Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 January 2004

Taxi-drivers in China campaign to defend their jobs

Rolling strikes and protests by more than 1,000 taxi drivers are continuing in Dazhou City, Sichuan province, in opposition to the local government auctioning off Taxi Operation Certificates. The campaign began in November last year.

About 800 drivers held a sit-in outside the municipal government building and on January 6, police from Dazhou City and Beijing detained 99 drivers involved in another demonstration. Although most were released after a few days, some were kept in custody until January 10.

The municipal government ignored the protests and auctioned off 1,053 permits on January 10. While the sale of permits provide the government with financial gains, it deprives many of the drivers of a livelihood because they are too poor to buy a license. The majority of taxi drivers are retrenched state-owned enterprise employees or workers forced from their homes by the Three Gorges Dam project.

Strikebreakers attacked in Indian Technopark strike

On January 17, a bus carrying strikebreakers to the Swedish-owned Torroid technology company in the Technopark estate in Kerala, India was attacked by unknown assailants throwing stones and other objects. According to news reports, three passengers were injured and had to be hospitalised. Without presenting any tangible evidence, the company immediately blamed striking workers and demanded police action.

Around 100 workers at Torroid went on strike on January 2 demanding reinstatement of four employees dismissed for alleged misbehavior. The company has refused to recognise the workers' union and is not paying the standard salary and bonus prescribed by law.

Technopark consists of about 60 computer software companies employing 5,000 workers. Torroid manufactures transformers for domestic and export markets.

Indian bus workers sit-in

Workers at the Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) staged a *dharna* (sit-in protest) outside the managing director's office this week to demand improvements in conditions. They want the company to pay salaries on the first day of every month and hire an adequate number of personnel to maintain and operate buses.

They are also demanding the administration purchase new vehicles to ensure driver and passenger safety. The workers are members of the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU).

Indian doctors continue campaign against privatisation

Junior doctors in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh intensified a month-old indefinite strike by launching fasting protests from January 19. They have ignored a government deadline to resume duty. The doctors are opposing the privatisation of medical education and health services. To build support, they are visiting rural areas to explain the purpose of the strike and the adverse impact of privatisation on health services.

In Tirupathi, one Andhra Pradesh's main cities, four doctors are continuing a hunger strike outside the state-owned hospital. One hunger striker was hospitalised on January 19 after his condition seriously deteriorated. Junior doctors demonstrated for an hour in front of the hospital the next day to mark the strike reaching 40 days.

Sri Lankan health workers fight for salary increase

About 100 health workers began a hunger strike in front of the Health Ministry in Central Colombo on January 19 as part of a protracted campaign for a 44 percent salary rise. The hunger strike follows lunchtime protests outside state hospitals and the Health Ministry in Central Colombo on January 8 and a two-week strike last September. The workers, members of the Health Services Trade Union Alliance, are planning an indefinite strike from January 26 if their demands are not met.

Pakistani power workers fight privatisation

Pakistani power workers demonstrated in Faisalabad on January 19 against the proposed privatisation of the Faisalabad Electricity Supply Company and the Jamshoro Thermal Power Station.

According to the power union, sale of the thermal units will increase electricity costs by 250 percent. This is in line with World Bank demands for the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) to be divided into 14 corporate entities, in preparation for privatisation.

Union leaders addressing the demonstration called on the government to maintain WAPDA and obtain savings through eliminating duplicity between departments and by sharing administration facilities. This proposal would result in substantial job losses.

Cannery workers walk out

Over 1,000 workers at the Golden Circle cannery in Brisbane, Queensland, held a two-hour strike on January 22, after negotiations for a new collective work agreement broke down. The stoppage is part of a multi-union campaign for a 5 percent annual pay rise over two years and the maintenance of existing entitlements and working conditions.

Golden Circle is offering 2.5 per cent this year plus 3 percent next year. Unions claim the increase would not even keep up with inflation and result in a reduction in workers' purchasing power.

The pay offer is also tied to company demands for Saturday and Sunday work to be define as ordinary hours. This would drastically reduce overtime payments, which make up a considerable part of workers' take-home pay.

A union spokesman said: "We are demanding the company reconsider their position and come to the bargaining table with a more reasonable offer." A series of similar stoppages will take place over the next 28 days if the dispute is unresolved. The Golden Circle cannery is one of Brisbane's largest workplaces.

Mackay workers locked out

Fifteen workers employed by Anderson Mine Services in the northern Queensland town of Mackay were locked out for the second time on January 16. Management is attempting to force employees onto individual work contracts.

Workers claim that the individual agreements will push their wages below the inadequate rate paid by the company last year and are demanding pay be restored to award levels.

Ambulance workers demand pay increase

On January 23, 185 ambulance workers in Tasmania imposed industrial

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bans to demand a 20 percent pay increase over two years. They are refusing to complete office paperwork until next week. A base grade ambulance paramedic earns about $10,000 less a hospital-based nurse with equivalent qualifications.

The union lodged the wage claim in September last year but talks stalled when the government changed negotiating conditions. The union had to resubmit the claim in November.

A union spokesman said: “We’ve been waiting since then for them to come back to the table ... we’ve been more than patient.” The government claims that discussions on the ambulance driver’s demands were held up by the Christmas break and concurrent pay claims by the state police.

Australian steelworkers reject trade-offs

About 2,000 steelworkers at Bluescope Steel in Port Kembla, south of Sydney, have rejected a new work agreement, which includes a 4.5 percent wage increase over three years.

An Australian Workers Union (AWU) official said the offer was rejected because it was tied to trade-offs, including allowing casuals to replace permanent staff on annual leave or long service leave and bans on workers dumping iron from smelters during industrial action. The AWU wants to resume negotiations with the company.

