

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 February 2004

Indonesian teachers protest victimisation

Over 7,000 teachers in Riau province, Indonesia, struck on February against the expulsion of the Air Tiris High School principal, Abdul Latif, from an education conference on February 5.

The expulsion was ordered by the province regent, Jefri Noer, after Latif criticised the regency spending 5 percent of the total local government budget on education, instead of the 20 percent stipulated under the country's constitution.

Teachers, supported by thousands of students, have held protests demanding Noer's resignation. He has refused, claims the strike is the work of "provocateurs" and has threatened to sack teachers who continue industrial action. Fearing even wider unrest, Coordinating Minister for People's Welfare Yusuf Kalla this week publicly opposed the threat to dismiss strikers.

Candy workers demand five-day week in Indonesia

About 1,000 workers at candy manufacturer PT Super Worldwide Foodstuff Industry in Tangerang went on strike on February 16 to demand reduction of the working from six days to five.

Saturday work is currently paid at the daily rate and included in the workers' monthly base salary. The workers want it paid as overtime. Demonstrations have been held outside the Tangerang municipal manpower agency office.

Filipino health workers campaign for pay increase

Health workers in Negros Oriental are spearheading a national campaign to have all health workers' wages increased by 100 percent. The Negros Oriental Health Workers Association has presented a position paper to Philippines President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and sent a copy to health workers across the country.

The paper claims that the pay increase is needed to prevent thousands of health workers leaving the country. It said the health system faced a "virtual collapse" if the exodus was not stopped.

The workers also want additional training for nurses providing "advanced life support" due to a shortage of doctors, Doctor of Medicine courses reduced from 10 to 6 years and the provision of scholarships for medical students.

Government doctors in the Philippines are paid only 15,841 pesos (\$US280) per month and nurses 9,939 pesos. Filipino

nurses employed in the US, however, can receive a monthly salary equivalent to 216,000 pesos.

Filipino transport drivers strike

Public transport workers in the Philippines have taken strike action over the last two weeks against fuel price hikes, which rose by 100 percent in January. Cebu City was crippled for 16 hours on February 10 public transport operators walked out demanding a 37 percent increase in the minimum fare (from 4.0 pesos to 5.50 pesos). Nagakahiusang Drayber sa Sugdo (NADSU) called the strike.

A petition filed by drivers declared that the increase was needed to offset gasoline prices that have risen by 5.23 pesos per litre since approval of the 4.0 peso minimum fare in 2000. The strike ended after the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board said it would hold an emergency public hearing on the issue before the end of the week.

In Davao, Katawhan Kontra Kartel (KKK), another drivers' organisation, held a "Black Friday" protest on February 13 over fuel increases.

Protestors condemn treatment of guest workers in Taiwan

Workers and labour activists in Taipei demonstrated on February 18 against the treatment of guest workers by local employers. The protest was sparked by the alleged sexual assault of a Filipino maid named Rose by former vice presidential candidate Elmer Fung.

Rallying outside the government's Council for Labour Affairs, demonstrators blamed Taiwan's foreign labour policies for the treatment of the maid. Guest workers are not allowed to change employers during the three years that they are permitted to work in the country. Taiwan International Workers Association Chen Su-hsiang chairperson said: "If a domestic worker suffers harassment or even rape in a family, she will often stay and persevere out of fear she will be sent back on the pretext of having disobeyed her employer."

Demonstrators carried placards reading: "No More Rose Story" and "Don't let another Rose suffer sexual harassment".

Malay estate workers protest poor living conditions

On February 17, over 300 Malaysian rubber estate workers in Putrajaya demonstrated outside the Ministry of Human Resources. The workers, who have formed a group called the Estate Community Support Committee, were protesting over plantation living conditions. They handed a 10-page

memorandum containing their demands to a ministry official.

Employees say they face low wages, lack of basic living and education infrastructure and job losses as rubber estates are converted to palm oil production. Ministry secretary-general Datuk Dr Mohd Yahya Nordin said he would consider establishing a taskforce to investigate the claims and report back in two months.

