

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 December 2003

Workers in China arrested for forming union

Two workers were recently arrested in Chongqing in South China for forming a union at a munitions factory where they worked.

Du Hongqi and Li Yanying, who are husband and wife, face up to five years jail. They established the union to fight company plans to lay off 700 workers. Workers, many of them have worked their entire lives at the factory, have been demanding compensation of \$US 1,200. Authorities moved against the new union because it secured support at the plant and from many workers across a number of industries.

In a separate dispute, 12 female employees at a factory in Nanching attempted to commit suicide in protest against the sacking of 4,600 workers. The total workforce at the plant is 5,000. Those laid off will receive just \$US100 severance pay. According to reports, corruption by management officials contributed to a financial crisis at the factory.

Philippine transport workers strike over rising cost of fuel

The city of Bacolod came to a halt on December 8 when 85 percent of public buses and jeepney operators held a two-day strike. The strikers are demanding a one-peso fare hike to compensate for recent increases in fuel costs. They are also demanding abolition of the Oil Deregulation Law, which they claim is responsible for pushing up fuel prices.

The United Negros Drivers Operators Association organised the strike. Protest rallies took place at various locations around the city and a demonstration was held in Manila.

Thai workers oppose unfair dismissals

Workers from German-owned MKS Jewelry International in Bangkok, Thailand are continuing to fight against their unfair dismissals and have registered a complaint with the Labour Committee of the House of Representatives. The 24 workers were sacked earlier this year after they formed a union at the company and went to the Ministry of Labour to register it.

The company had told the ministry that they would not dismiss the workers for attempting to register the union, but later sacked them on the grounds they had held an illegal strike and caused trouble at the plant.

The sacked employees are representatives for the 450-strong, mainly female workforce. They formed a union to obtain improved conditions and to demand the end of humiliating body searches at the plant. Not only are workers scanned with metal detectors, but they are also subjected to a full body search by security guards at the end of each shift. Several workers are also selected randomly

each day and strip-searched.

The company has been vicious in its treatment of the sacked workers. After dismissing them, management circulated the workers' names to other companies in the industrial zone to stop them finding alternate employment.

Sri Lankan health workers fight forced transfer

Staff at the Kalutara, Nagoda hospital (43 kilometres south of Colombo) held a protest on December 5 to stop the transfer of an auxiliary worker. According to the All Ceylon Health Workers Union secretary, the worker was transferred because he played a leading role in recent strike action.

Hospital staff ended the protest and returned to work after being assured by management that the transfer order would be withdrawn.

Water supply workers strike over privatisation

Around 6,000 workers at the National Water Supply and Drainage Board in Sri Lanka held a four-hour national strike on December 11 to demand a salary increase and oppose government plans to privatise the country's water supply system. They claim that the move will lead to layoffs and increased prices for consumers.

The workers struck on October 15 over the same issues and are planning further industrial action on December 17 if their demands are not met.

Technical education teachers work-to-rule

A work-to-rule campaign by technical college teachers throughout Sri Lanka has entered its third week. The teachers launched the action on November 17 to protest against an extension of work schedules from 36 weeks a year to 48 weeks. They also want guidelines governing transfers amended, vacant positions for technical education officials filled and the establishment of a proper scholarship scheme.

According to the Association of Technical Education Teachers, the Minister for Tertiary Education has not responded to the union's demands. The work-to-rule is delaying new student applications and examinations.

Custom officers strike against government bill

Sri Lankan custom officers struck on December 3 against the proposed Revenue Authority Bill, which endangers jobs and the officers' right to a pension. Workers from the Inland Revenue Department, the Excise Department and Sri Lanka Customs demonstrated outside the Inland Revenue Department in Central Colombo. After returning to work the next day they began a work-to-rule campaign.

Despite negotiations with unions on the bill for the past year and a half, the Finance Ministry has ignored workers' concerns and forwarded the proposals to the cabinet.

University teachers demand removal of Vice Chancellor

Sri Jayawardanapura University staff have begun a hunger strike to force the removal of the vice chancellor. Teachers accuse him of not following proper procedures and bias when appointing university posts and approving promotions. They also claim that he initiates repressive actions against students.

