

Workers Struggles: Asia and the Pacific

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Gunmen shoot Hacienda Luisita pickets

On the evening of January 5, four gunmen shot down two workers after ramming a luxury sports utility into a picket-line barricade set up by mill and farm workers at the CAT sugar mill. The mill is located in the 6,000-hectare Hacienda Luisita sugar plantation near the city of Tarlac in the Philippines. One of the victims, Ernesto Ramos—the uncle of Ricardo Ramos, the president of the mill workers' union, the Central Azucarrera de Tarlac Labor Union (CATLU)—remains in a critical condition. The other, Jun Lablan, has been taken off the critical list.

The deadly assault comes just seven weeks after 12 workers and two small children were killed when armed police and military personnel dispatched by Labor Secretary Patricia Sto. Thomas violently smashed a blockade of the mill by 6,000 workers.

The killings are the subject of a Senate and House inquiry ordered by President Gloria Arroyo after a public outcry over the brutal assault. But even as the inquiry was underway, Marcelino Beltran, the chairman of the farmers' organisation Alwansa ng mga Magbubukid sa Tarlac (ATM) and a key witness, was gunned down outside his home on December 8 by an assailant wearing an army uniform.

Members and supporters of the United Luisita Workers Union (ULWU) and CATLU began picketing the CAT sugar mill on November 6 in support of wage increases and the reinstatement of sacked workers. Central to the dispute was the demand for genuine land distribution, which has been evaded over years by the Hacienda Luisita and other large landowners. The Conjuangco family, relatives of former Philippines President Cory Aquino, owns the Hacienda Luisita.

Filipino garment workers fight to save jobs

Nearly 2,000 garment workers employed by Gelmart Industries Philippines (GPI) in Paranaque (10 kilometres south of Manila) are still locked in a dispute that began last month.

On December 18, members of the 1,200-strong Lakas ng Manggagawa sa Garment union cut short a Christmas party and rushed to secure the factory gates upon learning that machines and garment products were being removed secretly in container vans. The workers immediately set up a 24-hour picket to watch at the gates. On December 22 and 24, the company made further attempts to drive out container vans but only succeeded in getting one through the picket after it rammed the gate and injured a worker.

The union suspects that the move may be related to the company's plan to relocate production to China or Indonesia. It

could also be designed to put maximum pressure on workers to accept cuts to pay and conditions during the current round of negotiations for a new work agreement.

Jailed Chinese shoe factory workers released

Ten shoe workers jailed after strikes and protests last year at plants owned by the Taiwanese company Stella International Group in southern China were released from prison on December 31. The plants are located in Dongguan City in Guangdong province.

More than 1,000 workers took part in a mass protest on April 21 at the company's Xing Xiong Shoe Factory over low wages, pay arrears and harsh factory rules. Two days later, more than 4,000 workers at Stella's Xing Ang plant went on strike over the same issues.

The ten workers were arrested in October and November and sentenced by the Dongguan City court to three and a half years jail. The plants make shoes for top-line brand names such as Nike, Timberland, Reebok and Clark. The base pay for workers at both plants is US33 cents an hour. They earn about \$US100 a month, if they work up to 30 hours overtime. Rights group China Watch lobbied the company's buyers to call for the workers' release.

Government employees rally in Bangkok for pay increase

More than 100 workers from the Government Housing Bank (GHB) demonstrated in front of the bank's Bangkok headquarters on January 5. They were protesting the government's rejection of their demand for an average pay rise of 22 percent, with 30 percent for low-ranking staff.

GHB Labour Union spokesman Panya Panbua-ngam told the media that as from January 6 its 1,800 members would wear black to work to protest the cabinet's decision. If the cabinet did not approve the pay rise at its next meeting on January 11, the GHB union said it would "join with 52 state enterprises labour unions which are members of the Confederation of State Enterprises' Labour Unions in taking further action".

Panchayat workers continue dharna for permanency

The dharna (fasting strike) by 400 employees at the Tumkur Zilla Panchayat (village council) office in Tumkur, India entered its third day on January 6. They are demanding permanency and related benefits. Some of the workers have nearly 20 years service. According to a Centre of Indian Trade Unions spokesman, the government issued orders to "regularise" the services of gram panchayat employees in 2003 but this had not been carried out.

Other demands include, the promotion of lower-level staff to second division clerk grade, the implementation of a scheme for employee posting and immediate payment of all wage arrears.

Indian insurance workers postpone strike due to tsunami disaster

Insurance workers in India have postponed a strike scheduled for January 4 in sympathy with victims of the tsunami disaster. The strike was part of a campaign for a long-pending salary increase.

