Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 January 2004

Retired petrochemical workers demonstrate in China

Since last month, retired workers at the state-owned China Petrochemical plant in the southern province of Guangdong have been protesting outside the company's office in Maoming over its pension plans. According to the retirees, each demonstration has attracted more than 1,000 workers. The monthly pension for retired workers is 1,100 yuan ($US132) a month. While monthly pensions in Guangdong Province were officially raised by 12 percent, workers at China Petrochemical received only a 4 percent increase.

As the protests have continued, police have begun to harass the workers. Zheng Jinnghai, a 64 year-old retiree, said police came to his home to pressure him not to lead a protest, but he refused to let them in. "They are trying to threaten us, scare us away, to dissolve the protest movement," he said. Yang, another worker, claims that his phone was tapped and that family and friends have had trouble contacting him.

Sacked Indonesian workers protest for reinstatement

Thousands of workers who were sacked by the state-owned PT Dirgantara Indonesia (PTDI), an aerospace company in Bandung, West Java, protested for three days this week in Jakarta. On January 13, they marched through the city to the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration building demanding a reinstatement order from a court hearing on the sackings.

In July last year, PTDI suspended 6,600 of its 9,350 workforce and then dismissed them. Management claimed that the layoffs were necessary because the company faced financial difficulties and could not pay its debts to local and overseas creditors, as well as employees' salaries. Workers said corruption and mismanagement caused the problems.

A spokesman for the workers said they were not optimistic about winning the case because Indonesian labour law allows companies suffering financial difficulties to dismiss workers.

Goodyear workers picket in Malaysia

Hundreds of employees at the Goodyear tyre manufacturing plant in the city of Shah Alam, 2 kilometres south of Kuala Lumpur, picketed on January 6 against the company's recruitment of contract workers. The picket began mid-afternoon and continued through each oncoming shift. Police constantly monitored the picket.

The National Union of Employees in Companies Manufacturing Rubber Products organised the picket. Union vice-president and worksite committee chairperson Sulaoman Amin said many of the contract workers are brought in from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. He said management "discriminates" against the foreign workers and "violates" their rights by paying them paltry wages and denying them leave or bonuses.

Goodyear's treatment of overseas workers is in breach of its own contractual agreements and government labour laws. Despite meetings with the company's human resources department and letters to the Human Resources Ministry and immigration department regarding the issue, the Goodyear workers' concerns have been ignored.

In a related issue, the company is alleged to have suspended a union executive committee member for being absent for three days, although the leave had been approved. Goodyear employs 700 people to produces car tyres.

Korean auto workers fight sell-off

Workers at Ssangyong Motor's two domestic plants in South Korea held partial strikes on two days this week against a creditors' plan to sell the automaker to China National Bluestar. The Ssangyong workers believe the sell-off will lead to job losses.

Industrial action began last month. Workers are blocking the entrances to the Ssangyong Pyeongtaek plant, about 70 kilometres south of Seoul, to stop inspections by Bluestar representatives. The inspectors want to complete due diligence by the end of January, when the company will make its final bid.

The union said it planned another stoppage on January 19 and an industry-wide strike in early February unless the management and creditors drop the sell-off plan.

Indian doctors fight privatisation

An indefinite strike by junior doctors in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh entered its second month on January 11. The doctors are fighting against the privatisation of medical education and health services.

Workers employed by the state medical services are planning to demonstrate in support of doctors on January 19. A statement by the Andhra Pradesh Medical Health Vaidya Vidhana Parishat Employees Union, which called the demonstration, condemned the government's "adamant attitude" toward junior doctors. It pointed out that medical education had become far more costly under privatised health, workloads had increased and there was greater pressure on staff.

The Centre of Indian Trade Unions issued a statement demanding the scrapping of self-financing seats in medical education and the collection of user charges by hospitals. The Joint Action Committee of Andhra Pradesh Junior Doctors Association has submitted a memorandum to the Indian government seeking its intervention to resolve the dispute.

Students at government medical colleges in Andhra Pradesh have launched hunger strikes in solidarity with the junior doctors. Students are taking action in Warangal, Kakinada, Visakhapatnam, Kurnool and Tirupathi. Striking doctors have gone to rural areas to explain the issues raised by the strike.

Indian transport workers defend trade union rights

Around 100 transport workers from the State Express Transport Corporation (SETC) of Madurai in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu demonstrated on January 12. They were protesting against the curbing of trade union rights and the conditions in which they are forced to work. Workers also demanded a bonus, a pongul (festival) performance payment and incentives.

The government has not purchased any new buses, and maintenance workers have not been provided with tools for their work. A program of health and hygiene in workshops has not been maintained and workers do not have a proper supply of drinking water. Workers who have taken part in gate meetings to highlight the issues have been transferred or suspended by the management.

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Pakistani teachers demand salaries

Fifty-two teachers demonstrated outside the Hyderabad press club on January 11 to demand the payment of over 13 months of outstanding salaries.