Bus dispute ends in South Australia

Bus drivers at Serco in Adelaide voted this week to call off threatened strike action and accept a 7.5 percent pay increase over 18 months. The decision was taken after a narrow 250 to 244 vote in favour of the pay offer. The drivers’ original claim also included a demand for shorter working hours, a crucial issue because of the highly stressful nature of the job.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) claims that the company has promised to discuss shorter working hours when the new agreement ends. TWU state secretary Alex Gallacher contemptuously dismissed the objections of workers opposing the settlement saying: “Once you have 80 percent it doesn’t matter if it’s a one vote or 100 vote difference.”

The union has allowed the dispute to drag on for 12 months, restricting drivers to a series of spasmodic strikes. In order to push through a settlement the company agreed to pay workers a one-off $700 bonus at the end of the month. The company employs 600 drivers who do 4,700 runs daily.

A separate pay dispute by SouthLink bus drivers, who provide services to Adelaide’s southern suburbs, is due to go before the Industrial Relations Commission.

New Zealand meat workers walk out

More than 500 meat workers at the Richmond Takapau plant walked off the job for 48 hours on January 19. It was the first strike at the abattoirs in more than 12 years. The walkout took place after negotiations with the management on January 16 failed to resolve a dispute over wages.

The company initially offered a three-year collective agreement with annual increases of 1.5 percent, but withdraw the offer and replaced it with a one-year contract. Employees are demanding a three-year agreement with annual increases of 3 percent, in line with a similar deal won by workers at the company’s sister plant at Oringi, near Dannevirke.

A Meatworkers Union spokesman said the union had been “very reluctant” to take strike action and had always tried to “help the company” whenever it could. Takapau workers slaughter 12,000 sheep and lambs a day and last year set a national record by processing more than two million animals.

Strikes by New Zealand court workers shelved

The New Zealand National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) has agreed to shelve further industrial action by Christchurch District Courts workers as talks between the union and the Ministry of Justice get underway.

Some 30 workers are seeking a new collective employment agreement. They went on strike during the Christmas week, disrupting court proceedings and forcing the postponement of a number of hearings. Talks have been scheduled for January 19 and February 11. A NUPE organiser said the union had “frozen” plans for industrial action when the ministry had agreed to listen to its concerns.

New Zealand meat inspectors stop work

A group of New Zealand meat inspectors stopped work on the afternoon of January 14 over contract negotiations. The workers, who are members of NUPE, are angry because they are paid less than other inspectors doing the same job. They are employed by ASURE, a state-owned enterprise set up by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries to run inspections for the export meat service.

The last collective agreement expired in July 2002 but a new contract has not been established despite extensive negotiations and mediation. NUPE members have been offered 24 cents an hour less than other inspectors at the company who have already signed an agreement. NUPE claims that this is because their members are not in an employer-preferred union and have declined to be contracted to do work beyond core inspection tasks. The workers voted to continue the campaign for equal pay, including further work stoppages.

PNG construction workers strike for better conditions

More than 50 construction workers employed in Papua New Guinea (PNG) by Mabey and Johnson, a British bridge building company, walked off projects on January 16 to demand better working conditions. Three days later they defied police and security to demonstrate outside the company depot in Lae. The workers called for an immediate reply to their demands for payment of outstanding overtime, advance payment of camping and traveling allowances, and wage and allowance increases to cover cost-of-living rises.

Employees returned to work when Mabey and Johnson general manager Tom Higgins threatened them with the sack. The company has since paid the outstanding overtime but refused to increase any entitlements.

PNG steel workers walk off their jobs

More than 100 workers at the Kanudi Atlas Steel factory in Port Moresby walked off the job on January 20 because the company has refused to severance payments to 19 workers terminated on January 16. Amalgamated General Workers Union general secretary Andrew Kandakasi said the strike was also in opposition to management failure to discuss a log-of-claims lodged on January 16, 2001. The log-of-claims includes a 50 percent pay increase plus a redundancy package.

The strikers have declared they will not return to work unless their demands are addressed. The union wants a meeting with company management, the Employers Federation of PNG and the Labour and Industrial Relations Department.

Australian government intervenes to block pay increase

In an unprecedented move, the Australian High Commissioner to the Solomon Islands, Patrick Cole, called the general secretary of the Solomon Islands Public Employees Union Clement Waiwori to his office on January 19 to discuss a recent pay increase granted to 7,000 public employees by the islands’ government.

The intervention came after Nick Warner, the Special Coordinator of the Australian-sponsored Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), claimed that the Solomon Islands government could not afford the pay increase and that it would undermine RAMSI’ mission’s reform program. The government only approved the pay rise when public servants threatened a national strike.

Waiwori said the High Commissioner and RAMSI asked him to reconsider the pay agreement. He said negotiations on the issue were over and they should consult the government. He later revealed that a memorandum of understanding to activate the increase had not yet been drawn up and signed.

Chubb workers re-employed on reduced wages

Chubb Security in East Timor is offering to re-employ 32 workers it

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dismissed last year on reduced wages. The cleaners and security guards were sacked on December 4 after going on strike for one day to protest against the company plans to cut monthly pay from $US133 to $94. While the workers' union, the Konfederasaun Sindicatu Timor Lorosa'e, says the sackings are illegal and has begun court action against Chubb it may be six months before it is heard.

Chubb hopes the increasingly desperate situation facing the sacked employees will force them back to work on individual contracts with less pay. Workers must also agree not to engage in union activities. To date, five of the dismissed workers have signed up. They will be paid a base wage of $85 plus $9 to cover annual leave and sick leave.

Various international union organisations have called for support but have not advocated any action outside urging people to send protest letters to United Technologies Corporation, Chubb's parent company in the US.

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