Initially only one teacher began fasting, but when the university gained a court order for his removal to hospital the remaining teachers joined the protest.

Roadside mechanics return to work

Roadside mechanics employed by the National Road and Motoring Association (NRMA) in New South Wales have returned to work after walking off the job on December 7. The strike began when management stood down mechanics for refusing to work as directed. The mechanics had imposed work bans on the use of a computerised job allocation system in their vehicles.

The bans are part of a campaign for a 21 percent pay rise over three years and in opposition to the NRMA's plans to increase the use of contract labour. The NRMA has only offered to pay 11 percent over 13 months. The basis of the return to work has not been made public.

Postal workers strike over new technology

Australia Post parcels centres workers struck for 24 hours on December 10, following a breakdown in negotiations over proposed technology and network changes. The postal union claims that the changes will adversely affect the jobs of about 850 staff.

A spokesman for the New South Wales branch of the Communication Electrical and Plumbers Union said the strike would mean that Sydney would be without parcel post services for part of the week. The stoppage went ahead after Australia Post failed in the Industrial Relations Commission to block the strike.

Queensland nurses continue industrial action

Nurses at the Mater and Friendly Society hospitals in Bundaberg, Queensland voted at a stop-work meeting on December 9 to continue their campaign of industrial action for improved pay and working conditions. The nurses are also concerned about inadequate staffing and heavy workloads.

The meeting discussed the inequities in wage levels between nurses in public and private hospitals. Registered year eight, level one nurses employed by the Mater hospital are paid 7.7 percent less than their counterparts in public hospitals.

Truck strike threatened after road death

Truck drivers in New South Wales are threatening industrial action before the end of the month unless the state government's Workcover Authority investigates drivers' timetables. The threat emerged in the wake of a collision involving two trucks on December 9 south of Coffs Harbour in which one driver died.

The Transport Workers Union believes that "unrealistic" timetables and deadlines are being forced on truck drivers, leading to accidents. The union also accused the authority of not conducting prompt investigations into truck accidents.

Flights held up by baggage handlers' snap strikes

Around 300 baggage handlers employed by Qantas airlines at Tullamarine international airport in Melbourne held two snap strikes on December 9. The first strike, lasting half an hour, was to hear a report from the Transport Workers Union (TWU) on outstanding issues related to rostering and part-time work. The second strike, over the sacking of a worker for taking extended sick leave, lasted for over an hour.

The strikes delayed 18 domestic and international flights by up to 90 minutes. A TWU spokesperson said that the actions were a result of ongoing problems workers faced at the Melbourne airport.

Fiji public sector unions split over pay rise

Three public sector unions this week rejected the Public Service Commission's (PSC) offer of a one percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA), with another one percent increment to be paid early next year. The unions involved are the Fiji Public Service Association (FPSA), Fiji Nurses Association and the Fiji Teachers Union. The FPSA has given 28-days notice that it will be holding secret ballots to vote on industrial action. The three unions have filed for a judicial review into the issue to be called on December 22.

FPSA general secretary, Rajeshwar Singh, accused the three other unions—the Fiji Teachers Association, Fiji Public Employees and Viti Civil Servants—of "selling their members short". The PSC offer contains an agreement to replace the annual COLA adjustment with a Performance Management System. The change will disadvantage workers by distorting salary scales in the public service.

Hundreds of PNG teachers may be left stranded

More than 700 teachers in Papua New Guinea's Morobe province who were planning to return to their home provinces for the Christmas holidays could be left stranded. Teachers have flocked to the Morobe branch of the Teachers Association this week to complain that they have not been paid their annual leave fare entitlements. Under the current award, teachers employed outside their home regions are entitled to fares to allow them to be with family and friends at Christmas.

Officers from the Division of Education in Morobe cannot explain what happened to \$US278,800 set aside in the province's budget to pay the teachers' entitlements. The matter has been left in the hands of the Provincial Education Board.



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