Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature by e-mailing information to: editor@wsws.org

Workers to march over murder of strikers

Organisers are expecting about 3,500 people to march to the Philippines presidential palace at the end of this week to protest the army-police operation at the Hacienda Luisita sugar plantation in Tarlac City that left 14 striking workers dead. The shootings took place last month when hundreds of police and army personnel were mobilised by the Philippines government to smash a blockade of workers.

The marchers from Central Luzon will be joined by thousands of protesters from Manila and Southern Tagalog. While the government denied that police had been carrying firearms, the workers accuse President Arroyo of allowing Labor Secretary Patricia Sto Tomas to authorise the military and police to fire on strikers. A workers' spokesman said, "Blood has smeared the hands of the president" and demanded she "take full responsibility for this bloody carnage". He said that the killings proved that the Arroyo government would not hesitate to use violence "to protect the interest of the landlords and big business".

In the face of widespread outrage, the government promised to conduct a full inquiry into the killings. This week, however, farmers' group leader Marcelio Beltran, who was at blockade at the time of the murders, was gunned down outside his home. According to his son, the assailant was dressed in a military uniform.

Indonesian industrial estate workers protest minimum wage proposal

Some 8,000 workers from three industrial estates on the Indonesian island of Palau Batam gathered at the Riau Islands gubernatorial offices on December 4. The protestors demanded that the governor reject a proposal that would set the provincial minimum monthly wage at 635,000 rupiah ($US70.50) for 2005.

A survey by the Indonesian Metal Workers' Federation has claimed a "reasonable" existence in Batam would require earning 728,000 a month. Deny Rifa'i, a protest steward, said: "The government needs to raise the level of the minimum wage to match the cost-of-living identified in the survey."

After three hours the protest dispersed peacefully, following a promise by a government official that the governor would decide on the matter by next week at the latest.

All-India university teachers hold protest march

College and university teachers across India staged a joint march to parliament on December 6 to protest the poor quality of higher education and service in colleges and universities. The teachers' demands included the implementation of proper promotion schemes, lifting the retirement age to 65 years and the provision of a health care scheme for university staff.

The march was organised by All India Federation of University and College Teachers Organisation (AIFUCTO) and the Federation of the Central Universities Teachers' Associations (FEDCUTA).

Sri Lankan teachers demand an end to salary anomalies

On December 1, teachers picketed the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall (BMICH) in Colombo, where the office of the National Council for Administration is situated. They are demanding the government resolve salary anomalies that have existed for the last seven years. Prior to picketing the BMICH, the teachers marched from Borella junction, a busy Colombo suburb.

The salary anomalies emerged in 1997 when the recommendations of the B.C. Perera salary commission were implemented. During the picket a memorandum containing the teachers' demands was handed to the chairman of the National Council for Administration.

Telecom workers strike for salary increase and bonus

Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) workers began a national campaign of daily afternoon work stoppages on December 8. They are demanding a 30 percent salary increase, an improved bonus payment, confirmation of casual staff and withdrawal of a management order prohibiting workers' meetings inside SLT offices. The workers also called for a halt to the further sale of government shares in SLT to private investors. SLT is presently jointly owned shared by the government and Japanese telecom company NTT.

Another key demand in the 33-item log-of-claims is for lower phone tariffs for consumers.

On December 6, workers picketed SLT offices where they hoisted black flags. The workers are members of the Trade Union Alliance, covering employees in 1,317 companies.

Health workers demand over time payments

Sri Lankan health workers, including medical officers, doctors, and nurses, picketed the Colombo National Hospital on December 3. They are demanding overtime payments outstanding for last five months. Because salaries are not sufficient to cover living expenses, the workers are desperate to obtain their outstanding overtime and holiday payments.

Health workers from Badulla Hospital in Uva province went on strike for four hours on November 30 for overtime payments owed for the last four months.

Pakistani power workers oppose privatisation

Workers at the Karachi Electrical Supply Corporation (KESC) held a demonstration and protest rally in front of the Karachi Press Club on December 6, against the privatisation of the company. The government is planning to sell 51 to 74 percent of its shares in the company. The day of the protest was the final date initially set by the

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government for the submission of bids from buyers.

Speaker from the KESC Employee Action Committee addressed the rally demanding the sale be stopped immediately and pointing out that the drive to privatise KESC was in line of the dictates of the IMF. They said power tariffs could be increased for consumers if privatisation takes place.

The protestors also demanded the reinstatement of sacked KESC workers and full-time positions for workers presently employed on a contract basis.

