

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 December 2005

Indian workers protest provident fund cuts

The “All India Protest Day” on December 20 saw millions of factory workers and other private sector employees hold rallies and demonstrations across the country over a one percent cut to Employees’ Provident Fund (EPF) interest rates. The cuts were instigated by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) federal government, which includes the Stalinist CPI (M), and introduced by the Employees’ Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) a fortnight ago.

The EPFO claims that it is not possible to pay more than 8.5 percent because returns on provident fund deposits are low. Last week, the Labour Ministry convened a meeting of Regional PF Commissioners to discuss ways of generating funds internally to pay EPF interest for this year.

The unions, however, want retention of the 9.5 percent interest rate for this year and an increase to 12 percent next year. Factory workers and employees in the private sector come under EPF while the state sector employees are covered under the Government Provident Fund.

More deaths in illegal industrial units

Two factory workers from West Bengal, Salam, 30, and Amrul, 20, were killed in an explosion at a spray-painting company in Madanpur Khadar village near Delhi on December 13. The deaths come just six days after 12 people died in a blaze at an industrial unit in Vishwas Nagar in east Delhi. According to the government, both plants were “illegal” industrial units.

Delhi police investigation officers said that an exploding drum of chemicals probably caused the fire. Flames quickly spread, exploding spray paint cans and causing panic among workers. Nearby residents fled their houses and children in a private school on the ground floor of the factory and in an adjacent building narrowly escaped the fire.

Female garment workers protested in Bangalore on December 11, blaming management negligence for the fire. They demanded the federal and state governments initiate a national audit of factory safety and health conditions, legal action against the Vishwas Nagar unit owner, and adequate compensation to the victims’ families. Industries Minister Mangat Ram Singhal compared the fire to last year’s tsunami arrogantly stating: “This is nature ... who could have prevented it?”

Punjabi workers rally for conditions

Government employees in the Punjab and from the Chandigarh Municipal Corporation rallied in Chandigarh on December 13, condemning the central government’s “anti-employee attitude” and demanding better working conditions. These include, lifting state and municipal workers conditions to those of central government employees, bonuses and the immediate confirmation of all job appointments.

Among those demonstrating were workers from Chandigarh transport, public health, electrical, housing, horticulture and a range of other government departments.

Forestry workers demand decent wages

Forestry workers demonstrated in Hisar in the Indian state of Haryana on December 13 to demand payment of overdue wages, abolition of the contract work system and regularisation of employment. According to the

Forest Department Labourers Union, hundreds of workers have not received wages for the past four months. Workers will maintain protest action until the demands are met.

Sri Lankan medical officers and health workers strike

Government medical officers in the North Central, Uva and North East provinces of Sri Lanka are continuing an indefinite strike begun on December 12. They want all vacancies for medical officers in the provincial hospitals filled.

There are 81 vacancies in the main Anuradhapura hospital and another 30 vacancies in other hospitals in the North Central province. Existing medical officers work under extremely difficult conditions due to staff shortages.

Other workers at the Anuradhapura hospital walked out on December 16 demanding the payment of overtime allowances and holiday entitlements owed for the last five months. Hospital management claims that the government has not provided the 24 million rupees needed to settle the outstanding amounts.

Employees have threatened to strike indefinitely from the end of December if the issue remains unresolved.

In a separate dispute, minor staff and pharmacists at the Wathupitiwala hospital struck for six hours on December 14, demanding payment of outstanding overtime normally due on the tenth day of each month. They returned to work after management promised to pay the allowances.

Indonesian workers demonstrate over wages

On December 19, thousands of workers jammed city streets in Medan, Surabaya and Cimahi in Indonesia to protest over a minimum wage due to be introduced on January 1, which is below the cost of living.

Police and security guards attacked protesting North Sumatra Workers General Action members in Medan and several demonstrators were injured. In Surabaya, 10,000 marched to the East Java governor’s office and tore down the fence. The governor refused to meet them. Hundreds of workers in Cimahi converged on the West Java governor’s office.

The workers reject the new minimum monthly wage, which is about 700,000 rupiah (\$US68), and want 1,330,000 rupiah (\$US129). Chairman of the Confederation of All-Indonesian Workers Union Jacob Nuwa Wea said the mass demonstrations expressed frustration over poor working conditions and unfair treatment. He claimed that workers in the East Java regency of Madiun were only being paid 300,000 rupiah (\$US29) and found it difficult to survive.

Child protection workers impose work bans

Government child protection workers in Tasmania imposed work bans December 20 over heavy workloads. Employees will only concentrate on children-at-risk cases and redirect low-risk cases to Department of Health and Community Services management.

A spokesman for the Community and Public Sector Union said that workloads had increased by 400 percent in the past year, resulting in a backlog of over 500 child protection cases. The union contends that staff numbers should be doubled to deal with the current workload.

New Zealand fast-food workers continue strikes

On December 17, workers at the Royal Oak Pizza Hut in Auckland went on strike and picketed the outlet. The stoppage was the third in a series of one-day walkouts at fast food outlets over the past weeks to demand a \$NZ12 hourly minimum wage, abolition of youth rates and for secure working hours.

The minimum wage in New Zealand is currently \$9.50 for 18-year-olds, \$7.60 for 16 to 17-year-olds, with no legal minimum for those under 16. The strikers held multi-language banners protesting against poverty wages and the WTO. A spokesman for the *supersizemypay.com* campaign said that 70 percent of the strikers were migrants or international students and particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Previously, workers at Starbucks and KFC outlets went on strike.