Korean worker commits suicide to protest discrimination

On February 14, a worker in South Korea burnt himself to death at Hyundai Heavy Industries in protest over the treatment of causal and guest workers. The man, known only as Park, left a suicide note with the slogan “no more discrimination against non-regular workers”. There have been a number of suicides by workers protesting over poor working conditions and the government’s deportation of immigrant workers.

Indian textile workers fight lay offs

More than 100 workers from the Velan Textile Factory Mazdoor Organisation in Chamarajanagar, Karnataka state, demonstrated on February 16 against the company’s “anti-worker” policies. Employees demanded the payment of salary arrears and a bonus. They also accused the company of laying-off staff in November in violation of labour laws. After marching from the area known as the Travelers’ Bungalow, the workers rallied outside government offices.

Pakistani power workers protest against privatisation

Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) workers are continuing their campaign against the proposed privatisation of the Faisalabad Electric Supply Company and Jamshoro Power House. On February 11, hundreds demonstrated outside the Quetta press club against the government’s plans.

Hyderabad Electricity Company (HESCO) employees also marched to the city’s press club in protest over privatisation and the forced retirement and dismissal of staff. They carried banners and placards denouncing unemployment, price hikes, repressive government ordinances and the corrupt practice of HESCO officials. A similar protest was held in Lahore.

The Pakistan WAPDA Hydroelectric Central Labour Union said that workers were protesting throughout the country against the privatisations, which are being carried out at the behest of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Perth train drivers threatened with sack

The Public Transport Authority has threatened train drivers in Perth, Western Australia (WA), with dismissal for failing to comply with a back-to-work order. The drivers, members of the Australian Rail, Bus and Tram Drivers Industrial Union, walked out on February 13, as part of an ongoing campaign for a new enterprise work agreement.

The WA Industrial Relations Commission issued the order on the Friday evening of the strike but the majority of drivers stayed out during the weekend. Some 20 drivers remained on strike on Monday and now face disciplinary action.

Rail action on hold in NSW

Overtime bans imposed by 300 train drivers in NSW to highlight the acute shortage of drivers and many other issues are to be lifted. Meetings of about 200 drivers on February 17 agreed to lift the bans but only for a “trial period”. The decision came after rail union leaders told the meetings that they would be tougher in future negotiations with RailCorp management.

The meetings decided to re-impose the overtime ban if the drivers’ grievances were not addressed within two weeks from February 23.

At the same time, rail maintenance unions called off industrial action planned for February 20 after talks with NSW Transport Minister Michael Costa. The strike was to protest RailCorp procedures for random testing of staff for drugs, alcohol, fitness and fatigue. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union said the minister had agreed to greater consultation in the future.

Correctional centre teachers vote to strike

Teachers employed at the Correctional Centre in Goulburn voted this week to go on strike on March 3, after the NSW Labor government refused to pay a 5.5 percent interim salary increase recently awarded to teachers working in other correctional centres.

The meeting decided to hold a protest rally on March 3 and called on other correctional centre teachers to take similar action. The protest will consider further industrial action if the pay rise is not granted.

Manufacturing workers meet over claims

New Zealand manufacturing workers concluded a series of mass stop-work meetings this week. The meetings involved hundreds of workers from Wellington, Auckland, New Plymouth, Napier and Wanganui and were called to prepare a log-of-claims for a multi-employer “Metals” collective employment agreement. Similar meetings in the South Island were held late last year.

Workers endorsed a claim for a 5-percent pay rise, 37.5-hour week and 15-minute “smoko” (tea) break. The Metals and Manufacturing Industries Collective Agreement is New Zealand’s largest private sector industrial contract and covers over 2,000 workers at some 200 companies.

Negotiations between the Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union and the Employers and Manufacturers Association to renew the agreement are due to start in Auckland on February 24.



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