

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

31 January 2004

## Leading Cambodian union official murdered

Thousands of mourners turned out on January 25 for the funeral of Chea Vichea, president of the Cambodian textile workers union. Unknown assailants shot Vichea at point blank range in a Phnom Penh street.

It is not yet known if Vichea was murdered because of his political opposition to Prime Minister Hun Sen and his Cambodian People's Party or because of his union role. He was a leading member of the main opposition Sam Rainsy Party, which has had three of its members assassinated this year. Vichea received death threats over the phone on the eve of the national elections last year.

Textile employers were becoming increasingly hostile to the union over the growing number of disputes by workers demanding improved wages and conditions. Vichea recently lodged a complaint with the International Labor Organisation's Committee on Freedom of Association over the dismissal of 30 unionists at the INSM Textile factory and listing other abuses by textile and garment employers. Last year security personnel, led by a retired army colonel, beat up Vichea while he was distributing leaflets outside a garment factory.

Human Rights Watch described Vichea's death as a "watershed killing" which would send shock waves through the Cambodian labour movement. Cambodian police have arrested a man in connection with the murder but refused to release any information on the alleged motive.

## Strikes against sale of South Korean automaker continue

A strike by day and nightshift workers at Ssangyong Motors in South Korea brought the company's two domestic plants to a standstill for four hours on January 27. The strike was part of an ongoing campaign against plans to sell the automaker to China's Lanxing Group.

Demonstrating workers re-endorsed an earlier decision for a general strike in February if the sales plan is not dropped. Workers fear that a takeover by Lanxing will lead to mass layoffs and the loss of benefits.

The industrial campaign began shortly after Ssangyong's creditors and Lanxing signed a memorandum of understanding last month. Workers have been holding half-day strikes every week and picketing the company's Pyeongtaek plant, 70 kilometres south of Seoul, to stop Lanxing officials carrying out inspections. Lanxing is attempting to complete due diligence inspections by the end of January, in preparation for the signing of a sales contract by the end of March.

## Multiple deaths in Chinese coal mine

The China Labor Bulletin (CLB) has just released a report revealing that 26 miners were killed on December 26 in a fire at the Gaocun coalmine in Shangtuancheng, Hebei province. Sparks from a faulty electric cable in a mineshaft caused timbers to catch on fire. Ten miners escaped the blaze.

A spokesman for CLB said that an official from the Shangtuancheng town government refused to provide details on the accident or to confirm whether the mine was private or state-owned. An official from the nearby Wuan City trade union said he had not heard of the accident.

According to one villager, the shaft that caught fire had been contracted out to a private company. The victims were mostly migrant workers from Sichuan and Guizhou provinces. Police have reportedly detained the subcontractor.

## Thai workers walk out of privatisation hearing

On January 25, hundreds of power workers stormed out of a public hearing on the government's plan to sell off 25 percent of the state-owned Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT). The mass walkout came after the management refused to answer employees' questions about how the proposed partial privatisation would impact on jobs and working conditions. Even before the hearing began, company officials banned workers inside the hall holding placards opposing the sale.

An EGAT labour union spokesman said the share sale was "unnecessary" and claimed that the government wanted a quick sale to raise funds for next year's national election. EGAT general secretary Banlue Hengprasit, however, failed to advance a clear-cut opposition to the privatisation agenda. He claimed to be mainly concerned about what benefits the power workers would receive if the sell-off goes ahead.

## Sri Lankan railway workers on strike

Some 14,000 Sri Lankan railway workers launched an indefinite strike at midnight on January 26 in opposition to plans to privatise the railways.

Last July, the government converted the Railway Department into a corporate body—the Railway Authority—declaring that the restructure was necessary to stop massive losses. Workers accuse the government of deliberately bankrupting the railways by subcontracting the lucrative freight sector out to private concerns. They believe the new authority is a step towards the full privatisation of rail.

Since the Railway Authority was established passenger fares have increased by 60 percent, several commuter services have been abolished, and railway staff not paid a promised 12 percent salary increase.

Around 300,000 commuters have been affected by the strike, which involves most of the rail unions.

## Sri Lankan health workers on hunger strike

Twelve Sri Lankan health workers began a "fast-unto-death" hunger strike in front of Ministry of Health in Central Colombo on January 26 as part of their protracted campaign for a 44 percent salary rise. Two of the workers are now seriously ill.

Health workers in several hospitals in the Kandy region held strikes on January 28 to express their solidarity with the hunger strikers. An indefinite national strike is expected if the wage demand is not met.

