

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Philippines sugar workers face further police attack

The Philippines government is preparing further violence against workers involved in a dispute at the Cojuangco family-owned Hacienda Luisita sugar plantation near Tarlac City. The plantation workforce is picketing for a pay increase and the genuine redistribution of land to the hacienda's farmer-workers. They are also demanding the reinstatement of sacked union officials.

Last week, plantation and mill workers' unions received reports that a large contingent of police and army personnel was being assembled to disperse the pickets at the hacienda and the sugar mill. Labor Secretary Patricia Santo Tomas issued a return-to-work order on January 14 and has since instructed the security forces to enforce it.

In advance of the impending attack, an Armed Forces Northern Luzon Command (Nolcom) spokesman declared that the strike had become a "national security issue". He claimed the strike was being "directly orchestrated" by the Central Committee-Political Bureau (CC-Politburo) of the underground Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP).

On November 16 last year, 12 workers and two young children were gunned down on the picket lines. Government, military and police spokesmen claimed that the fatal shots were fired by CPP-NPA fighters attempting to "inflare the dispute". Witnesses at a Senate inquiry, however, testified that the army fired the shots. Even so, a Nolcom commander said this week that if his forces are sent against striking workers, "we will exert all efforts to avoid falling into another trap of the CPP-NPA, just like what happened on November 16".

Korean bank union caves in on sackings

On January 26, the union covering workers at the Kookmin Bank in South Korea announced that it had accepted a management plan to restructure the business. The decision opens the way for 3,800 job losses. The union caved in to the management's demands despite a protracted campaign of protests by bank workers last year.

The union claimed it had accepted the layoffs "in order to save the bank and the employees". While the number of people to be axed is 1,000 less than the bank's original proposal, the agreement only suspends further job cuts until 2007.

In order to stampede workers into accepting the downsizing, the bank has offered to pay the equivalent of two years' wages in

severance and other benefits to employees who take voluntary redundancy. Workers must apply by January 31. Full-time workers who refuse to accept the deal, together with part-time workers, will not receive retraining and will be offered a far smaller redundancy package.

Indian port workers strike

Port workers at Chennai Port container terminal, in the south Indian state of Tamilnadu, ended a two-day strike on January 20 called in support of a pay claim and to demand compensation for the family of a colleague who died while at work.

To assist the man's family, his workmates voted to donate one month's salary and pressed the company to contribute an equal amount. The workers returned to work after agreeing to an undisclosed pay settlement that was tied to a no-strike clause. The management agreed to pay just one day's pay as compensation to the dead man's family.

Locomotive drivers oppose victimisation

Locomotive drivers in Kochi in the southern Indian state of Kerala ended a four-day hunger strike on January 20 against the victimisation of a fellow driver. The driver was transferred when he demanded a rest period after working for 11 hours straight. The strike was called off when the management withdrew the transfer order. During the strike, workers protested in front of the Railway Divisional Office in Thiruvananthapuram.

Transport workers oppose privatisation

Workers for the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) in north India held a sit-in protest on January 20 against privatisation. Protest meetings were held at the Shadipur, Naraina, Mayapuri, Hari Nagar, Peeragarhi and Keshavpur depots. Officials of the Delhi Parivahan Mazdoor Sangh, DTC Workers Union and DTS Workers Unity Centre addressed the rallies.

The speakers accused the Delhi government of bringing in privatisation under the guise of restructuring. They said the government was "trying to benefit a few capitalists at the cost of the poor employees". They pointed to plans being drawn to lay off a large number of employees and warned that if these were not withdrawn the unions would step up industrial action.

Privatisation in India is affecting workers and threatening jobs in the health, electricity and water sectors as well.

Sri Lankan health workers demand unpaid wages

Health workers at the Gampola hospital in Sri Lanka's Central Province—including doctors, nurses, general staff and paramedics—went strike on January 19. They were protesting against the late payment of their salaries for January. The workers have

also not been paid the overtime they have accrued over the past three months.

Strike ends at Incat in Tasmania

About 100 workers employed by ferry builder Incat in Tasmania returned to work on January 24 after striking last week. The strike, by members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union, was in support of about 20 electricians who are seeking an \$80-a-week wage increase to establish pay parity with other electricians across the island.

