

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Hacienda Luisita unions negotiate under threat of state violence

CATLU and the ULWU, the two unions representing striking mill and farm workers at the Cojuangco family-owned Hacienda Luisita sugar plantation near Tarlac City, have begun negotiations with the company. The workers, who have been on strike for three months, are demanding pay increases, reinstatement of sacked union officials and a genuine land distribution program.

The unions entered “explorative” talks with plantation lawyers at the urging of Philippines President Gloria Arroyo and the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines. While Arroyo claims that she wants a “peaceful” solution, 12 worker and two young children were killed on November 16, 2004, when the government ordered hundreds of police and army personal, backed by armored vehicles and water cannon, to disperse pickets.

The present negotiations, which include representatives from Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and the military, are taking place under the threat of further state violence. A few weeks ago DOLE Secretary Patricia Santo Tomas ordered a large contingent of police and troops be readied to again disperse pickets and enforce her direction for the strikers to return to work. At the same time, the commander of the Armed Forces Northern Command declared the strike “a national security concern”. The dispersal operation was put on hold by Arroyo, but only during negotiations.

The unions have already indicated that they are willing to reduce a number of their demands. On February 2, CATLU—representing 750 mill workers—indicated that it would cut its claim for a 100-peso (\$US1.38) pay increase to just 60 pesos and lower its gratuity pay and contract-signing bonus claims. In return, CATLU wants its president Ricardo Ramos and 34 other union officials rehired.

The ULWU—representing 5,000 farm workers—has offered to decrease its pay claim, lower the number of guaranteed working days it is seeking and reduce the number of sacked workers to be reinstated from 327 to just 73, including eight union officials. There has been no report on the progress of workers’ demand for land distribution.

Pakistani power workers fight privatisation

Karachi Electric Supply Corporation (KESC) employees began a round-the-clock protest outside the Karachi Press Club on February 4. They want the government to abandon plans to privatise KESC. Two workers, Akbar Korejo and Syed Aslam Shah, are on a fast to the death. Other employees, two at a time, in 12-hour shifts, have joined them. The protestors also want the restoration of trade union rights at KESC and regular employment for contract workers. The campaign started on the same day that initial bidding for KESC by private

companies began.

Thousands of chanting workers rallied outside the press club with speakers accusing the government of imposing World Bank and IMF dictates. Several unions participated in the demonstration, including the Pakistan Wapda Hydro Electric Central Labour Union and the All Pakistan Federation of Trade Unions.

The rally followed a protest on February 2 by hundreds of Water and Power Development Authority workers outside the Rawalpindi press club in Punjab province in solidarity with the KESC employees. Speakers warned that privatisation would destroy thousands of jobs and bring sharp increases in electricity charges.

Workers and teachers protest in Pakistan’s Sindh province

On February 4, workers from the Thatta Sugar Mills marched in Thatta, in Pakistan’s Sindh province, demanding provincial authorities reopen the closed mill or offer a severance package. The march passed through the town’s main thoroughfares and ended outside the local press club. The protesters held a sit-down protest on the national highway, disrupting traffic for about one hour. The workers say the campaign will continue until their demands are met.

Meanwhile professors and teachers in Thatta and Hyderabad protested on February 3 for better working conditions and jobs by hoisting black flags on college buildings and wearing black armbands to work. They want an improved promotion system, a 33-percent increase in physical education and librarian directors’ positions and 2,500 other staff vacancies in colleges filled. They are also calling for the withdrawal of plans to privatise St. Joseph and St Patrick colleges and an end to political interference in education institutions. Further protests are planned.

Sri Lankan health workers demand reinstatement of colleagues

Health workers at the Sri Jayawardanapura Hospital on the outskirts of Colombo launched a work-to-rule on February 4 demanding the reinstatement of six clerks sacked on February 1. Management claimed that there were irregularities in the clerks’ appointments.

The six dismissed employees began a sit-in hunger strike after they received termination notices and were joined by another health worker who climbed to the roof of the hospital and began a hunger strike. The work bans are severely disrupting services with hospital workers determined to continue the fight until the termination notices are withdrawn.

Postal workers demand legal action over death of colleague

Kandy post office workers began an indefinite strike on February 3 to demanding legal action against officials who allegedly stopped salary payments to an employee. The worker subsequently committed suicide.

The deceased worker, Pushpa Kumara, had been temporarily transferred from Kandy to an army camp post office in

Kankesanthurai, on the northern Jaffna peninsular, and was on duty when tsunami struck. Management stopped his salary claiming that 75,000 rupees (\$US750) went missing from the army post office safe during the disaster. After failing to regain his salary, and with his integrity being questioned, the distraught employee killed himself by jumping in front of a train.

