions".

Indian municipal workers strike for pay increase

More than 5,000 garbage collectors employed by the Thane Municipal

Corporation (TMC) in Maharashtra returned to work on February 23, after being on strike for two days. The strike ended after the council agreed to a pay increase of between 1,500 rupees and 3,300 rupees (about \$US30 to \$US60).

A workers' spokesman said management had been given enough time to consider the pay demands before the strike was called. He said a verbal agreement on the pay increase from the council was not enough and that workers wanted a written order from the municipal commissioner.

Engineering workers demonstrate in New Delhi

Engineering workers from Bharat Heavy Plate and Vessels (BHVP) in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, demonstrated in New Delhi on February 25 to demand wage and benefit increases.

According to the union covering the BHVP workers, a pay rise was agreed in October 2001 but the government had not yet issued a clearance for it. BHPV manufactures equipment for India's defense industry and other public sector corporations.

Sri Lankan bus workers demand salary arrears

Workers employed at the New Eastern Bus depot in Ampara, 200 kilometres from Colombo, struck on February 17. The 475 workers are demanding payment of their January wages, which the company promised on February 8.

Some 300 employees from the Kandy South depot demonstrated the next day over the same issue. Workers complained that they were often not paid on time. Management blamed delays in state funding. The funding shortage has also resulted in a large number of bus breakdowns due to lack of regular maintenance.

Strikes hit Australian construction sites

Work on major building sites across Queensland came to a standstill this week as thousands of construction workers, plumbers and electricians began protracted strikes.

About 1,500 electricians, working for more than 100 separate construction contractors, began a 10-day strike on February 27, after negotiations in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) failed to resolve a dispute over a new enterprise work agreement.

The electricians are demanding a 35 percent pay increase. Electrical employer groups have offered only 18.5 percent. A number of employers, including John Goss, Tyco and the Multi Service Group, have applied to the AIRC to stop the current industrial action and end the bargaining period for the new agreement. If the application is successful further strikes will be illegal under the federal Workplace Relations Act.

Construction workers and plumbers also launched a 10-day strike in support of new enterprise work agreements on February 26. A spokesman for the construction workers said that one of major issues preventing an agreement with the Queensland Master Builders (QMB) was the current 13 rostered days off (RDOs). The QMB wants to be able to buy out the RDOs, but workers want to take the time off.

Teachers' union suspends industrial action in Queensland

The teachers' union in Queensland has suspended plans to hold a continuous series of stop-work meetings after the State Labor government agreed to negotiations on reducing class sizes.

Teachers at 9 schools held meetings over contentious issue and another 20 schools were due to take action in the coming days. Teachers at Sarina State High, Mackay North State High and Anderson in Mackay voted to strike for 36-hours if the issue is not resolved. Teachers in Queensland schools are required to teach classes of 30 students.

Aircraft engineers to stop work over safety

Aircraft engineers have called for nationwide stop-work meetings on March 10. The workers will discuss a campaign to oppose changes by Virgin Blue which they believe will undermine safety. Virgin wants pilots to conduct pre-takeoff safety checks, work normally done by qualified engineers.

The Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) has approved the use of

pilots for pre-takeoff inspections. According to the Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA), the change has already resulted in a number of unsafe incidents, including the removal of landing gear brake pins.

New Zealand doctors continue strikes

Thirty senior doctors at Timaru Hospital held the fourth strike in a series of six-hour rolling stoppages over pay and conditions on February 27. The doctors claim that inadequate wage levels have resulted in staff shortages and heavier workloads. They are forced to work extensive weekend rosters and be on call one night in every three.

The doctors have rejected a 6 percent pay rise offer from the South Canterbury District Health Board (DHB) as inadequate to attract new applicants. A senior clinician with 31 years' experience at the hospital announced his resignation this week, saying: "When you get to the stage that senior doctors are striking because the tools and methods are not sufficient, that is a failure of the system". He warned that hospital management actions during the dispute would make it more difficult to recruit consultant staff.

An appeal last week by senior medical staff that the DHB override hospital management and become directly involved in settling the dispute was rejected.

Immigrant farm workers oppose exploitation

New Zealand's Immigration Minister Lianne Dalziel has been forced to launch an inquiry into an immigrant labour scam after three Ukrainian workers lodged complaints with authorities this week. The young people were part of a group of 11 who each paid \$NZ3,600 to an agent acting for a Christchurch-based Russian go-between who found work for immigrants on local farms.

The Ukrainians said they were exploited while working near Ashburton in the South Island where they had to work 13-hour days, with \$130 per week deducted for "expenses". The farm workers were forced to sign contracts they could not understand and were told that if they did not do so, they would be sent home.

The Immigration Service has suspended six farmers' licenses to recruit overseas while the allegations are being investigated. Work permits, specific to each farmer, were granted to cover the use of immigrant labour after farmers claimed they could not find locals to fill the vacancies. The immigrant workers had been employed since August under a scheme to fill vacancies for "skilled farm managers".

Police brought in to confront waterside picket

More than 20 police were rushed to South Port in New Zealand on February 19 to escort workers from contract company Mainland Stevedoring through a waterside workers' picket line.

The waterside workers are protesting against the use of contract labour to load logs onto ships. The dispute over contract labour began two years ago when forestry company Carter Holt hired Mainland to provide labour at several ports. Mainland workers are employed on inferior wages and working conditions.

From the beginning, the Waterfront Workers' Union has made no attempt to appeal to the Mainland workers. Instead the union claims the dispute is over "outsiders" taking "local jobs".

In December 1999, Christchurch woman Christine Clarke was killed when a businessman ran his vehicle into her on a waterside workers' picket line at Lyttelton.

Solomon Islands teachers ready to strike over back pay

Members of the Solomon Islands National Teachers Association (SINTA) will go on strike on March 3 demanding the payment of over \$10 million (\$US1.3 million) in back pay. This is the equivalent of 10 weeks pay for every teacher. SINTA said the strike would only be called off if the government agreed to pay half the outstanding amount before Monday.



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