

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 January 2004

Indian jute workers on indefinite strike

A strike by 200,000 jute workers in West Bengal has entered its second week closing 59 mills across the northeastern Indian state. The workers are demanding the government withdraw plans to privatise the National Jute Manufacturing Company, pay outstanding allowances, and end the use of contract labour for recurrent jobs. Fifteen unions, led by Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), are involved in the strike.

Indian Technopark workers launch protest campaign

Around 100 employees of Torroid, a Swedish electronic company in Kerala, southern India, began a sit-down protest on January 2. The demonstration was held outside the entrance of Technopark, an industrial estate where the company is located. Workers are demanding reinstatement of four employees who were dismissed for alleged misbehavior. The protestors have accused the company of "high-handedness" during an inquiry into the allegations.

Technopark, which consists of about 60 computer software companies, employs 5,000 workers. Torroid established the estate in 1997 and manufactures transformers for domestic and export markets. M.R. Ravi, leader of the newly formed Torroid Employees Protection Samithi, claims that the company has refused to recognise the union and does not pay the standard salary or bonus as prescribed under law.

Sri Lankan health workers fight for salary increase

Health workers throughout the Sri Lanka held lunch-hour protests outside state hospitals and the Health Ministry in Central Colombo on January 8. They were involved in a two-week strike last September to demand pay increases and since December 29 have been wearing black armbands to highlight their demands.

The health workers are demanding a 44 percent pay rise, matching the increase recently won by medical officers. They have rejected a government offer for progressive

salary increases over six years.

Sri Lankan road workers protest

Around 3,000 road workers demonstrated outside the Road Construction and Development Corporation on December 30 in protest over the sudden closure of their workplace. Management shutdown the privately-owned company without prior notice and called police to prevent workers entering their workplace that day. Situated in the Ratmalana industrial estate on the outskirts of Colombo, the corporation was sold by the government several years ago.

Migrant workers activists in hiding

Two leading members of the Yaung Chi Oo Burmese Workers' Association, a body representing migrant workers in Thailand, have gone into hiding over fears that they will be arrested and deported. Thai factory owners in Mae Sot have demanded local authorities investigate the men. They have labeled them as troublemakers because they assisted 260 immigrant Burmese workers who went on strike against the Nasawat Apparel garment factory in mid-December last year.

Moe Swe and his colleague Ko Phyo advised the strikers how to sue the company for failing to pay correct wages. The Nasawat workers were paid only half the minimum daily wage of 133 baht (\$US3.20) a day. All the strikers were arrested and deported to Burma.

The association also assists Burmese migrants working in mainly appalling conditions in the Mae Sot area, in Thailand's Tak Province, near the Burmese border.

Indonesian textile workers demand full pay

About 350 stood-down workers from textile products manufacturer PT Argo Pantes in Tangerang protested outside the factory on January 5 to demand payment of their salary arrears. According to employees, they have been paid about 120,000 rupiah per month, instead of an average of 701,000 rupiah (\$US82), after they were told not to report for work in November. Indonesian labour laws stipulate that until dismissals are finalised workers

must be paid in full.

One protestor claimed that the company was recruiting contractors to replace the permanent workforce. Management is refusing to meet workers to resolve the dispute.

Bank workers still face job losses in Korea

Korea Exchange Bank (KEB) Credit Service management announced this week that it was willing to hold talks with the bank workers union over a proposed merger. KEB Credit Service's board decided to combine the credit card company (presently a separate entity) with the bank in late November, but held off when workers went on strike.

Employees are demanding management drop the merger plans and guarantee all jobs. The proposed talks, however, will not resolve the issues because management has already announced that it will not shelve its plans or negotiate on the scale of job losses. A company spokesman said it had no choice "but to eliminate a certain number of jobs".

Construction union to cut deal with union-buster

According to a media report this week, Kevin Reynolds, the Western Australia (WA) secretary of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, will sign an enterprise work agreement with Len Buckeridge of the BGC group. Buckeridge, a well-known union buster, has a long history of assaults on union officials and workers on WA building sites, including a charge of driving his car into a caravan on a picket line, almost killing two workers.

As part of the agreement, Reynolds wants union coverage over workers to be employed at BGC's \$650 million Burrup Fertilisers ammonia plant project near Karratha in Western Australia's Pilbara region. In exchange, he is offering a "peace deal" to the BGC group.

While details of the deal have not yet been made public Reynolds held a closed-door meeting at Buckeridge's mansion in Mosman Park, one of Perth's wealthiest suburbs, on Christmas Eve.

New Zealand government announces new anti-strike laws

New Zealand nurses and teachers are preparing for national pay rounds in 2004. The Labour government, however, announced just before Christmas that it is preparing to push through new legislation that will curtail the right of teachers and nurses to strike.

Teachers and nurses have been at the centre of increasingly bitter industrial struggles against the Labour government's funding policies and the rundown of state

health and education since it came to office in 1999.

Under proposed amendments to the State Sector Act, the State Service Commission will take over responsibility from school boards for docking teachers' pay during strikes. Many boards refused to dock pay during the last pay dispute when thousands of teachers staged wildcat strikes in defiance of both the Labour government and the union. The Post Primary Teachers Association has accused Education Minister Trevor Mallard of seeking to exact "revenge".

Health workers are also being targeted following an unprecedented series of strikes last year by nurses and doctors and a continuing campaign by nurses for increased pay. A clause in the new Employment Relations Law Reform Bill requires the Health Minister to approve a "code of practice" governing health and safety during strikes and lockouts in the health sector. This will potentially give him the legal power to enforce strikebreaking by District Health Board employers.

Fiji government employees vote on strike action

Unions representing Fiji government employees will vote this month on a recommendation to strike in support of a pay increase. The result will not be known until Fiji Teachers Union (FTU) members vote after returning from school holidays on January 27.

The Fiji Public Service Association members, together with the FTU and the Fiji Nurses Association, have rejected the government's one percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) and are demanding a four percent COLA increase and a full merit payment.



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