The return to work has gone ahead although the company sacked a union delegate during the stoppage. A union spokesman said: "It seems to be a common history at Incat with people who want to stand up and take the company on. They end up being terminated." He said the union was "fearful" that the sacking "will create another escalation in the current dispute". Incat builds fast commercial and military passenger and vehicle ferries. It has made no commitment to improve workers' pay or conditions.

Queensland prison workers strike over wage anomalies

Seventy workers at the Wacol prison in Brisbane went on strike on the weekend of January 22-23. The strikers—including cleaners, gardeners and a psychologist—are demanding the end of pay anomalies that see workers in the same categories paid differing wage rates.

The anomalies in pay and conditions exist because the workers at the privately-owned prison are not covered by a collective work contract. Workers at the prison are also demanding improvements in health and safety standards.

Maritime workers protest sacking in Sydney

About 100 maritime workers demonstrated outside the Circular Quay ticket office of Captain Cook Cruises in Sydney on January 25, demanding the reinstatement of a colleague. The worker, David Swales, was sacked earlier this month for taking a month's leave to visit his girlfriend in Poland.

Swales had applied for the leave several months in advance, but permission was later withdrawn when the company put a freeze on all holidays. Despite Swales being unable to change his arrangement or get a refund for his flight tickets, the management refused to grant his request for unpaid leave. According to the union, Swales had not taken an extended holiday in five years.

The Maritime Union of Australia has begun an unfair dismissal case in the NSW Industrial Relations Commission claiming that the company "acted improperly and heartlessly" when it sacked Swales. A union spokesman said the company had a history of employee abuse, including verbal denigration of a female employee because of her weight. It had refused to provide counseling for workers who had retrieved a dead body from the harbour, and pressured staff to go onto individual contracts.

New Zealand company fined over young workers' injury

Mobile Sandblasting has been fined \$NZ3,000 and ordered to pay \$7,500 in reparation to a 14-year-old boy who suffered burns while working for the company last November. The judgment was brought down in the Rotorua District Court last week. The company—which does sandblasting and spray painting—pleaded guilty to failing to take all practicable steps to ensure that employees under 15 did not perform tasks likely to be harmful to

their health.

The young worker was burnt on his face and arms after a container of thinners exploded while he cleaning the underneath a 12-tonne digger. The youth lit a cigarette lighter to see under the digger and the flame ignited a thinner-soaked rag. This fell onto the bottle of thinners, causing it to explode.

The teenager was forced to run through the flames to escape. According to the Occupational Safety and Health report, he was not provided with information about the highly inflammable substance he was using or instructed in its safe handling. He was not provided with protective gear such as gloves and goggles and was left unsupervised.

Fijian Holiday Inn workers walk out

Fifty of the 120 staff employed at the Holiday Inn in the Fijian capital of Suva walked off the job on January 24 and set up a picket about 50 metres from the hotel. The striking workers are from the day and afternoon shifts.

A union representative said the strike was over the unfair termination of an employee in December 2003 and the repeated refusal of the Labour Ministry to accept the notice of dispute, which was lodged immediately after the dismissal.

Immediately following the walkout, Labour Minister Kenneth Zinck ruled the strike illegal, despite the union giving the mandatory 28-day notice of intention to strike. A Labour Ministry-supervised ballot of hotel employees in December endorsed strike action over the issue.

Union lawyers have filed a court injunction challenging Zinck's decision. Union delegate Talica Rokovusolo told journalists: "If the judge says it is illegal we will be going back to work. If he says it is legal we will be staying here until we get our staff member reinstated."

Solomon Islands plantation strikers arrested

Fifty-eight striking employees of the Russell Island Plantation Estate Limited (RIPEL) have been arrested and charged with causing bodily harm to two Royal Solomon Islands Police officers. Workers and police clashed on the Yandina wharf on January 17 when RIPEL attempted to load copra and cocoa onto a boat for transport to markets in Honiara. Police attacked pickets using C-S spray and workers retaliated by throwing stones.

If convicted, the workers face a maximum of six months jail each. They are due to appear in the Honiara Court on February 8.



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