#### **Sri Lankan tax officers on sick note campaign**

Around 600 tax officers and valuers employed by the Inland Revenue Department reported in sick on January 28 in protest against moves to restructure the department into a corporate authority. The officers demonstrated for two hours outside the main office in Central Colombo. A spokesman for the Inland Revenue Union said that employees would hold further protests, hunger strikes and strike action if the government presses ahead with its plans.

#### **Victorian postal workers strike over forced relocation**

Around 250 drivers and sorters employed by Australia Post in Melbourne took 24-hour strike action on January 29. The dispute was triggered by workers' concerns that jobs and working conditions could be lost when the state's Parcel Centre is relocated from Port Melbourne to Ardeer on the city's outskirts. The strike followed an earlier protest outside the two facilities.

A spokesman for the Communication Workers Union, which covers the postal workers, claimed a number of permanent jobs could be replaced with casual positions due to the relocation. He also said Australia Post was refusing to provide staff with a canteen at the Ardeer site.

#### **Ambulance management used to break industrial dispute**

Management and non-unionised ambulance officers employed by the Tasmanian Ambulance Service (TAS) have been instructed to continue working despite industrial action and bans imposed by the predominantly unionised work force.

Health and Community Services Union members want a 20 percent wage rise to bring their incomes into line with comparable workers in the health care industry. A base-grade paramedic earns \$10,000 less than an equivalent hospital-based nurse. Bans have been placed on ambulances attending public events, including horse and motor vehicle racing.

#### **Western Australian workers strike over asbestos**

Around 160 Australian Workers Union members constructing a gas pipeline between the Pilbara towns of Port Hedland and Telfer took strike action this week after unearthing asbestos sheets near the former gold mining town of Goldsworthy.

The workers are concerned that they may have been exposed to the deadly asbestos fibres. They returned to work earlier this week, after demanding the company, BHP Billiton, clean up the site.

#### **Broome nurses threaten to boycott night shifts**

Broome public hospital nurses, in Western Australia's Kimberley region, have threatened to boycott night shifts in the casualty department because of inadequate security. A patient attacked a female nurse at the weekend and the hospital's duress alarm system failed to activate.

Australian Nursing Federation members have accused hospital management of not taking their complaints about safety seriously. They want management to provide the emergency department with a security guard and to increase the number of physical barriers between staff and patients.

#### **New Zealand airline workers strike cancelled**

A planned strike by airport ground staff in the New Zealand tourism centre of Queenstown was called off after a settlement was reached this week between the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) and Mount Cook Airlines.

The 22 workers had planned to strike indefinitely from January 29 to

secure wage parity with Air New Zealand ground staff. While Mount Cook Airlines is a wholly owned regional subsidiary of Air New Zealand its pay rates are far below those of the parent company.

EPMU national secretary Andrew Little said that a "confidential settlement" had been reached during mediation on January 23 and ratified by members the following weekend. Little said that while he could not reveal details of the settlement, it included an "acceptable" pay rise.

#### **Pending national strike by Fiji public employees**

Members of the 3,000-strong Fiji Public Service Association voted overwhelmingly this week to strike for a further three percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA). The Fiji Nurses Association and the Fiji Teachers Union are also conducting ballots on whether to call a strike over the same demand. Both are expecting to get a mandate from their members.

In an attempt to head off the dispute, Minister for Labour and Industrial Relations Kenneth Zinck has threatened to de-register all three unions and sack workers who strike. Zinck is pleading with the public servants to reconsider their decision and to resume negotiations with the Public Service Commission.

#### **PNG public servants in Madang prepare to strike**

Over 3,000 public servants in the Papua New Guinea (PNG) province of Madang are threatening to go on strike if the national government does not satisfactorily reply to their grievances by February 2.

The workers have been without an administrator for over a year and the Finance and Treasury Department has not endorsed the provincial budget of K50.7 million (\$US15 million). John Bivi, Mamose regional president of the Public Employees Association, said that further delays in the approval of the budget would harm the delivery of goods and service to Madang.

Public servants endorsed a strike at a lunchtime meeting on January 23 and have resolved that future strike action should continue until the government responds to their demands.

#### **PNG port workers return to work**

Stevedoring workers employed by Port Services in Port Moresby ended a four-day strike on January 25, after the PNG Employers Federation filed a court order against their union for breaching the 2003 Stevedoring Award. Maritime Workers Union (MWU) members walked off the job on January 21 after 20 of their colleagues were laid off for one day on the grounds that there was no work.

The union is disputing Clause 9(b) in their award, which allows the employer to send permanent employees home without pay if no ship is in the port. MWU president John Mahuk has called on the Secretary of Labour and Employment to establish a tribunal to review the issue.



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