

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 December 2005

Workers protest factory fire deaths

Apparel workers in the Indian state of Karnataka demonstrated on December 11 at the Mahatma Gandhi statue in Bangalore, the state's capital. They were protesting over management negligence at a factory in New Delhi where 12 workers, including four women, were killed in a fire on December 7.

The workers demanded legal action against the factory owner and compensation for the victims' families. They also called on the federal and all state governments to initiate a national audit of health and safety conditions in factories. The demonstration was organised by Garments Mahila Karmikara Munnade which represents female garment workers.

Indian bank officers protest transfers and suspensions

Union Bank of India officers demonstrated in Chandigarh in the Punjab on December 9. They were opposing the transfer of workers to distant locations and suspensions.

One bank officer, P.M. Vankar, was transferred from Gujarat to Meerut in Uttar Pradesh and also suspended. The next day he suffered a fatal heart attack. The workers are demanding appropriate compensation for Vankar's family, including the employment of one of the man's dependants.

Protestors handed a memorandum to the Regional Head of the bank at Chandigarh demanding an end to the bank's policy on suspensions and distant transfers and the recall of officers wrongfully transferred out of the state.

The All India Federation of Bank Officers of the Union Bank issued a statement warning the management that if members' demands are not met it will call a one-day strike on December 30.

Electricity workers strike against privatisation

Thousands of Punjab State Electricity Board (PSEB) workers held a one-day statewide strike on December 8. They were demanding the Electricity Act 2003 be scrapped and that the Congress state government drops its plans to divide up the PSEB and then privatise it. PSEB management has already introduced a contractual employment system.

A PSEB spokesman warned that workers who took part in the strike would face disciplinary and legal action and all strikers would lose one day's pay.

Sri Lankan postal workers strike over illegal construction

Postal workers in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa in the North Central province of Sri Lanka went on strike on December 5.

They were demanding a halt to illegal construction adjacent to the Anuradhapura Post Office, which is impacting on the work environment. Rajapakse government political cronies are allegedly carrying out the construction and the police and the mayor have done nothing to halt it.

Postal workers have threatened to call for a national strike if their demand is not met.

North China coal mine death toll reaches 90

A deadly blast on December 7 at the Liuguantun Colliery in Kaiping district of Tangshan, (165 kilometres from Beijing) has claimed the lives of 90 miners with five workers seriously injured.

The death toll could rise further because the company's labour register was not properly kept and officials are not sure how many miners were underground at the time of the explosion. One unconfirmed source claimed 186 were in the mine at the time. The former state-owned mine has an output of 150,000 tons of coal a year.

Chinese sailors stranded in Solomon Islands

A spokesman for 21 Chinese sailors stranded in the Solomon Islands claims that they will face starvation unless their employer Solgreen pays them. They have not been paid for six months.

Angry sailors locked two managers in the company's premises at Ranadi last weekend in a bid to force them to pay the outstanding arrears. At the same time, Solgreen is taking the Solomon Islands Inland Revenue to court for seizing its assets, including fishing vessels, in a dispute over unpaid taxes.

Filipino workers stranded in Dubai

The Philippines Department of Labor and Employment has been forced to respond to the plight of 88 Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who have fallen prey to illegal recruiters and left stranded in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. They have no work or any means of support. The Philippines labor attaché in Dubai said repatriation is being arranged.

Meanwhile, 30 Filipino runaway workers, the majority of them maids, held a 24-hour fasting protest at the Philippine embassy shelter in Zinj in Bahrain on December 9. Many had suffered from contract violations, unpaid wages, long hours, physical assault, sexual harassment, rape and forced prostitution.

They want employment and protection under Bahrain's labour legislation. There are currently over 40,000 overseas housemaids working in Bahrain not covered by these laws.

Filipino garment workers get separation pay

Thirty-seven regular employees of garment manufacturer Maxglory Apparel ended a three-day strike on December 3, after the company agreed to honor separation pay arrangements when the company closes. The payout is equivalent to 150 percent of the workers 45-day salary multiplied by the number of years of service. They will also be paid for the time on strike, vacation entitlements and sick leave.

Maxglory Apparel is one of many garment manufactures in the Philippines that are closing. In September 2004, Fashion House Garments Incorporated closed, displacing over 1,000 workers.

The Confederation of Garment Exporters of the Philippines said about 200,000 workers or about half of the Philippines' garment industry workforce are in danger of losing their jobs over the next three years due to competition with low cost producers like China.

