

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 December 2003

Indian petroleum workers strike against privatisation

About 150,000 Indian oil workers held a one-day national strike on December 16 to oppose privatisation of their industry. Employees in a number of state-owned oil companies, including ONGC, Indian Oil Corporation, HPCL, BPCL, Oil India and IBP, participated. The strikers are members of 76 unions.

All India Trade Union Congress general secretary Gurudas Dasgupta said the strike action was the first to be jointly organised by all unions in the industry. All India Petroleum Workers' Union president C.S. Dalvi said the walkout won full support and that the unions would call an indefinite strike if the government continued with its privatisation plans.

The unions have accused the central government of acting under pressure from transnational energy companies which want to control the highly-profitable state owned oil industry which has a nationwide retail network and other valuable assets.

Sri Lankan water workers strike

Around 6,000 workers at the National Water Supply and Drainage Board in Sri Lanka went on strike for four hours on December 17. Employees want a 4,000-rupee minimum salary (\$US40) and the immediate payment of 1,750 rupees in salary arrears to each worker.

The strike was also in opposition to government plans to privatise the country's water supply system. Workers fear that it will lead to layoffs and increased prices for consumers. Water board workers struck on December 17 and October 15 over the same issues.

Sri Lankan health workers continue industrial action

Around 80,000 Sri Lankan health workers have maintained their industrial campaign for a pay rise with a series of short strikes. The workers went on strike on December 12 for four hours and for a full day on December 15.

They are demanding a 44 percent pay rise, in line with the increase recently won by medical officers. In September, health workers, from minor staff to assistant medical practitioners, participated in a two-week strike in support of the pay increase.

Korean transit workers to strike for new work agreement

On December 17, the labour union covering workers in the Seoul Metropolitan Rapid Transit Corporation announced that its members would strike from December 23. The announcement came after negotiations for a new work agreement on salaries broke down.

The transit workers want an 11 percent pay increase, an additional one-day holiday each month, a three-year extension on the retirement age and reinstatement of employees fired for union activities. Management has offered a 5 percent pay increase, in line with guidelines laid down by the Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs.

The decision to strike follows a union ballot earlier this month. Even though 57.8 percent of the workers voted for strike action, the government claims it will be illegal because the union did not go through a lengthy mediation process with the Labor Relations Commission.

Malaysian workers rally against poor conditions

Over 600 workers are planning to rally in Kuala Lumpur on December

21 to expose the extremely poor working conditions in the metal and textile industries. Many employees are forced to work 10 to 12 hour shifts without any additional compensation.

They are demanding the government set a 900-ringgit minimum (\$US236) and an eight-hour day. Most factory workers currently earn between 450 to 600 ringgits daily. Other demands include three-month maternity leave and a mandatory retrenchment fund.

The rally will also demand that the government end its opposition to the formation of unions in the country's electronic industry.

The rally is being organised by the Kajang-based Network of Oppressed Peoples (Jerit!). The non-governmental organisation plans to collect 200,000 signatures from factory workers across Malaysia and present them to the prime minister in 2004.

Western Australian teachers union accepts minimal pay offer

After a three-month dispute, the Australian Education Union leadership in Western Australia last week capitulated to the Gallop Labor government's minimal pay offer.

State primary and secondary school teachers were fighting for a 30 percent pay rise over three years, plus improvements in working conditions. Teachers had demanded smaller class sizes in secondary and upper primary schools and improved pay rates and classifications for teachers in remote country areas. Thousands of teachers across the state staged a 24-hour stoppage, the first in eight years, on November 18.

The AEU leadership agreed to the government's offer of just 3.3 percent over three years and some minor concessions on class sizes and conditions for country teachers.

Pilbara pipeline workers walk off the job

More than 150 pipeline workers walked off the job last weekend in the remote Pilbara region of Western Australia, after several collapsed from heat exhaustion. The Australian Workers Union (AWU) members had been instructed to work in temperatures over 50 degrees Celsius. The pipeline workers also accused their employer, McConnell Dowell, of not providing adequate drinking water, medical facilities and air-conditioned vehicles.

The workers are building a pipeline from Port Hedland on the north west coast to the inland mining town of Telfer. The desert camp is 200 kilometres east of Port Hedland.

A WorkSafe official inspected the desert camp following the strike and issued McConnell Dowell with four improvement notices. AWU secretary, Bill Shorten, commented: "It's appalling to think in this day and age we have people working here in Australia in conditions that we haven't seen since the days of convict road gangs in the nineteenth century".

The workers have also been forced to scout hundreds of kilometres from the base camp, without two-way radios or adequate water supplies.

Queensland council workers strike for permanency

Tradesmen employed by the Brisbane City Council went on strike on December 17 to protest the continued use of contract labour and breaches of provisions in their new certified work agreement. The agreement gives

preference to permanent employees and allows casual workers to apply for permanency after 12 months.

The council's records show that it employs 80 building workers on a casual or temporary basis or through labour hire companies. Some of the casuals have worked for the council for 10 years while many others have been there for more than 12 months. To date only nine workers have been considered for permanent positions.

