

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Asia

Sacked strikers defy restraining order

Striking workers at Marc Food Industries Inc (MFII) in Compostela Town, on the Philippine's island of Cebu, are continuing to picket the company premises, defying a temporary restraining order by the National Labor Relations Commission (NLRC).

The restraining order was issued on December 7 after management claimed that workers on the picket were violent and had engaged in coercion and intimidation. Workers strongly denied the accusation. Local police, beefed up by officers sent from neighboring districts, have not yet intervened against the strikers.

Members of the MFII Employees Union-ALU-TUCP struck on August 16, accusing the management of unfair labour practices, union-busting and paying low wages. The company, which produces and exports noodles, refused to take the workers back after the strike and issued termination notices in the mail.

On September 20, the company filed for permanent closure but then returned to normal operations under the name of New Grande. The son of the company's lawyer, who owns an employment agency, supplied new workers for the operation. Spokeswoman of the Associated Labor Union-Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (ALU-TUCP) Josefina Lim said their lawyers are preparing a case to demand the restraining order be lifted.

Filipino Catholic hostel workers go on strike

Fifty workers at Pius XII Catholic Center in Manila went on strike on December 13 after five months of negotiations for a wage increase bogged down. The strike left only a few staff members to man the centre's offices and 200 rooms in its hostels.

The employees, members of the Pius XII Catholic Center Employees Association, are seeking a 3,000 peso (\$US54.50) monthly wage increase in their new Collective Bargaining Agreement but management will not budge from its offer of only 100 pesos.

The lawyer representing the workers, Domingo Dando, told the *Philippines Daily Inquirer* the Association was willing to lower its pay demand to 1,000 pesos. A spokesperson for the centre's Board of Trustees said they are urging both parties to keep negotiations open.

Jobs protest closes Indonesian factories

Three plastics factories in the Tangerang region, 25 kilometres west of Jakarta, were forced to close operations when residents of Bitung village, Cikupa, and Tangerang blocked access roads to the premises on December 6. The residents were protesting the companies' reluctance to recruit local workers.

The villagers' blockade was still in force on December 13, forcing PT Prima Makmur Rotokemindo, PT Royalindo Engraftama and PT Poly Kemas San Putra to remain closed. Tangerang Manpower Agency director Apon Suryana promised that he would seek clarification from the three

companies.

Meanwhile, further west, in the city of Serang, thousands of workers on December 10 held a rally at the Banten gubernatorial office arguing that the 693,500 rupiah (\$US77) monthly minimum wage set for 2005 was below the cost of living.

Andi Romli of the Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers Association said: "We demand that the governor put the minimum wage up to 777,500 rupiah for workers in Cilegon, and 735,873 rupiah for Tangerang and 722,200 rupiah for Serang regency." He threatened further protests if the governor does not meet their demand.

Pakistani power workers rally against privatisation

A large number of workers from the Jamshoro thermal power station and the Lakhra power station near Hyderabad staged demonstrations outside the facilities on December 13.

The workers were protesting the privatisation of the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) of Pakistan. A sit-down demonstration also took place on the Indus highway near Hyderabad, causing traffic holdups. A heavy contingent of police was present at the protests.

The protestors also demanded the provision of hardship and generation allowances and the restoration of a house acquisition scheme. They have threatened to spread the campaign countrywide if there is no positive response from the government.

Indian road workers demand reinstatement

Hundreds of road workers and family members held a one-day fasting campaign in Salem and Erode in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu on December 13. They demanded that the government reinstate 10,000 workers retrenched in 2002. Facing increasing hardship, some of the sacked workers have since committed suicide.

The protestors pointed to a court order directing the government to reinstate the workers and demanded it act accordingly. The protest was part of a campaign begun on November 25 by road workers in several cities across the state to push for the reinstatements.

Childcare workers demand to be paid on time

Childcare workers in Cuddapah district in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh staged a sit-down protest outside the Collectorate in Cuddapah and Nalgonda on December 13. The protests, which lasted more than three hours, were called to demand that salaries be paid when they fall due and for an immediate pay increase. The regular payment of salaries is an urgent question for the low-paid workers, who literally live from week to week.

During the recent election, the Congress Party promised to raise the salaries of childcare workers and to grant promotions and job security. The pay increase, however, amounted to only 100 rupees (\$US2). The workers are also critical of poor working conditions, including being forced to work increased hours without additional pay.

Childcare workers in the port city of Visahapatnam held a rally on the same issues on December 13. The workers are members of the Andhra Pradesh Anganwadi Workers and Helpers Union.

Coffee plantation workers demand salary increase

Coffee plantation workers in the southern Indian state of Karnataka staged a sit-down protest in front of the Deputy Commissioner's office in Madikeri on December 12, demanding a salary increase. A large contingent of workers shouting slogans and carrying placards had marched from the Field Marshal K.M. Cariappa Circle along busy main roads.

At the end of the protest, a memorandum containing the workers' demands was handed to the Deputy Commissioner. Beside the pay increase, they want unlicensed contractors banned from plantations, permanency for workers employed for 90 days straight and gratuity payments increased from 15 to 30 days.

The minimum wage for plantation workers was fixed in 1999-2000 and supposed to be revised after three years. They are demanding a daily minimum wage of 75 rupees (\$US1.50) for coffee, tea and rubber estate workers in Kodagu, Dakshina Kannada, Hassan and Chikmagalur districts and increments in line with the increase in the cost of living index. Workers urged the government to fix salaries for non-staff employees in plantations such as drivers and mechanics.

