

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

27 December 2003

## **Textile workers arrested in Thailand**

More than 260 migrant textile workers from Nasawat Apparel at Mae Sot in Thailand's Tak province were arrested and taken from their temporary refuge at a local Buddhist temple this week after striking over unpaid, below minimum wages and exploitative conditions. Police arrived at the temple as employees were completing labour protection complaint forms to claim wages owed for the past two years and to charge their employer over horrific working conditions.

The migrant workers from Myanmar (Burma)—209 women and 60 men—were arrested after Tak provincial employment department head told police that the workers had been sacked and were now illegal immigrants.

Thailand border police and soldiers carrying M16s were also involved in the attack, with police using electric batons on some female employees. The textile workers have been taken to Immigration Detention Centres in Tak province and the Thailand/Burma border awaiting likely deportation.

## **Sri Lankan workers fight factory closure**

Around 150 workers from Reckitt Benckiser (Lanka) Ltd (RBLL) held a protest outside the factory on December 18, to oppose the plant's sudden closure. Workers want the facility reopened. "We want our jobs and not the puny VRS [voluntary retirement scheme]," angry workers told the media.

RBLL, which makes cleaning products and other consumer items, announced in November that it was outsourcing manufacturing and logistics in order to boost productivity and profitability. The Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers Union has accused RBLL of violating a collective agreement with the union.

## **Sri Lanka oil workers stop work**

Hundreds of Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC)

workers at the main storage complex in Kolonnawa in suburban Colombo, went on strike on December 26 to demand immediate payment of overtime arrears. They have not been paid overtime for two years.

Authorities, fearful that other CPC workers would support the strike and panic would spread throughout Sri Lanka over oil shortages, pledged payment of arrears and the strike ended after three hours.

## **Hotel workers picket Labour Secretariat**

Sri Lankan hotel workers launched a picketing campaign outside the Labour Secretariat on December 16 to demand withdrawal of brokerage penalties from their allowances and the introduction of eight-hour shifts, overtime payments and daily service charge reports. Employees want the Labour Ministry to intervene in the dispute.

## **National teachers strike in Nepal**

Government teachers in Nepal held national strike action with protests outside District Education Offices throughout the country on December 12 to demand withdrawal of the Education Act 7th amendment. The amendment introduces teacher "licensing," orders teachers to keep out of politics and establishes a legal framework for private schools. Under the licensing system, teachers' qualifications are re-checked. If their qualifications are not in "order," they can be sacked.

Up to 1,600 teachers picketed Mahottari district education office, with similar pickets in Udayapur, Siraha, Gorkha and Sarlahi. Two teachers involved in a sit-in protest in Baglung district were arrested.

The national walkout was one of many strikes held by teachers in recent months opposing the repressive new education laws.

## **Pakistani contract doctors fight for regularisation**

Contract doctors holding placards demonstrated outside Peshawar provincial assembly on December 18 to demand regular employment. Large numbers of

police were mobilised by the government to intimidate the doctors.

Contract Doctors Association president Dr. Taimur Khan told the demonstration that the government had appointed 1,200 doctors on a contract basis in 1995. Despite the fact that most of them had passed public service commission examinations on more than one occasion, their services were yet to be regularised. He pointed out that 746 doctors, including 170 women doctors and 150 dental surgeons, were working in far-flung health facilities on paltry salaries.

### **Railway workers strike over new job cuts**

New South Wales rail workers struck for four hours on December 23 after a breakdown in negotiations with the Transport Minister Michael Costa over job security. The strike affected all City Rail services. Rail workers have threatened further industrial action next year.

Over 1,500 jobs could be axed through the planned merger of the State Rail Authority and Rail Infrastructure Corporation, with about 200 employees on workers compensation or long-term sick leave to be the first to lose their jobs. The merger is in line with the state Labor government's long-term aim of privatising the rail system.

### **Public sector union wants deal**

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and the Civil Service Association (CSA) are preparing to make a deal with the Gallop Labor government in Western Australia for a drastically reduced pay rise for state public servants.

After a 24-hour strike earlier this month and threats to maintain industrial action, the union leadership this week suddenly dropped a claim for a 19 percent pay rise over the next three years and agreed to negotiate a 7 percent rise over two years. Government officials immediately welcomed the back down. The CPSU/CSA offer comes a week after teachers' union officials agreed to a 3.3 percent pay rise over the next two and a half years.

### **New Zealand health workers ratify agreement**

Some 2,000 disability support workers have voted to ratify a new collective employment agreement with the IHC, New Zealand's major care organisation for people with intellectual disabilities. The deal between IHC and the Service and Food Workers Union (SWFU) ends a bitter industrial dispute that began last April.

The workers, who previously earned between \$11.65

and \$12.65 an hour, will be paid a 2 percent increase, backdated to the expiry of the previous contract. Workers who had been locked out for a day during the dispute will also to be paid. IHC management had previously refused to fully backdate the pay increase.

In June, employees banned paperwork and driving IHC vehicles, and followed this with a three-hour national strike. They twice rejected ratification proposals because the pay rises were to be delayed by several months. IHC management responded by contacting individual union members and threatening lockouts.

The SWFU finally met with IHC four hours after the beginning of an indefinite lockout and made a settlement. It recommended the deal to its members, while publicly proclaiming that it would add only \$230,000 to the IHC wages bill of \$104 million.

### **New Zealand court workers walk out**

Thirty Christchurch District Court employees struck on December 22, causing a major bottleneck of court cases. The workers, who are members of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) walked out in protest over the Justice Ministry's refusal to negotiate a collective employment contract until March 2004.

A NUPE organiser said the strike was ended after two hours when the ministry quickly arranged a meeting that afternoon. Court workers had been "deeply frustrated" by previous ministry statements that officials were too busy to meet until March, he said.



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