Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

31 December 2005

Asia

Protest over Punjab factory closure

Thousands of workers, teachers, farmers and supporters protested in front of the Hero Cycle factory at Ludhiana in the north western Indian state of Punjab on December 25. The demonstration was a show of solidarity with thousands of workers who lost jobs after the closure of the Rockman cycle factory in Ludhiana.

The demonstration included moulders, steel, hosiery and railway workers and members of a range of trade union organisations. The teachers came from the Democratic Teachers Front and the farmers from the Bharti Kisan Union.

Police attack teachers' demonstration in Bihar

Around 25 people were injured when police wielding long bamboo canes and backed by water cannons dispersed a protest by hundreds of temporary teachers in Patna, the capital of the Indian state of Bihar, on December 26. The teachers, who are not paid salaries but only small irregular "honorariums," were demanding an increase in the payments.

The police attacked the protestors when they attempted to break through a security cordon and block the busy Bailey Road near Hartali Chowk. They were seeking to confront the newly elected chief minister, Nitish Kumar, who was scheduled to inspect a site for an extension to the Birla Institute of Technology.

Bangalore computer teachers stage indefinite hunger strike

On December 26, two thousand computer teachers working as casuals under the Karnataka state government's Mahiti Sindhu Scheme began an indefinite hunger strike in the capital Bangalore.

The teachers in the southern Indian state are demanding the government initiate a plan to recruit them as permanents. A similar plan was recently introduced to change the employment status of part-time lecturers.

Dambulla nurses and postal workers strike

Nurses at the base hospital in Dambulla, 148 kilometres from the Sri Lankan capital Colombo, began a sick note campaign on December 21 and did not report for work. They are demanding outstanding overtime payments.

In a separate dispute, postal workers at Dambulla's main post office went on strike on December 26 after a fellow worker was assaulted while distributing letters in the city centre. The strikers picketed the post office and demanded improved security when carrying out deliveries.

Indonesian police evict sacked plantation workers

More than 700 workers were sacked and their families forcibly evicted from their homes by armed police officers at one of Indonesia's top palm oil plantations on December 26. The workers were employed by PT Musim Mas at Pelalawan in the Riau province, 900 kilometres north-west of Jakarta.

They were sacked for striking earlier in the year against the company's violations of their trade union rights. Five local union leaders were arrested on trumped-up criminal charges during the strike.

Indonesian Wood Forestry and General Workers Union Federation president Khoriul Anam said none of the workers had been paid for three months and the company had no right to sack them while a dispute over pay was being heard in the Supreme Court.

Nevertheless, the National Dispute Settlement Committee has approved the sackings. The workers' local union, SP KAHUTINDO, said it had provided factual information to several government departments and official hearings detailing the company's violations but nothing had been done.

Malaysian power union allows employer to reverse bonuses

About 700 workers employed by Malaysia's largest power company, Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB), were told on December 21 they will have to pay back a total of 500,000 ringgits in performance bonuses they received on December 15. They earn a base monthly salary of just 1,000 ringgits ($US251).

TNB management said performance rating criteria had been tightened after the bonuses were paid but gave no further explanation. The management had earlier briefed the TNB Employees union on its decision but the union failed to inform workers.

The union announced it would protest the decision but made clear it recognised the company's right to cut bonuses and pay. It demanded only that the cut be made in accordance with the Employee Act 1955, which states "the total of any amounts deducted from the wages of an employee in respect of any one month shall not exceed 50 percent [of the employee's monthly

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wage]".

Australia and the Pacific

Adelaide library workers refuse to work on Christmas Day

About 20 library workers employed by the Port Adelaide-Enfield Council in South Australia defied a management directive to work on Christmas Day or to apply for annual leave to cover time off. Even though the council libraries would be closed to the public, staff were instructed to come in to stack and sort books.

None of the workers showed up for work and the majority were on strike after refusing to put in annual leave forms. Casual library workers also joined the Christmas Day boycott after learning they would not be paid penalty rates for the day. Industrial action may continue into the New Year to establish Christmas Day as a rostered holiday.

New Zealand social workers strike during Christmas period

On December 23, 250 social workers and administration staff at Child, Youth and Family (CYF) in New Zealand went on strike, refusing to attend crisis calls throughout the Christmas holiday period. They also placed bans on callouts on all statutory holidays.

CYF employees want parity with health sector workers who recently received 20 to 30 percent pay rises. CYF has offered 11 percent for social workers and only 6.4 percent for administration staff, many of whom are paid just $10.50 an hour.

A National Union of Public Employees spokesperson acknowledged that children would need help over Christmas but said the government was responsible for the CYF staff striking. The industrial action was due to continue indefinitely.

Strike closes New Zealand banks

Hundreds of Westpac bank staff took to the streets across New Zealand on December 23 over pay issues and increased sales targets. The action forced Westpac to close about 30 branches on the busiest banking day of the year.

The strike involved 1,500 workers. Hundreds of strikers picketed Westpac's office in downtown Auckland while 60 rallied outside the bank's Wellington headquarters. There were marches and rallies in Hamilton, Tauranga, Rotorua, Gisborne and Hawkes Bay.

Talks between the management and banking union Finsec stalled over what the union claimed were "unrealistic" and "unethical" sales targets. Workers also rejected the bank's offer of a 5.2 percent pay increase across the board.

Auckland fast food workers walkout over pay

Workers at Lincoln Road KFC in West Auckland walked off the job to protest an inadequate rise in the minimum wage announced by the New Zealand Labour government on December 21. The increase for adults was 8 percent, taking the hourly rate to $10.25 while the rate for young workers rose to just $8.20 per hour. A Unite Union organiser said workers were disgusted with the increase and decided to call the wildcat strike after hearing the announcement. He said that anything under $12 an hour was a poverty wage.

NZ credit union staff strike over contract

Bayside Credit Union staff went on strike on December 22 and picketed the company's Hastings branch office following protracted negotiations for a new work contract. The workers rejected the company's latest pay offer of just 3.5 percent, saying it did not recognise job changes or close the pay gap between Bayside and the rest of the finance industry. An organiser for the Finsec union said the management's attitude was "disappointing". Trade unions founded the credit union and its board consists mainly of union representatives.

Fijian construction workers strike for bonus

Around 426 construction workers at North Projects (Fiji) Limited (NPL) went on strike on December 28 over the non-payment of a Christmas bonus. The men decided to strike after hearing that storemen at the company had received bonuses of $1,200 ($US705). After work on the 296-room Sofitel Fiji Resort and Spa ceased, the company agreed to a $200 bonus to workers employed on the construction site for more than six months and $100 to the others.

Fijian mine union accepts layoffs

The Vatukoula Mine Workers Union this week threatened to strike after Emperor Gold Mining Company announced it would retrench 374 workers, but the union has no intention of defending jobs. The union's general secretary, Satish Chandra, insisted only that the company consult the union before the retrenchments and that temporary and contract workers, who are non-union labour, be the first to go. The company said it would meet with the union and government to discuss the plan.

PNG nurses face the sack for striking

Nurses at the Goroka Base Hospital in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea were threatened with the sack for refusing to return to work after a three-day national nurses strike ended on December 22. The nurses decided to stay on strike in solidarity with their Port Moresby counterparts who are unhappy with the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Health Department and the Nurses Union to end the national action. The Port Moresby nurses are demanding a three-party tribunal be established to look into a range of unresolved issues affecting nurses.

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