Melbourne auto parts workers demand answers

Five hundred workers from the Melbourne-based automotive part manufacturer Ion on December 9 demanded the company's administrators, directors and bankers justify their decision on December 9 to place the enterprise into voluntary administration.

The decision places a question mark over about 3,000 jobs. The company is more than $300 million in debt and was in the midst of a $450 million expansion program. In the wake of cost overruns and delays, three major banks refused to extend funding and management called in an administrator.

A union representative told the press: "We are seeking an explanation from the company's directors as to why the CEO and chairman as recently as October 28 said that the company was in a good financial position. We want to know how the company's financial situation could have changed so much to warrant voluntary administration without any consultation of staff or information being provided to the workers affected."

Queensland power workers demand improved pay offer

Electrical tradesmen employed by Queensland power company Energex this week threatened rolling stoppages during the summer season. The workers are seeking a 6 percent pay increase, but the company is offering only 3.5 percent.

The tradesmen are outraged over the low pay offer. The Queensland Labor government has recently approved an 11.25 percent pay hike for 80 Energex executives to compensate for a reduction in performance bonuses from 30 to 15 percent. The executive pay rise was granted despite the state being plagued by widespread blackouts last year. The annual median salary for an executive in the government-owned corporation is $200,000.

Biscuit factory workers return to work

Around 130 workers employed at the Sakata rice cracker factory in Laverton North, Melbourne, returned to work on December 8 after being on strike for 10 days. The workers, members of the National Union of Workers (NUW), picketed the plant for a union-based enterprise agreement for higher rates of pay and better conditions. It was the first such agreement by Sakata in its 10 years of operations in Australia.

According to a spokesperson for the NUW, the new agreement included an 8 percent wage increase over two years with casual employees to be offered permanency after 12 months service and site rates for labour-hire casuals.

Truck drivers threaten blockades

Owner-drivers in Western Australia are planning to strike before Christmas to demand higher freight rates from haulage companies and improved safety management. Driver fatigue is the major issue that the 2,000 drivers want urgently addressed. They contend that companies contracting the owner-drivers have had a lax attitude towards safety and fatigue management regulations.

Employer groups belonging to the Transport Forum had earlier agreed to grant rate increases of up to 12 percent but many of the companies have still not signed agreements allowing the increases to commence.

The strike could have a major impact on Christmas supplies with shortages of such items as electrical goods for retail outlets. Fresh produce will not be delivered interstate. Salaried drivers were expected to support the owner-drivers and not cross picket lines or run blockades if they are set up.

NZ port worker crushed by falling concrete slab

A worker died this week after being crushed by a falling concrete slab at Christchurch's Lyttleton port. The man had been working with a crew demolishing a cargo shed on Cashin Quay when the slab fell and pinned him to the ground. He was employed by an off-site contractor. Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) visited the site and will investigate the incident.

NZ health board refuses union plea for mediation in jobs dispute

The National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) complained this week that the Canterbury District Health Board (DHB) refused to mediate with clinical records staff at Christchurch Hospital. The staff began a campaign of limited industrial action on December 1 over the impact on workloads arising from the cutting of 12 positions in the Clinical Records Department.

NUPE is treating the dispute as a "health and safety" issue under the Employment Relations Act and has confined industrial action to a series of work bans. These include, a daily limit of one work trolley per staff member and a ban on answering other staff phones. Workers are also refusing to make deliveries and train new staff.

Fiji public servants to strike for cost-of-living increase

The Fijian Confederation of Public Sector Unions (CPSU) is planning a nationwide strike on December 27. The confederation, made up of 5,000 members from the Fiji Teachers Union, Fiji Nurses Association and Fiji Public Service Association, is seeking a 5 percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA), plus a 15 percent increase in all work related allowances, backdated to January 1, 2004.

The government is refusing to negotiate on COLA and is attempting to force all government employees to accept future pay increases under its recently introduced performance management system (PMS). Public Service Commission chief executive officer, Anare Jale, said the government would issue a 3 to 5 percent pay increase to those determined to be productive. "The government does not want to continue to carry people who are not performing," he said.

Meanwhile, another peak union body, the Fiji Islands Congress of Trade Unions (FICTU), comprising the Public Employees Union, Fijian Teachers Association and Viti National Union, is restricting its campaign for a COLA increase to public demonstrations. Police restricted a FICTU protest march through the streets of Suva on December 4, turning away over a thousand protesters and allowing only 500 to participate. FICTU General Secretary Attar Singh said workers will not be intimidated by police and future demonstrations are being planned.

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