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

Filipino strikers brace for police attack

Reports have reached strikers at the Cojuangco family-owned Hacienda Luisita sugar plantation in the Philippines that Special Action Forces from the Philippines National Police headquarters in Camp Crame are being dispatched to enforce a Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) return-to-work order issued on January 14.

The *Sun Star* newspaper reported that "more than 1,000 police from the Tarlac provincial office are standing by to assist the team from Camp Crane" when they launch an attack on about 6,000 striking workers. DOLE ordered members of the Central Azucarera de Tarlac Labor Union (CATLU) to report to work within five days from the time the parties in dispute received copies of its decision.

In November last year, 12 workers and two young children were killed during a police and military operation ordered by Labor Secretary Patricia Santo Tomas to smash a blockade by strikers at the plantation's sugar mill.

The workers have said that they will defy the return-to-work order and rejected the dismissal of 35 strike leaders that Tomas claimed had "misled" employees on the legality of the strike. CATLU President Ricardo Ramos said that the sacking of union officials was designed to provoke further unrest and declared: "We will stay put." Union lawyer Nenita Mahinay said the union would take legal action for the withdrawal of the order and bring the case before the Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court if necessary.

The 10-page DOLE decision also ordered the Central Azucarera de Tarlac management at the Hacienda Luisita to immediately pay workers their unpaid salaries and implement wage adjustments as part of a Collective Bargaining Agreement, retroactive from July last year. This includes a daily wage increase of 15 pesos (US8.5 cents) and a lump sum of 12,500 pesos ($US223), far short of the union's demand for a 100-peso daily wage increase and a 30,000-peso signing bonus.

Indonesian union cancels airport strike

This week, the union representing workers employed by airport operator PT Angkasa Pura I (API) in 13 Indonesian cities cancelled a planned strike and a series of mass protests. The union planned to hold two days of action from January 18 and a strike on January 21 over moves to outsource management of the workers' old-age pension fund. API union chairperson Itje Yulinar said that work would continue as normal but employees would wear black ribbons from January 18.

API workers have held a series of protests since the middle of last year when the company's new management and the Office of State Enterprises announced its plan to transfer the old-age pension fund from a workers' foundation to a private insurance firm. Payments to the fund are deducted from employees' monthly salaries.

The workers are concerned that management and officials may embezzle funds, which amount to over 100 billion rupiah ($US11.1 million), during the transfer. They also argue that higher fees charged by the insurance company will sharply reduce benefits to retired workers.

A union official said that the issues had been discussed with government ministers but they had continually insisted that the workers accept the plan. The union called off the strike after Sugiharto, the State Minister of State Enterprises, issued a press statement declaring that he would not approve the transfer and would meet with API's board of directors. Itje Yulinar said that the workers' "peaceful demonstration" would continue until an agreement with Sugiharto had been secured.

Chinese retail workers walk out

About 700 counter staff at the retail outlets of Japanese cosmetics-maker Kanebo in Shanghai and Beijing walked off the job on January 18. While the company is not disclosing the reasons for the dispute, *Kyodo News* reported that the workers were protesting over the actions of a Japanese executive at a Shanghai subsidiary. The executive allegedly searched the desk drawer of a female employee without her approval. The workers, who remain on strike, claim this is "a human rights violation".

Japanese business paper *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* said that the dispute was triggered by Kanebo's sudden decision last week to replace the Chinese president of the Shanghai units with a Japanese executive. Workers were only informed after the change was made.

Indian doctors fight for better working conditions

Junior doctors at the Nehru Hospital in Gorakhpur, in the southern Indian state of Kerala, began an indefinite strike on January 16. They are demanding better working conditions and timely payment of their salaries and other dues.

The doctors are considering extending their strike to include outdoor and indoor services if their demands are not promptly met.

Indian telecom workers demand improved wages and conditions

Casual telecom workers for Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL), in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, demonstrated near Telephone House in Bangalore on January 17. Workers' representatives presented a list of demands for improved wages and conditions to BSNL's chief general manager in Karnataka.

Most of the employees are not even paid the minimum wage, after their daily wage was reduced last June from 120 rupees ($US2) to just 60 rupees. They are also deprived of other benefits. Even though the company makes deductions from their wages for the Provident Fund and Employees State Insurance, the money is not paid into the fund.

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Most of the casual workers are employed in housekeeping, trenching, repairing cable faults or as office assistants. They are members of the Karnataka State BSNL Non-Permanent Workers' Union.

