Workers Struggles: Asia and the Pacific

7 January 2006

Asia

***Beijing News* staff defend editor**

About 100 staff at the *Beijing News* walked off the job on December 30, protesting the removal two days earlier of the newspaper's outspoken editor-in-chief Yang Bin. The action resulted in the popular tabloid printing 32 pages instead of the usual 80. Many of the strikers returned to work after they were threatened with the sack.

Yang Bin's removal came after Communist Party officials singled out the tabloid at a meeting in early December, claiming it had "committed errors in the orientation of opinion". The meeting decided that "city tabloids" should work to "strengthen Party control" and demanded that all editors bow to the directions of party propaganda officials.

The *Beijing News* had earlier been officially criticised for reporting the killing of seven rural protesters in Dingzhou, northern China, in June and for sympathetic reports about a migrant worker who killed his foremen and three others. The worker became unhinged because he had not been paid wages over an extended period.

Yang Bin is not the first prominent Chinese editor to be removed. The editor-in-chief and general manager of the *Southern Metropolis News* were given long jail sentences last year on corruption charges. Colleagues claim the charges were trumped-up.

Indian mine workers protest end of mining operations

A mass protest on January 1 by Kudremukh Iron Ore Company Ltd (KIOCL) and Kudremukh Iron and Steel Company Limited (KISKO) workers and administrative staff halted all activity at the enterprises. The workers were protesting an Indian Supreme Court order ending mining in the Kudremukh area.

KIOCL mines are located in the Chikmagalur district in the state of Karnataka, while KISKO has a pellet plant in Mangalore, a port city on India's southwest coast. Administration offices for both companies are in the state capital Bangalore. The companies employ around 1,950 workers plus administrative staff, who will all lose their jobs.

The mining leases expired on midnight December 31. The entire area was restored to the forestry department and became part of the Kudremukh National Park. KIOCL dumpers and other earth moving equipment had already been removed from the mining sites. Production at the Mangalore pellet plant, which still has 296,000 tonnes of iron ore, will continue until January 25.

Central Industrial Security Force paramilitary police have been deployed in the area and are manning strategic points to enforce the Supreme Court order. Workers plan to hold a protest march along the national highway and establish a road blockade near the pellet plant.

Punjab telecom workers protest harassment

On December 30, workers from the federal government-owned telecommunications company Bharat Sanchar Nigam (BSNL) rallied outside the Telecom Bhavan complex in Patiala, Punjab. They were protesting the harassment and arbitrary transfers of National Federation of Telecom Employees (NFTE) members across the country.

The NFTE claims that over 1,800 union members in Andhra Pradesh have been victimised and that Punjab NFTE members in the Hoshiarpur and Ludhiana districts transferred in violation of normal procedures. The rally condemned the BSNL administration and demanded that the transfers be cancelled.

The Sanchar Nigam Executives Association (India), the BSNL executives union, has also announced a national sit-in strike on January 5 over several issues, including privatisation. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government plans to increase foreign direct investment in BSNL from 49 percent to 74 percent.

Indian rail workers demand salary increase

Railway workers protested in several regions across India late last month to demand the federal government pay a promised salary increase and resolve other outstanding issues. Workers in Bombay burnt an effigy of Finance Minister P. Chidambaram on December 29, while others held a sit-down protest and mass rally at Sirhind railway station in northwestern Punjab the next day.

Rail unions claim the government dishonoured an agreement to increase salaries by January 2006. The previous government cut casual leave from 15 to 11 days. The current government has cut it to just 10 and reduced a set bonus.

The workers are also concerned that new rules allowing

© World Socialist Web Site

the Employees Contributory Pension Scheme to invest in multinationals will put their pensions at risk. Workers contribute 10 percent of their basic pay to the scheme.

Speakers at the Sirhind rally pointed out that government cost cutting, downsizing and zero budgeting has led to massive staff shortages. In the Ambala division alone, there were 105 assistant station master positions and 1,245 other positions vacant.

In separate action, southern railway workers protested at Shoranur station on January 2 against privatisation. Track maintenance and parcel services have already been outsourced.

Sri Lankan pharmacists oppose privatisation

Pharmacists at the Sri Jayawardanapura Hospital on the outskirts of the Colombo city picketed the premises on January 4. They were protesting government plans to hand over the hospital's outdoor pharmacy to the State Pharmaceutical Corporation and run it as a commercial enterprise. The outdoor pharmacy currently provides medicine to outpatients at concessionary rates.

One protestor told WSWS that if the government went ahead with its plan, hospital pharmacists could be retrenched and "patients will have to spend almost three times as much for medicines". Workers believe that the hospital's indoor pharmacy could eventually face the same fate. The pharmacists are planning more protests and will turn to other health workers for support.

Sri Jayawardanepura Hospital, a gift from Japan, was established around two decades ago. Unlike other government hospitals in Sri Lanka, it charges patients a fee for services but far less than private rates. There have been several protests by the hospital's workers over privatisation plans.

Bangladesh primary teachers protest in Dhaka

Thousands of poorly paid Bangladeshi non-government primary school teachers, many wearing black armbands, marched through Dhaka on December 27. They want to become part of the public system and receive higher wages and retirement benefits on a par with government teachers. Bangladesh Non-government Primary Teachers Association members earn around 3,000 taka ($US40) a month, or less than half the wage paid to their counterparts in public schools.

The teachers, who converged on the capital from around the country, have threatened to begin a hunger strike and a sit-down protest at the prime minister's office if their demands are not met.

The Pacific

Fiji miners' union sells out workers

On December 30, Fiji Mine Workers Union general secretary Satish Chandra called off a proposed strike action over the retrenchment of 374 workers from the Emperor Gold Mining Company. The union scotched the strike after cutting a deal with management allowing the sacking of 233 non-union workers and contractors and retaining the jobs of 141 union members.

The deal was a sell-out all round. The remaining workers will now be forced to work six days a week for the next four months but for only five days' pay. Management promised to pay the balance after three months but this may not eventuate.

Despite recent increases in the price of gold, Emperor management claims it must reduce costs through layoffs because of rising fuel prices. The retrenchments, however, appear to have been a management ploy to alter employment conditions. Management and the union met on January 4 to "fine tune" the deal.

PNG nurses forced back to work after police threats

Most of the 1,000 striking nurses in Papua New Guinea returned to work this week after the National Court ordered them to end strike action and Police Commissioner Sam Inguda threatened legal action.

Nearly 4,000 nurses struck on December 19 over back-pay, insurance cover, redundancy arrangements, health and safety issues and the government's failure to implement award salary scales from 2000. Doctors threatened to walk off the job in support of the nurses.

While the PNG Nurses Association signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Health Department on December 22 ending the strike, 1,000 nurses remained on strike because the settlement failed to resolve other outstanding issues. They demanded the government establish a tripartite tribunal comprising nurses' representatives, the Health Department, and the Reconciliation and Arbitration Tribunal to investigate. The government refused.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site