Mine explosion kills two

Two miners were killed by an explosion inside a mine tunnel in Barangay Dumalan, 85 kilometres south of Cebu City on December 10. Five days after the blast another six miners remain trapped and are feared dead.

The miners are believed to be trapped just about 70 metres down the tunnel but rescue efforts are being hampered by about 50 tons of coal

blocking the entrance and dangerously high levels of methane gas.

The Department of Energy (DOE), which is in charge of the rescue, claims there is a lack of specialised equipment and ventilation equipment is being brought in from Zamboanga some 450 kilometres away.

The mine is owned by Ibalong Resources Development Corporation. One worker was killed and three others injured at the mine last year after a portion of shaft collapsed on them.

Electrical workers strike over pay

Electrical workers across the island-state of Tasmania in Australia went on strike for 24 hours on December 14 to protest low hourly wages. The workers, members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), are demanding wage parity with their counterparts on the mainland who are paid up to \$8 an hour more.

More than 250 electrical workers held a protest rally outside Tasmania's state parliament to highlight their demand.

Leather workers strike over new workplace agreement

Over 40 workers employed at New Wave Leather in North Laverton, Victoria went on strike on December 14 over a new workplace agreement. The previous agreement covering the workers, who are members of the National Union of Workers (NUW), expired earlier this year.

A NUW spokesperson said claims that the company wants to reduce meal allowances, scrap rostered days off and the bonus scheme, and cut the number of work classifications to just three. New employees will be forced to take a lower rate of pay. Removal of the bonus scheme would see some workers up to \$100 worse off.

Journalists strike over plans to restructure

About 40 journalists and other staff from Australia Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) news and current affairs programs "AM", "World Today", "PM" and other radio programs walked out on December 13 for 24 hours. They were opposing changes to work practices planned by ABC management that will impact on program quality.

Newspaper workers strike over pay and jobs

About 500 journalists and other staff from Fairfax publications, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Sun-Herald* went on indefinite strike on December 14. The strike erupted after negotiations between management and the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance for a new wages and conditions agreement broke down.

The workers are also concerned about company plans to cut 65 jobs from the Sydney and Melbourne newspapers. Staff at Fairfax's other publications—the *Age*, *Illawarra Mercury*, *Newcastle Herald* and the *Australian Financial Review*—are planning to hold stop-work meetings to consider their position.

Union proposal will cut wages and accept job losses

Several dozen engineers, members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), marched to Air New Zealand headquarters on December 8 while the union presented a proposal to save the airline \$NZ100 million over five years to avoid 300 job losses. The company's plan is to close its Auckland engineering base, cut 600 engineering and maintenance jobs and outsource work off shore.

The union, instead of fighting this, has engaged a prominent businessman as a consultant to convince the company that its restructuring plan was "unnecessary" and to question "the quality of servicing in any offshore location".

The EPMU's proposal includes capping the annual pay rate for leading hands at \$82,000 and the replacement of the present maintenance setup with a "slimmed-down engine-shop and a single-line wide-body operation". The union has also suggested local outsourcing of heavy engineering work.

EPMU national secretary Andrew Little claimed the proposal could provide a "win-win" outcome. Air NZ has assembled a senior management team to analyse the union proposal and entered mediation this week.

New Zealand casino workers continue strike

Staff at Hamilton's SkyCity casino went on strike on December 8 for the third time in a week to demand higher wages. They want parity with their Auckland counterparts who are paid 15 to 20 percent more.

SkyCity has offered the Hamilton staff a 2 percent wage rise on the hourly starting rate of around \$10. The take-it-or-leave-it offer would see workers locked into a three-year deal with no further increases or wage parity. The next bargaining period is in 2009.

A flexi-time proposal from the company would give workers a guaranteed minimum of 160 hours per month but this would include broken shifts, late shifts and up to 10 shifts in a row.

The Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) representing about 180 workers claimed the company was now bringing in non-unionised Auckland staff on the higher pay rate.

The union also claims the company was reprimanded by the Mediation Service less than two months ago for attempting to communicate with union members outside negotiations, a breach of so-called "good faith" provisions in the Employment Relations Act.

NZ Open Polytechnic staff back on strike

Academic staff at the Open Polytechnic of NZ (TOPNZ) resumed strike action this week, having walked off the job on December 7, following a breakdown in negotiations for a collective employment agreement.

