

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Sugar worker accuses bodyguard of picket line shooting

A sugar farm worker shot on a picket line on January 5 at the Hacienda Luisita plantation, located near Tarlac in the Philippines, has testified before a Senate inquiry that the assailant was a bodyguard of parliamentarian Benigno Aquino. The Conjuangco family, relatives of former Philippines President Cory Aquino, own the plantation. It is the scene of a long-going and bitter dispute over pay, layoffs and workers' demands for genuine land redistribution.

The injured worker, George Loveland, said he was on the picket with 20 other people on January 2 when a Nissan Patrol sports utility vehicle carrying Benigno Aquino's bodyguards drove into the plantation. One man asked Loveland his name and told him that the workers should make a settlement. The same vehicle approached the pickets when leaving three days later. One of its occupants cursed the strikers and then got out and shot Loveland in the chest. Another worker, Ernesto Ramos, was also shot.

Asked by the media for his reaction to the shootings, Benigno Aquino said his bodyguards "did not shoot anybody". He declared: "If I were contemplating a crime, perhaps the first thing I would do is to ensure that I could get away with it."

The reality is that those committing violence against the striking workers are confident that the authorities will do nothing. Weeks have passed since 14 people were killed in a violent military-police assault ordered by the government on a workers' blockade at the plantation's sugar mill but no one has been charged or held accountable.

President Gloria Arroyo only ordered a Senate inquiry into the killings after a public outcry. Shortly after, Marcelino Beltran, the chairman of the farmers' organisation *Alwansa ng mga Magbubukid sa Tarlac* (ATM) and a key witness to the inquiry, was murdered outside his home on December 8 by an assailant wearing an army uniform.

Sugar mill workers locked out in the Philippines

More than 300 mill workers at the Central Azucarera de Bais (CAB) sugar plantation on the island of Negros have been locked out after they filed a 30-day strike notice with the Department of Labor and Employment (Dole).

The dispute was triggered by the management's refusal to negotiate a new Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) with the mill workers' union. Negotiations between the management and unions broke down on January 11. The union has insisted CAB management respond to the workers' demands by January 21.

Pablito Saguran, president of the CAB Employees Union-National Federation of Labor (CABEU-NFL), said a claim by management that it obtained 311 signatures from workers calling for the strike notice to be withdrawn was "misleading". He said the workers had only signed because the company had assured them they would resume normal operations.

Filipino public servants to protest transfer of regional office

Over 8,000 public servants in Zamboanga plan to hold a protest march and prayer rally on January 15, the date set for the transfer of government offices to Pagadian, a city some 200 kilometres away. The workers are concerned about the impact of the shift on their employment. The rally is being organised by the Confederation of Government Employees Union.

Indian power workers oppose privatisation

Seventy thousand power workers employed by the Uttar Pradesh Power Corporation (UPPCL), in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, began an indefinite strike on January 10. They are opposing the privatisation of a generation unit and five distribution companies. Demonstrations were held outside UPPCL offices across the state.

The workers are also demanding the filling of 35,000 vacant positions in the power sector, the payment of ex-gratia allowances and the creation of a single workforce across UPPCL's generation, transmission and distribution companies.

Pakistani power workers strike against privatisation

Power workers across Pakistan held a one-hour strike on January 10 to protest the moves to privatise the country's power generation and supply industry. Carrying banners and chanting anti-privatisation slogans, thousands of workers from the Karachi Electric Supply Corporation (KESC) demonstrated at the company's office in Karachi. Strikers from Jamshoro, Lakhra and Kotri demonstrated in Hyderabad.

The workers demanded restoration of their trade union rights, which were banned in KESC by the military government. They also demanded full-time conditions for 9,000 workers employed on contracts and condemned the government for appointing army officials to top management positions.

Workers have threatened to disrupt power supply to Karachi if the privatisation process is not halted immediately. The KESC Employees Action Committee and the Water and Power Development Authority Hydroelectric Labour Union called the protest.

Pakistani newspaper workers demand wage increase

Hundreds of newspaper workers marched in Quetta on January 6 to demand the payment of an overdue wage increase. They also called for the repeal of laws depriving them of trade union and other basic rights.

Later, workers rallied at the city press club. Speakers condemned the government's plan to privatise a number of state-owned companies.

Bangladeshi garment workers die in factory fire

Twenty-three garment workers were burnt to death in a blaze at Shaan Knitting and Processing, a garment factory in the Siddirgani suburb of Dhaka. Around 400 employees were inside the four-storey factory when the fire broke out on January 7.

Fire fighters struggled for four hours to put out the fire, but thick smoke continued to pour from the building the next day. An electrical short is alleged to be the cause.

According to reports, workers died because a number of exits were blocked. At least 30 were injured as they escaped down a narrow, smoke-filled staircase. Fire extinguishers in the plant were not in working

condition.

Around two million workers are working in Bangladeshi garment factories. Most of the plants have lax safety standards and a poorly maintained. With Bangladesh earning \$US5 billion from garment exports annually, the government does little to enforce safety.

Tasmanian electricians strike for pay increase

About 20 electricians at shipbuilder Incat in Tasmania went on strike on January 13 and will not return until the beginning of next week. Two days earlier, the workers walked off the job for several hours after negotiations for an \$80 per week pay increase broke down.