Parents of disabled workers fight company abuse

The Department of Family and Community Services is to investigate allegations of physical abuse and sexual harassment of disabled workers at a factory in the rural town of Hamilton, in western Victoria. Parents of the workers at the Nigretta furniture-making plant have also contacted the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) to investigate.

According to a CFMEU spokesman, some of the complaints include allegations that disabled employees late for work were made to sit in a "naughty chair" all day and that a young girl with Downs Syndrome was locked in a toilet for spending too much time away from her workbench.

Written statements from parents and former employees have been given to the relevant federal government department and an investigator has been appointed.

New Zealand health workers vote to strike

Health workers at Wellington's Capital and Coast District Health Board (CCDHB) have given notice of strike action on December 23. General service workers will stop work for two hours and mental health staff will hold two two-hour stoppages on the day. Escalating levels of industrial action in the New Year will follow the strikes.

The workers want a three percent across-the-board pay rise. Bargaining between the Public Service Association (PSA) and the CCDHB began in August. A PSA spokesman said the board had consistently refused to make a reasonable pay offer comparable to the increases being granted in many other industries.

Mental health service and allied health workers, such as physiotherapists, occupational therapists, social workers, technicians, pharmacists, medical laboratory, and administrative and clerical services, are involved in the dispute.

New Zealand police snatch Thai workers in dawn raid

Nine vineyard workers are to be deported this week following early morning raids by New Zealand police and immigration officers on a Blenheim property. The nine Thai nationals, who were living on the rural property, were served with removal orders. The three women and six men have been in New Zealand since April 2002 when they arrived on three-month visitor permits.

More than 30 so-called "illegal" workers, mostly Thai, Malaysian or Indian, were believed to be working in the South Island's grape growing area. Many had paid up to \$NZ10,000 to an agent in their home country to come to New Zealand. The "recruitment fee" is deducted from workers' wages, along with rental payments for houses sometimes occupied by six or seven people.

Two Thai workers told the *Marlborough Express* that their \$8.50 an hour pay rate was far less than promised and they were not paid holiday entitlements or statutory leave because they were illegal. At the same time, they were reluctant to leave because it would be difficult to get work in Thailand and impossible to repay their debts to recruiting agents.

New Zealand education staff to vote on contract

Early childhood teachers and support staff are holding a postal ballot this week on a pay deal negotiated between the NZ Educational Institute and early childhood employers. The agreement, which covers more than 800 teachers and support staff employed at 150 childcare centres, crèches, and community kindergartens, was reached after four days of talks.

Under the proposal, qualified teachers in centres covered by the agreement will be paid a salary instead of an hourly rate. Key points in the

settlement include an average pay increase of 2.65 percent for teachers and 2.5 percent for all support staff. Compensation will be paid if work hours are reduced due to a fall in the number of children at a centre.

East Timor workers strike over pay cut

Chubb Security sacked employees providing security and cleaning services to the World Bank's East Timor offices this week. The workers were dismissed for striking on December 4 over the company's decision to cut wages by 30 percent from \$US133 to \$US94 dollars a month.

The Confederation of East Timor Trade Unions accused Chubb of breaching the labour code for failing to give its employees 30 days notice of termination. It also raised concerns over unpaid overtime and company attempts to force the security workers to sign individual work contracts.

PNG teachers protest over non-payment of travel allowance

More than 700 teachers in the Morobe province of Papua New Guinea on December 16 rallied outside the provincial education office in an attempt to secure annual leave travel allowances and to confirm their postings for next year. Office staff locked the doors and prevented teachers from presenting their log-of-claims to education administrators.

The teachers have been trying for three weeks to force the Division of Education to address the issue. Under the current award, teachers employed away from their home regions are entitled to fares allowing them to be with family and friends at Christmas.

PNG Teachers Association regional secretary, Arnold Kondi, alleged that the 976,100 kina (\$US279,000) earmarked for teachers' fare entitlements have been fraudulently used for other purposes by the provincial government. He said the union is preparing to take the issue to court.

Solomon Islands public service union accepts reduced pay increase

Attempts by government employees in the Solomon Islands to gain adequate compensation for foregoing pay increases in the past seven years has been thwarted by their own union.

This week, the Solomon Islands Public Employees Union (SIPEU) accepted the Trade Dispute Panel's decision to award thousands of public servants and government employees a 2.5 percent pay increase plus an 8 percent Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA). The 2.5 percent will be backdated to January this year and the COLA payment to January 2002.

The offer falls far short of the union's original demand of a 5 percent pay increase and a 45 percent COLA. Public employees have not received a pay rise since 1996 and their original demand reflected the cost-of-living increase since then.

The original claim was widely supported by public sector workers, who went on strike in November. The SIPEU, however, accepted the government's claim that the pay demand was "unaffordable" and called off the strike after one day. Playing down the union's capitulation, a SIPEU spokesman told the media that the decision was "better than nothing", cynically adding that government employees should view it as an "early Christmas present".



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