Members of the Association of Staff in Tertiary Education (ASTE) rejected a new management offer of a 3 percent pay increase made at negotiations last week. Previous offers of 1.5 percent and 2 percent sparked industrial action.

An ASTE spokesman said tutors were furious because the renewed offer was less than the inflation rate. The polytechnic recorded operational surpluses of more than \$4 million in the last two years, has investments of more than \$14 million and is in a healthy financial situation compared with other polytechnics.

Meanwhile, ASTE members at the Auckland University of Technology have settled a new collective employment agreement with salary increases of between 4.5 and 8.1 percent next year.

NZ kindergarten talks break down again

The union representing New Zealand kindergarten teachers said this week that talks on working conditions have broken down for a second time and that more strikes were likely. The union, the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), went back into negotiations with the Ministry of Education following a one-day strike by 1,700 teachers across the country last week.

The dispute is over the government's plans to extend the traditional kindergarten model of morning and afternoon sessions into a full-time operation. The ministry and kindergarten associations have refused to accommodate the concerns of teachers over proposed extensions to hours of work and term times. The ministry denies talks have broken down, saying only the parties were unable to reach agreement and will reconvene talks late January.

NZ television staff walk out

Staff at New Zealand's state-owned TV broadcaster's Avalon studio walked out on December 13 taking the prime time "Good Morning" television program off air.

Some 60 workers went on strike in a dispute over pay and conditions. A spokesman for the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union said staff were angry the broadcaster has refused to offer "a decent pay rise".

The workers, who earn \$50,000 a year, want a 5 percent pay increase but the company is offering 3.6 percent. Mediation on December 9 failed to reach a settlement.

Mariana Islands employer abandons non-resident workers

The owner of construction company White Elephant Corporation fled the Northern Marianas Islands on November 27 owing 21 non-resident employees almost \$US87,000 in wages.

The workers, 20 Filipinos and one Chinese, have not been paid a full wage for over two years. They have no money and have been evicted from their barracks.

The Department of Labor has issued the workers a memorandum to find temporary work. They have found temporary accommodation and have been forced to apply for humanitarian assistance from the Attorney Generals Department to pay for water and electricity.

Another garment factory closes in Saipan

Over 600 resident and non-resident garment workers in Saipan, the capital of the Northern Mariana Islands, will lose their jobs on February 10 next year when the eight year old garment company Hyunjin Saipan Incorporated closes.

A company spokesman said their customer, high-end apparel retailer Jones New York, had stopped placing orders claiming Hyunjin Saipan's prices were too high and it could get garments cheaper in Vietnam and Cambodia. Saipan garment workers earn between \$US3.15 and \$3.50 an hour.

Hyunjin Saipan is the seventh garment factory in Saipan to close this year since the World Trade Organisation liberalised trade rules on January 1, 2005. Over 3,000 garment workers have lost jobs since then.

Union blockades on again in New Caledonia

New Caledonia's Kanak union (USTKE) on December 11 set up blockades at mines and some government administrations in a territory-wide campaign in support of a nickel plant in the islands' northern province. The USTKE has called a general strike.

The protest is directed against the French state-owned nickel conglomerate Eramet and its subsidiary mines (SLN) which are being barricaded. The company's smelter in Noumea is still operational.

The action comes as Eramet has sought a court ruling on the Koniambo nickel ore deposit which is at the centre of negotiations for the construction of a Canadian owned smelter on the north end of the island. The government appears to be stalling on the ore transfer ruling.

The issue has prompted mass action because a 1998 agreement stipulated that a smelter project had to be started before the end of December for the Kanak northern province to get the Koniambo ore. New Caledonia is the third largest nickel producer in the world.

PNG teachers stranded in Port Moresby

A group of concerned teachers met at the Central Province Travel Agency in Gordons, Port Moresby on December 13 over delays in processing travel warrants. Many of their colleagues throughout the country are experiencing the same problem.

Government schools across Papua New Guinea closed on December 9 and many teachers who were supposed to return home for the Christmas break are stranded. The teachers go through the same ordeal every year. In the past some have been forced to spend their entire break in the town where they were posted to teach.

Meanwhile, teachers on the island of Bougainville have complained that education officers in Buka are refusing to meet with them about their salaries and leave entitlements. Teachers said that they had made several costly trips over the last week into Buka only to find the Education Office doors shut and no one there to talk to them about their entitlements.



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