After returning to work, the electricians intend to ban maintenance work on Joint Venture Hull 50, a ship owned by the American company Bollinger/Incat and leased to the US military to carry out support missions for the war in Iraq. The workers will ensure two other Incat vessels to be used to transport aid to tsunami-affected regions in Asia are completed.

A spokesman for the Communications Electrical Plumbing Union said the electricians only wanted to be paid at the same rates as electricians employed by other companies in Tasmania. He said that several electricians had already left the company because of poor pay.

Queensland medical staff act against shortages

Medical staff at Rockhampton Base Hospital (RBH) in central Queensland have imposed work bans after the state Labor government and hospital management dismissed their complaints over staff shortages and under-funding.

In December last year, medical practitioners at the hospital unanimously endorsed a vote of no confidence in the management, claiming that the RBH has been starved for funds for many years and was on the verge of collapse.

The hospital, and the whole of Central Queensland, only has one orthopedic surgeon after the other specialist resigned at the beginning of December. The number of clinicians at the hospital has fallen so low it is no longer safe to run services.

Western Australian nurses reject government pay offer

Western Australian nurses this month overwhelmingly rejected the state government's pay offer of 14.7 percent over three years and six months back pay. Nurses are demanding improvements in working conditions, which the government is refusing to discuss.

In late 2004, the Labor government headed by Premier Geoff Gallop sent ballot papers to state public sector nurses urging them to vote in favour of a new pay deal. While the controversial move was designed to bypass negotiations with the Australian Nurses Federation, the main aim was to pressure nurses to accept the pay offer prior to the state election due in February this year.

WA rail construction workers return to work

The Perth-to-Mandurah rail project is at the centre of a pay and conditions dispute. Rail construction workers employed by construction company John Holland went on strike on January 12, on the eve of starting work. The 140 workers are demanding a \$10-per-week pay increase, to establish parity with their counterparts working for other companies on the project. They are also seeking a reduction in the working week from 38 to 36 hours.

Employees returned to work after Holland agreed to discuss their demands with the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union. During an earlier dispute in November last year, workers were threatened with individual fines of up to \$6,000 by the federal government's Building Industry Task Force when they refused to end strike action.

Widows force study into death of New Zealand port workers

A former Port Nelson worker has died after contracting motor neurone disease, a rare degenerative brain illness. The man died at his home on Christmas Eve, aged 66. He is believed to be the fifth former port worker to die from the disease since 2002.

The Nelson Public Health Service has now been persuaded to launch a

study into the deaths by a group of widows. They believe that their husbands' deaths could be linked to methyl bromide exposure.

The toxic greenhouse gas is used at ports around the country to fumigate export timber and containerised cargo. It has been used in more than 220 fumigations at Port Nelson in the past 12 months alone. Nelson Pest Control Services performed 109 container fumigations and three other fumigations at the port. Another company, Genera, performed 62 container fumigations and 48 timber fumigations. One widow said she was "absolutely horrified" at the number of fumigations taking place in the vicinity of port workers. "When they let the gas out it goes everywhere," she said. A spokesperson for Campaigners Against Toxic Sprays said it was "shocking" the spray was being used close to houses without any warnings to residents.

Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) revealed this week that it had "considered" prosecuting a former fumigation company and issued several formal warnings after incidents at the port involving the gas. Fumigation operators are obligated to notify public health, fire services and police before using the fumigant. Public Health has admitted that the regulations covering the use of methyl bromide are hopelessly outdated. OSH officials are planning to meet later this month with Port Nelson companies involved in fumigation, to "review procedures".

Guam workers protest over racist sackings

Guam employees of the engineering firm Calpec demonstrated on January 10 to protest the sacking of 10 workers on a Calpec contract with telecommunications company MCI. Joseph Mendiola, who was leading the demonstration, accused Calpec of dismissing the workers for filing a formal complaint after a MCI representative allegedly called them "a bunch of island monkeys". Calpec management claims the sackings were not related to the incident and the workers were laid off because company's contract with MCI is near completion.

The workers have filed a complaint of discrimination with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in Hawaii.

Surgeons end boycott of Guam Hospital

On January 6, two private practice surgeons ended their boycott of Guam Memorial Hospital (GMH) after hospital management agreed to resolve some of the issues in the dispute. The doctors were protesting over operating room conditions and a shortage of medical supplies. Guam Memorial is the only civilian hospital on the island.

Management has agreed to hire its own surgeons, employ a permanent nurse manager for the operating room, correct deficiencies in the operating room and determine whether the medical director should be replaced.

In May 2004, *Pacific Daily News* reported on a major shortage of nurses at the hospital. The newspaper interviewed nurses who said they were often required to work 12-hour shifts and double shifts to make up for the staff shortage. Hospital management claimed it was having trouble attracting nurses to the island, but other reports indicated that the hospital was starved of funds.

Early in August last year, the GMH Authority, with the support of the Guam Medical Society, made an appeal to the Guam legislature to assist paying for the outsourcing of housekeeping and security services, and a subsidy to meet operating expenses.



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