The teachers were forced to take leave by the Sindh education department in November 2000 on allegations of being illegally appointed. Following protests, the department employed them on an ad hoc basis between 2001 and 2002 but did not pay their salaries.

Speaking during the demonstration, teacher Farhana Farooqui said they had tried for three years to get their employment made permanent, but without success. The teachers threatened to stage a sit-in outside the provincial governor's house if the problem was not resolved.

Sri Lankan health workers on sick note strike

Around 80,000 Sri Lankan health workers held a one-day "sick note" strike throughout the country this month, demanding a 44 percent salary hike. If it is granted, they will not seek further pay increases until after 2006. Health services came to a standstill after workers reported in sick and failed to attend their workplaces.

The health workers' demand is in line with a pay increase won by medical officers. While medical officers did not join the campaign, they indicated their support. Health workers have been struggling for several months over the pay issue and last September went on strike for two weeks.

Australian smelter workers strike over wages

Workers at the Norsk Hydro Aluminium Smelter at Kurri Kurri near Newcastle in New South Wales (NSW) went on strike for 48 hours on January 14.

The dispute is over a new wages and conditions agreement between the company and its main labour hire contractor, Skilled Engineering. Negotiations have dragged on for eight months. The Australia Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) claims the company is demanding unacceptable changes to workers' conditions in exchange for a wage rise.

Bus workers drop strike action

Threatened industrial action by about 250 NSW State Transit bus drivers and maintenance workers at the Burwood Bus Depot in Sydney scheduled for January 14 was called off. During negotiations with the Rail Tram and Bus Union, Transit management agreed to transfer a local manager who workers accused of threatening and violent behaviour.

Workers had complained about a number of incidents involving the local manager, including the alleged throwing of a television set. Although the manager has been suspended since early December 2003 on full pay, workers demanded that he be permanently removed from the depot.

WA dock workers strike over safety

Maritime Union of Australia members walked off the job this week after a 32-year-old worker was seriously injured when he was caught up between two shipping containers at P&O Ports in Fremantle, Western Australia. He remains in hospital with numerous injuries, including a dislocated shoulder, cracked ribs and wounds to his head.

The 220 workers returned to work after P&O agreed to conduct a safety review. They have threatened further industrial action if all their concerns over safety are not met.

Train drivers plan further industrial action

Train drivers in metropolitan Perth attended a four-hour stop-work meeting on January 12 to discuss an ongoing campaign for an enterprise work agreement. The drivers, members of the Rail Tram and Bus Industry Union, want a 20 percent pay rise but have only been offered 6.9 percent over two years. They are also seeking improvements in working conditions.

The meeting decided to continue a campaign of rolling stoppages and other forms of industrial action, including a strike on the Australia Day public holiday. Many commuters use public transport to attend the Australia Day Skyworks show in Perth, the Western Australian capital.

Tasmanian miners strike over job security

Miners employed at the Pasminco Rosebery mine in Tasmania's west went on strike for 24 hours on January 12 over concerns about job security. Workers are angry that the mine owners have begun to contract out core job functions.

The Australian Workers Union said a contractor had been employed to provide a truck and an operator to the underground section of the mine. Pasminco employees normally perform this work. The miners have returned to work but the issue remains unresolved.

PNG nurses threaten to walk out

Nurses at the Tari district hospital in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea are threatening to walk off their jobs in two weeks time if authorities do not take urgent steps to fix damaged power lines to the hospital and provide greater security to staff and patients. Crime by gangs of unemployed youth has been increasing in the Tari area. The hospital was broken into and equipment stolen or damaged.

As a temporary solution the town mayor has agreed to employ two security guards at the hospital and supply 200 litres of diesel a month for the hospital generator until the power lines are restored.

Solomon Islands public sector strike suspended

Public sector unions in the Solomon Islands have withdrawn their notice to strike after the government indicated it was willing to reopen negotiations on salary and cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) for public employees.

The move came after the combined 7,000-strong unions issued a 28-day strike notice because the government had ignored a Trades Dispute Panel recommendation for backdated pay adjustments and COLA increases. All parties met on January 13 and the issue was to be discussed at a cabinet meeting the following day. Public servants held a sit-in protest at midday outside cabinet meeting but the outcome has yet to be made public.

Fiji's Labour Minister threatens to de-register unions

Fiji's Minister for Labour and Industrial Relations, Kenneth Zinck, has threatened to de-register the Fiji Public Service Association (FPSA), Fiji Nurses Union and the Fiji Teachers Union if they go ahead with a planned national strike next month. He said that once de-registered, union funds would be frozen. Their leaders would be investigated for destabilising the economy and union members would be disciplined or sacked.

The minister's threat is being ignored by union members, who currently are holding secret ballots for strike action in support of a 3 percent increase in the COLA allowance, instead of the 2 percent offered by the government. FPSA general secretary Rajeshwar Singh said that only the Registrar of Trade Unions, and not the minister, had the power to de-register unions.

The Fiji Teachers Association (FTA), which accepted the 2 percent COLA increase, has pledged to "stand by the government" and will continue to work if the other unions go on strike.

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