Sri Lankan teachers boycott exam supervision

Teachers in the Padaviya area, between the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, boycotted the supervision of the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) examinations that began on December 13. There are 1,000 candidates sitting exams in seven centres in the area.

The teachers are protesting the curtailing of the hardship allowance paid to teachers working in what are classified "difficult schools" in the region. The government has interfered with the classification to remove six schools from the list, depriving teachers of a 2,500-rupee (\$25) hardship allowance.

Transport workers demand reinstatement

Ten transport workers sacked from the Ampara bus depot in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province began a hunger strike on December 13. They are demanding reinstatement for themselves and 11 other drivers and conductors who were illegally sacked by the previous government after working at the depot for four months.

When workers staged a similar protest in October this year, the present government promised to reverse the dismissals but did not honour its pledge.

Valuation staff demonstrate for conditions

Hundreds of Valuation Department employees demonstrated opposite the department building in Punchi Borella, Colombo on December 15. They are demanding the correction of salary anomalies, and the filling of 25 vacancies for district valuation staff and vacancies in 50 other work categories.

The workers are threatening a sick note campaign and will report unfit for work en masse if the government fails to address their demands.

Australia and the Pacific

Labor government attempts to pressure nurses

The Western Australian state Labor government plans to issue a memorandum on a proposed new work agreement and a ballot paper directly to public sector nurses. The process is designed to pressure nurses to accept the agreement even as negotiations with the Australian Nurses Federation (ANF) are in progress.

The government is offering a 14.7 percent pay increase over three years, just short of the 15 percent claimed by the ANF, but is not prepared to meet nurses' claims for a 5 percent qualification allowance, a \$2,000 retention bonus and a 50 percent increase in night duty allowance. While the government claims there are 12,000 public nurses employed in the public health system, the ANF said the real number is around 9,300.

While the ANF condemned the government for issuing ballot papers, the state's peak union body UnionsWA reportedly supported the move. In an attempt to backtrack, UnionsWA secretary-elect Dave Robinson claimed

that he had believed that the government was only conducting a "straw poll" to gauge the response of nurses. The ANF disaffiliated from UnionsWA earlier this year.

Freight companies given seven-day deadline

Private truck drivers meeting in Western Australia's capital Perth this week gave freight companies seven days to increase their pay. While the angry meeting in the suburb of Belmont put off threatened industrial action, the drivers said that any company that refused to meet the deadline would be hit by work bans, including drivers refusing to load and unload trucks.

The drivers say legislation is needed to ensure they can earn an adequate income without jeopardising their safety by working excessive hours.

New Zealand newspaper workers strike over pay

Journalists, delivery and dispatch staff at the *Northern Advocate* in Whangarei went on strike this week in a pay dispute. The 30 members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) walked off the job on December 13 for two days.

The union's collective agreement expired on September 1 but negotiations for a new one have been delayed. The workers want a 7 percent wage rise over two years. An EPMU spokesman said members were seeking the increase because wage settlements at the *Northern Advocate* over the past five years had been lower than the average for the industry. There was a "catch-up" element involved in the claim.

The company is offering a 2.9 percent pay rise from the beginning of this month, and a further 2.5 percent from December 1, 2005. In response to the strike, the management cancelled the staff Christmas party and removed a coffee machine from the premises.

New Zealand health board backtracks on sackings

The Canterbury District Health Board (CDHB) has been forced to back down to striking clinical records staff at Christchurch Hospital and hire staff to fill shortages caused by sackings over the past two months. According to the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE), the CDHB had disestablished positions, claiming they needed fewer staff—12 not 21—to run a new processing system. The union now anticipates the numbers will be back up to the original 28.

Employees are maintaining some of the work bans imposed earlier in the dispute. NUPE believes there was a hidden agenda behind the downsizing to save money to meet the deficit resulting from a flawed population-based funding model. It is unclear whether all the sacked workers will automatically get their jobs back.

NZ university staff vote on national bargaining

Association of University Staff (AUS) members in New Zealand's seven traditional universities began voting this week to determine whether to endorse negotiations for national collective employment agreements for academic and general staff.

Union members had earlier this year supported recommendations for unions to bargain for a national collective agreement but university authorities without exception opposed the approach. After several months, the AUS leadership abandoned national bargaining, and pay claims were eventually settled on a university-by-university basis.

Since then a working party between the unions and university employers has been formed to pursue joint lobbying of the government over funding. An initial tripartite meeting involving the union, university employers and government representatives was recently held.

Fijian unions call off national strike

Fijian public service unions representing 24,000 members called off plans for a national strike this week in support of a 5 percent cost of living adjustment (COLA). They accepted a government offer of a 2 percent one-off pay increase from December 23 and a 15 percent adjustment in allowances from January 1, 2005. In return, the unions agreed to plead the COLA claim in the arbitration tribunal, tying their members to whatever decision is handed down.

Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase claimed that the 2 percent payment, to cost the government \$9 million (\$US5.29 million), is a “goodwill payment” made to avert the strike.

Earlier this year, the government flatly refused to continue with the traditional yearly COLA claim. It was an attempt to force all government employees into a wages regime based on its recently introduced performance management system. The government offering 3 to 5 percent pay increases, “to those determined to be productive”.

The six unions involved—Fiji Nurses Association, Fiji Teachers Union, Fijian Teachers Association, Fiji Public Service Association, Public Employees Union and the Viti National Union of Taukei Workers—all signed off on the government’s offer. Public Service Commission chief executive Anare Jale said the arbitration tribunal was likely to make a decision on continuing the COLA claim next year.



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