New Zealand local authority workers locked out

Council workers in Invercargill, Gore and Bluff were locked out December 15. About 30 members of the Public Service Association (PSA) were locked out at Invercargill after reporting for work at the council premises in the morning. The same happened to 25 library workers at Invercargill, Bluff Service Centre staff and council workers in Gore.

Employees walked off the job two days earlier in a "wildcat" strike to demand a 4.5 percent pay rise and a new collective work agreement. Employers offered 3 percent increase and a \$250 lump sum payment. The councils have also indicated they want to ditch the current multi-employer agreement covering workers. An employer spokesman claimed that half the union members have accepted the offer.

The PSA promised to suspend industrial action if employers discontinued the lockout.

New Zealand nurses present pay petition

Nurses employed in general practitioners' surgeries presented a petition with 18,000 signatures to the New Zealand parliament on December 15 demanding equal pay with public hospital nurses. Public hospital nurses are due to receive a 20 percent pay increase and by next year will earn \$160 more than those in GP's surgeries.

Government MP Maryan Street received the petition. While she claimed the Labour Party supported "the principles behind" the nurses' bid for pay parity she said achieving it would "not be easy".

Westpac NZ staff reject contract offer

Westpac NZ bank staff rejected the company's latest work contract offer this week and voted to strike on December 23, the busiest banking day of the year. The offer was rejected by 68 percent of the 1,900 Westpac workers who are members of Finsec, the financial sector union.

Employees object to performance targets requiring them to sell increasing amounts of "lending and other products" to customers that would result in mounting debt. If they fail to meet targets they have their take-home pay reduced.

A Finsec spokesperson said sales targets and pressure on staff to achieve had intensified over the over the past 12 months while the bank made \$NZ600 million profit.

New Zealand broadcasting workers strike

Staff at Television NZ's Avalon studio in Wellington walked off the job on December 15, taking the prime time "Good Morning" program off the air for the second time in a week. The 60 technical and production workers want a 5 percent pay rise and are objecting to long working hours. The state broadcaster offered a 3.6 percent wage increase.

NZ residential healthcare workers strike

Care givers, cleaners, kitchen and laundry staff, nurses' aides and receptionists at Lexham Park Rest Home and Hospital in the Bay of Plenty went on strike on December 13 after Radius Residential Care offered a 2.5 percent wage increase. A spokesperson for the workers said the offer was "insulting" because the government had released 7 percent extra funding over the past 12 months.

High staff turnover at Lexham Park due to the low wages, extended hours and poor working conditions is typical of the entire industry. Radius

Residential Care, which acquired Lexham Park two years ago, has 22 facilities across the country.

PNG nurses end three-day national strike

Nearly 4,000 nurses in Papua New Guinea returned to work on December 22, ending a three-day national strike. The nurses struck over back-pay, insurance cover, redundancy arrangements, health and safety issues, and government failure to implement award salary scales from 2000.

PNG Nurses Association officials recommended the return-to-work after the Public Service Conciliation and Arbitration Tribunal ordered the government to immediately implement the 2000 award and instructed PMGH administration to address the nurses' grievances at the hospital. PNG's The Department of Personnel Management (DPM) confirmed that it would process travel warrants owing to nurses since 2000.

PNG teachers still waiting for leave entitlements

Two weeks after school holidays began, thousands of teachers across Papua New Guinea are still waiting for this year's leave entitlements. Hundreds of teachers are stranded at their schools, unable to return home for holidays. Many teachers have still not been paid outstanding 2004 entitlements.

Lae provincial treasury building doors were quickly closed when over 500 angry teachers arrived at the office on December 20. In Madang, teachers have been gathering at the provincial education office. Last year, teachers in a similar situation stoned the office and denounced officials after they posted notices claiming teachers had made false travel claims.

Morobe PNG Teachers Association branch president Mark Nanu confirmed that about 4,000 teachers in various parts of the province were affected. He alleged that some treasury department officers were delaying payments so they could demand bribes for processing entitlement applications.

The PNG Teachers Association has begun circulating a petition demanding an investigation into allegations that leave entitlement funds dating back to 2003 were misused.

Union blockades lifted in New Caledonia

The New Caledonia's Kanak Union (USTKE) and the Cougern union has lifted blockades, which were established on December 11 to demand the establishment of a nickel ore processing plant in the country's northern province. The decision was made after the French High Commission assured the unions that it would support the project.

USTKE, however, has warned that a general strike could be called if a French high court rules against mining rights in Koniambo on December 26.

The High Court decision concerns a claim filed by the French state-owned company Eramet for exclusive rights to ore deposits. The proposed northern nickel plant, which would be run by a rival company, cannot proceed without access to the Koniambo deposits.

Another death at Fiji gold mine

Mineworker Sireli Masenawa, 22, was killed this week at the partially state-owned Emperor Gold Mine in Vatakoula, Fiji. Masenawa was crushed to death in a rock fall when working underground. It was the third underground death at the mine this year. There have been over 1,700 accidents at the mine since it opened and several deaths.

Despite ongoing deaths and injuries, the Mine Workers Union has not called industrial action but requested the government establish an inquiry into safety at the mine and for increased compensation for victims. The Emperor Mine is exempt from Fiji's occupational health and safety laws.

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