Pakistani sugar mill workers oppose closure

Retrenched employees from Thatta Sugar Mills demonstrated in Thatta, in the Pakistani province of Sindh, on January 14. They are demanding compensation, reopening of the mill and an inquiry into the removal and theft of the mill's machinery.

The workers marched through the city's main bazaar and held a sit-down protest on the national highway outside the press club. Workers have threatened to hold demonstrations every Friday until their demands were met.

Sri Lankan health workers demand overtime pay

Around 400 health workers from the Colombo National Hospital surrounded the director's office on January 13, demanding overtime and holiday payments that have accumulated since last October. The protest erupted after the hospital accountant told workers' representatives that there were no funds to pay the back dues. Employees returned to work after the hospital director promised to pay the outstanding money within the next few days.

Estate workers on strike over broken management pledge

Around 500 workers at the Ratnapura Tholosvalai Estate, 80 kilometres from Colombo, began an indefinite strike on January 13. They are demanding that the management pay workers' wages that it had used to fund relief for victims of the December 26 tsunami.

Workers at Kotiyagala Estate, near Nuewaraeliya in the central hills, began a "go-slow" this week. They are objecting to a management decision to deduct two days' wages from employees without their consent or any discussion. The estate belongs to Bagawantalawa Plantations.

Australian building workers strike over site death

Workers on the Barclay Mowlem Peppers Project in Kingscliff on the New South Wales north coast walked out for 48 hours on January 15 after 59-year-old Michael Palmer was killed. Palmer was crushed when an all-terrain crane carrying a large bucket of concrete fell on him. He was an employee of East Coast Concrete.

A spokesman for the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union claimed that the present licensing system had contributed to the accident. While a license is required to drive a small forklift, it is not needed to operate large all-terrain cranes like the one involved in the fatality. A spokesman for WorkCover said that the accident was under investigation.

Shipyard workers walk off in pay dispute

About 100 shipyard workers at Incat in Tasmania walked off the job on January 21 after holding an on-site meeting. The strike is in support of about 20 electricians who are involved in an ongoing dispute over an $80-a-week pay claim.

Communications Electrical and Plumbing members walked off the job for several hours last week and placed a series of work bans when they returned. Their claim is to bring Incat wages into line with electricians working for other Tasmanian companies.

A union spokesperson said he had been told that the company would close its operations if the strike continued. Incat builds fast commercial and defence passenger and vehicle ferries.

Electrical workers strike over pay

Electrical Trade Union members employed by BassLink in George Town, Tasmania, walked off the job on January 15 to protest the company's pay rates. They claim that interstate electricians recruited by Siemens and Aurora, contractors to BassLink, were paid $10 an hour more.

The dispute has gone to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission for mediation. BassLink is constructing an undersea electrical connection between Tasmania and Victoria.

Police, plantation workers clash in the Solomons

Police and striking workers from the Russell Island Plantation Estate (RIPEL) clashed at Yandina wharf in the Solomon Islands on January 17. The police used C-S spray on the strikers who responded by hurling rocks. RIPEL employees had occupied the wharf to try and stop copra being loaded onto ship bound for Honiara. The strikers forced the boat to leave before it was fully loaded.

About 1,000 RIPEL workers are on strike over the sacking of 100 employees and the eviction of their families from the island following the introduction of new copra-harvesting methods. Earlier, the workers told police officials at the wharf that they would allow the copra to be loaded if the company paid due salaries and National Provident Fund contributions.

Fiji hotel workers plan to strike over sacking

Hotel workers employed at the Holiday Inn in Suva, Fiji, have voted for a series of strikes beginning on January 24. The industrial action is over the unfair dismissal of Sevanaia Naliwa, who worked as a cook at the hotel in 2003, and the Ministry of Labour's refusal to accept a dispute notice.

Union general secretary Timoci Naivaluwaqa said management was falsely claiming that Naliwa was terminated because he had an argument with a co-worker at an off-duty Christmas party. Town Apartment hotel employees in Suva also held a workplace ballot where 92 percent voted to strike for Naliwa's reinstatement.

Fiji Telecom jobs to go

More than 700 communications workers are likely to lose their jobs at Telecom Fiji if the company goes ahead with a review of its operation. According to the Fiji Post and Telecom Employees Association general secretary Attar Singh, a telecom review team this week revealed plans to reduce staffing levels by 15 and 50 percent.

Singh said another 45 jobs from Telecom subsidiary Exceed Pasifica are also under threat. The review report will be tabled to a meeting of the company's board in March.

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