

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 January 2006

## **Vietnamese workers end strikes over wages**

About 6,000 low-paid garment workers in Vietnam returned to work on January 10 after reaching agreements with six different employers. The HCM Labour Federation, a state-run and controlled union, said the strike erupted because companies were too late announcing improved wages and bonuses.

Garment company Lien Phuong agreed to raise wages and improve meals for workers by the end of January while the South Korean-owned GS garment producer agreed to pay the new minimum wage to 245 of its 330 workers. Details of settlements with other companies are not available.

The government has announced a 30 percent increase in the new minimum wage for workers employed by overseas-owned companies as of February 1. The increase, the first since July 1999, lifts the minimum wage to \$US45 a month.

In a separate dispute, 250 workers in the southern Binh Duong province went on strike on January 10. The walkout came after the joint Singapore-Vietnam owned United Seafood Packers, cut workers' stipends and bonuses to offset the government's mandatory minimum pay increase. The Binh Duong Labor Federation has not taken any action against the company, merely requesting it "report" the matter to "relevant agencies".

## **Strike ends at Sri Lankan tyre plant**

Around 400 workers at Ceat Kelani International, Sri Lanka's largest tyre manufacturer, struck for a week from January 3 to demand a pay increase. The strike erupted when the company refused to increase wages by 5,000 rupees (50 US cents).

Ceat Kelani International is a joint venture with Indian company Associate CEAT and supplies semi-finished products for its partner. The two companies jointly produce 1,000 tonnes of cross-ply tyres

monthly.

The strike, which crippled production at both factories, ended after Sri Lanka's Labor Ministry intervened and directed the company and union to renew negotiations for a three-year collective agreement.

## **Indian autoworkers on strike**

More than half of the 2,350 workers at the Toyota-Kirloskar plant in Bidadi, India, have been on strike since January 6 over the sacking of three union activists. The strikers are members of the Toyota Kirloskar Motor Employees Union.

Management initially responded to the strike by shutting down production at the factory, which is near the southern city of Bangalore in Karnataka state. It has since tried to resume limited production by using management and workers who did not participate in the strike. Employees at other Bangalore-based companies are planning a one-day strike in support of the Toyota strikers.

The Japanese-based Toyota Company holds an 89 percent stake in Toyota-Kirloskar while the Indian Kirloskar Group owns the rest. The plant produces 70 cars a day, including the popular Corolla and Innova models.

## **Bangalore bus workers on indefinite strike**

Over 800 bus drivers, mechanics and helpers at around 150 private bus companies working on contract to the Bangalore Metropolitan Transport Corporation (BMTC) in Karnataka began an indefinite strike on January 11, demanding salaries overdue for two months. The strike has put buses off the road at five co-operative society depots in Koramangala, Yeshwanthpur, Yelahanka, Banashankari and Peenya.

One striking worker told the media that his salary was only 3,000 rupees a month and had not been increased for the last five years. "Initially the company promised

bonus and uniform allowances but never gave us them,” he said.

Bus workers allege that contributions to the provident funds have been deducted from their wages over the past five years but they have never been shown an account.

### **Boeing workers still on picket line**

Engineers at the Royal Australian Air Force base at Williamstown near Newcastle, in the Australian state of New South Wales, are still picketing the main gate. They began their protest in June 2005, after being locked out for imposing work bans in support of a new work agreement.

The Australian Workers Union (AWU), which covers the workers, has refused to mobilise any of its 300,000 members or other unionised Boeing workers to back the 27 Boeing workers. The union’s campaign has been restricted to appeals to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission and to Prime Minister John Howard to direct Boeing to negotiate.

Howard has publicly expressed his support for the company, claiming its lockout and refusal to negotiate are legal. His government has just pushed through new draconian workplace relations laws that strengthen the hands of employers to cut wages and working conditions and sack workers.

### **Butchers in dispute with Woolworths**

The Australian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) is threatening to take industrial action over a plan by supermarket chain Woolworths in Western Australia to introduce a new work classification.

The classification was included in a work agreement recently negotiated with the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Union. The union covers most supermarket staff but not skilled butchers.

The union has agreed that unskilled workers can do meat slicing—a job traditionally done by qualified butchers who are trained over a four-year apprenticeship.

The AMIEU wants an Australian Industrial Relations Commission injunction to prevent the new agreement being voted on by supermarket staff. Positions for qualified butchers are already in sharp decline due to the closure of smaller suburban and independent butcher shops.

### **PNG mine workers strike over takeover**

At least 1,000 workers at the Porgera gold mine in

Papua New Guinea (PNG) struck on January 9 over fears that existing contracts and benefits will be reduced by a planned takeover of the mine by Canadian company Barrick Gold Corporation.

Management branded the strike “illegal,” claiming workers had misunderstood the consequences of the takeover. Porgera has around 2,090 full-time employees, including 1,880 PNG nationals and 270 contractors.

Major shareholder Placer Dome operates the mine, which is located in the remote Enga Province northwest of Port Moresby. It has a 75 percent interest, with another 20 percent controlled by DRDGOLD. Placer Dome and Barrick Gold have reached a tentative agreement after Barrick increased its purchase offer to approximately \$US10.4 billion (33.5 billion kena).

Miners at the Emperor Gold Mine in Vatukoula in Fiji, in which DRDGOLD holds a 45 percent share, threatened strike action last week over Emperor Gold’s plan to sack 347 employees from its 2,100 workforce. The union at the mine is demanding all retrenched miners receive redundancy packages.

### **Teachers in Tonga demand end to victimisation**

Government teachers on the South Pacific island of Tonga have threatened to strike at the beginning of the school year. They are protesting against the Ministry of Education’s withholding of promotions from teachers who participated in a seven-week civil servants strike last year.

A general meeting of teachers, members of the Tonga Public Service Association (PSA), in Nuku’alofa on January 13 issued an ultimatum to the government to end all victimisations by January 23 or face a national strike.

A PSA spokesperson said there was “blatant discrimination” against those who took part in the strike and that the minister had passed them over to promote less qualified teachers. She accused the Ministry of Education of infringing Clause 5 of a Memorandum of Understanding signed last year to end the seven-week strike.



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