All India Insurance Employees Association (AIIEA) issued a statement expressing its members' sympathy over the loss of thousands of lives in South India and Southeast Asia caused by the earthquake and tsunami. Insurance workers donated to relief funds and manned special counters at various centres in Tamil Nadu to deal with victims' insurance claims.

Pakistani journalists protest for pay increases

Journalists held a sit-down protest on January 5 near the main office of the Jang Group of Publications in Karachi. They are demanding salary increases awarded by the government wages board.

According to Pakistani Federal Union of Journalists president Ahfazur Rahman, the journalists have not received the salary revisions awarded over several years. The Jang Group publishes the country's largest circulation newspaper.

Sugar workers demonstrate for severance pay

Pakistani sugar factory workers from the defunct Dadu and Thatta Sugar Mills held a joint march from the busy Haider Chowk area to the press club in Hyderabad on January 2.

They were protesting the non-payment of severance pay and other entitlements due to them after the recent closure of the two mills and the laying off of over 2,500 workers. Workers from other recently closed sugar mills were paid compensation or redeployed.

In the midst of the closures, the Pakistan Sugar Mills Association has increased the ex-mill price of sugar to Rs22,000 (\$US371) per ton. The rise will push up the retail cost of sugar across the country. The government announced last week that it has finalised a plan to import 200,000 tonnes of raw sugar in 2005—the first imports for four years.

New Zealand workers fight for compensation share

New Zealand victims will take up a legal fight for a share of the record \$AUS1.5 billion compensation agreement by James Hardie Industries to pay sufferers of asbestos diseases and their families. Under New Zealand law, sufferers cannot sue Hardie's New Zealand subsidiaries and can only obtain compensation from the Accident Compensation Commission (ACC).

Asbestos was used in wallboard and other building materials made in Australia. A hearing in Sydney next month will determine whether workers can sue James Hardie for diseases caused by its building products that were used in New Zealand.

Asbestos victims in New Zealand receive much less in compensation than those in Australia, who are now expected to receive about \$245,000 a head. Last year, a New Zealand court ordered the ACC to pay \$NZ98,500 after an asbestos victim's widow successfully argued that lump sum payments should apply from the date of treatment, or when a person first became ill. ACC has since appealed the ruling, claiming lump sums should be awarded only to people exposed or injured after April 1, 2002.

Niue stevedores refuse to work Sundays, holidays

Government-employed stevedores in Niue, one of the Pacific's smallest nations, have banned the unloading of cargo at the port of Alofi on Sundays and public holidays. The stevedores have been in talks with the government over pay rates and problems caused by

the lack of manpower on the wharf during unloading. Cargo vessels anchor in the roadstead and containers are loaded into barges that are unloaded at the wharf by mobile crane.

Working on Sundays has long been a contentious issue on Niue. Several years ago, flights in and out of the island were re-scheduled because the government had to refuse to roster staff to work on Sundays.

New Zealand-based Reef Shipping has criticised the recent industrial action and demanded the government act to change "local attitudes" to working hours. The company claims it had already lost one round trip by delays caused by stevedores' work bans.

Solomon Islands public employees issue strike notice

The Solomon Islands Public Employees Union (SIPEU) has given the government a 28-day notice of strike notice, effective from January 4. SIPEU general secretary Paul Balande said the dispute arose from the failure to fully implement the 2002-2004 Cost Of Living Adjustment (COLA) awarded by the Trades Dispute Panel on March 20 last year. Balande said that although the government had agreed to pay the COLA increase, the Ministry of Finance has not arranged the payment schedule.

The government was forced to sign an agreement in March last year granting public servants a 2.5 percent salary increase, backdated to 2003, plus an 8 percent COLA, backdated to 2002. The 7,000-strong combined public sector unions had threatened nationwide industrial action unless the increases were awarded.

In response to the latest strike notice, Finance and Treasury Permanent Secretary Shadrack Fanega has promised to pay police and teachers on January 6 and public servants and medical officers on January 13.

Tear gas used as New Caledonian police break-up picket

Police in the French territory of New Caledonia this week used tear gas to break up a picket in an industrial suburb of the capital Noumea. About 14 strikers were arrested after armoured police vehicles broke through a barrier of burning tyres. Workers retaliated by hurling petrol bombs and stones.

The strikers—members of the Union of Pacific Workers employed by the synthetic mould-making company Rotocal—had been blocking access to the company's plant at Ducos for two weeks in support of a pay increase.



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