Walltile workers strike for wage increase

Workers at the Walltile factory in Balangoda, about 120 kilometres from Colombo, began an indefinite strike on February 2. They want a 3,000-rupee (\$US30) pay increase and an 18,000-rupee annual bonus. Management has attempted to limit the bi-annual salary increase to just 1,300 rupees. Workers are planning to step up the campaign.

Six days later workers at state-owned transport corporations in Kalutara, Matugama and Ambalangoda, in Sri Lanka's southwest, started an indefinite strike to demand a 2,500-rupee (\$US25) pay rise. The increase had been promised to state sector employees by the United Peoples Freedom Alliance government in November 2004 but transport corporation management have refuse to act on the pledge.

Major bus routes serviced by the striking depots have been totally disrupted. The transport workers have begun a poster campaign to explain their case and win support.

Incat workers strike

About 80 manufacturing workers at ferry-builder Incat in the Australian state of Tasmania walked off the job again last weekend. While the workers have accepted a negotiated agreement, management is refusing to allow the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) to sign on their behalf. The AMWU is part of a single bargaining unit at the ship builders, along with the Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union and the Construction, Forestry Mining and Energy Union. It is unclear why the company has taken this stance.

The unions claim that Incat employees are paid at least \$80 a week less than their counterparts in other manufacturing industries in Tasmania. The new agreement will provide a 3 percent pay increase on certification, with another 3 percent in November, and a 38-hour week with no loss of pay. The 38-hour week was won by manufacturing workers in other states many years ago.

New Zealand legal aid workers to strike over pay

Workers employed by the Legal Services Agency (LSA)—the New Zealand government body that grants legal aid—will strike next week unless they receive an adequate pay offer. Workers will stop processing or approving invoices for legal aid, meaning that lawyers handling cases will not be paid.

The National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) has been in talks with the LSA for over six months but the agency is opposing a flat rate percentage increase. A NUPE spokesman said that the union wants a pay increase that “reflects cost of living increases and other pressures on members’ incomes”. The spokesman complained that the LSA’s position left the union “no room for manoeuvre” and that the strike was inevitable unless a last minute deal could be brokered. NUPE said it has “left the door open” for further talks.

The union represents legal aid employees in Wellington, Christchurch, Invercargill and Whangarei and staff who process legal aid applications for the Waitangi Tribunal.

Auckland bus drivers stop work

More than 800 bus drivers at Stagecoach overwhelmingly rejected a management pay offer at a stop-work meeting in Auckland, New Zealand, on February 7. An estimated 1,500 bus trips were cancelled during the stoppage. There were calls from the floor of the meeting for

an immediate strike but drivers returned to work at 2 p.m.

A combined unions’ advocate said that officials had dissuaded drivers from striking by citing an agreement with management requiring three days’ notice of industrial action. He said the drivers had eventually agreed to resume mediated negotiations despite anger over what they deemed an “insulting” pay offer. The offer would lift drivers hourly rate to just \$15. The company also refused to allow more frequent breaks and to reduce split shifts which presently stretch to 14-hours a day.

New Zealand port dispute goes to mediation

Port unions and the Christchurch Lyttelton Port Company (LPC) have entered mediation talks in an attempt to avert a month-long ban on overtime. Mediation had been set down for February 10 after combined unions gave notice last month that the overtime ban would be effective from the evening of February 16. The decision to take industrial action came after protracted bargaining between the company and union failed to produce an agreement on pay.

PNG public employees strike after torching of their houses

Department of Works employees at Mt Hagen, Papua New Guinea, walked off the job on February 9, after local clansmen living near the city burned down some of the workers’ houses. At least 90 families were left homeless and are now sheltering in the department’s yard and garage. The clansmen launched the attack following the death in custody of one of their colleagues who was arrested near the work’s compound.

While a police mobile unit intervened and stopped the torching workers fear that the attacks may continue and are threatening to remain off work indefinitely until the department provides permanent security. They are also demanding new accommodation for the displaced families.

Government holds up food assistance to sacked garment workers

Over 100 workers laid off last year by garment companies in Saipan, capital of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), are protesting over the delays in the release of food assistance from non-profit aid organisation Karidat Social Services.

Karidad, however, said the fault lay with Attorney General’s Office (AGO). A new bureaucratic process demanded by the US Office of Insular Affairs requires the AGO to certify all food assistance applications to displaced non-residents. The AGO is delaying certification and has not disclosed its reasons.

Karidat provides \$US100 per person in monthly food vouchers. The vouchers are the only means of survival for many displaced non-resident workers who cannot seek other employment without Department of Labor approval.



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