

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 January 2006

## Asia

### Indonesian police disperse protesting workers

Dozens of workers were injured and eight others arrested when police clashed with 10,000 workers demonstrating in the East Java capital Surabaya on January 16. Police used water cannon to disperse the protesters and prevent them entering the offices of Governor Imam Utomo after they tore down a fence leading into the governor's premises.

The workers are from 24 labour groups in the province and were protesting the paltry minimum wage increase granted by the East Java administration in December. On December 19, workers clashed with police outside the governor's offices in a similar protest over the same issue.

While the monthly minimum wage was increased last year from 578,000 rupiah (\$US57.80) to 665,000, the increase was far short of demands for 1,330,000 rupiah. Since then workers reduced their claim to 800,000 rupiah. They say this increase is essential after the national government increased fuel prices by 120 percent in October.

The governor has refused to meet a delegation of workers, claiming to have reached a compromise earlier with labour representatives. They have reportedly agreed to end the protests in return for a new survey of basic living costs in East Java. Workers, however, are threatening a province-wide strike if their pay demand is not met.

### Indonesian factory workers threaten action

On January 17, workers at instant noodle maker PT Olago Food in Tangerang, Indonesia threatened to take industrial action, including a factory sit-in, after negotiations for severance payments for 250 former employees failed.

The 250 employees were sacked for participating in a five-day strike last November. They were protesting over the company's refusal to register workers in the state's social protection scheme. They were also demanding the reinstatement of 47 dismissed employees. A government official for economic affairs gave the management a week to resolve the issue.

### Aged-care workers in China strike over pay

Day-care workers contracted by Xiang Guang Real Estate Management to work at a state-owned home for the elderly in China's Baoshan District struck on January 10 for an end-of-year bonus.

The company deducted 50 yuan (\$US6.17) monthly from each of the 39 workers' pay, promising to return it as a lump sum on January 20. Workers believe they will not get the money. They are

expected to work every day of the month and are paid a maximum monthly wage of just 950 yuan.

Management at the home, the Shanghao No.3 Social Welfare Institution, said it would not intervene in the current dispute, declaring that it was up to the hire company and the workers to sort it out.

### Indian bank workers strike against privatisation

Workers at India's state-owned Andhra Bank and Bank of Baroda struck on January 16, protesting the government's plan to further dilute its equity in the banks as a further step toward full privatisation.

The government has already reduced its equity in the Bank of Baroda from 67 percent to 53 percent and wants to sell another 11 percent. Government equity in the Andhra Bank was slashed from 62.5 percent to 51.5 percent in February 2001 and the bank is planning a second public issue, claiming it needs to increase its capital base.

Major state-owned financial institutions, such as the Dena Bank, Allahabad Bank, Oriental Bank of Commerce, Punjab National Bank and Syndicate Bank, are already being sold off despite repeated strikes and protests.

### Pondicherry ministerial staff strike continues

Ministerial staff in Pondicherry in southern India decided on January 16 to continue strike action after talks with Chief Minister N. Ragasamy failed to produce a satisfactory outcome. They have been on strike from January 4, demanding a restructure of lower and upper division clerk and assistant clerk positions and to increase their monthly emoluments.

The staff, members of the Joint Action Committee of the Ministerial Staff Association, began an "indefinite leave campaign" over the issue on December 12 but this was called off when the state government promised to consider their demands. The workers struck when the government failed to honour its promise.

### Bombay municipal workers launch protest

About 15,000 Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) workers began a weeklong protest on January 16 over the management's repeated failure to honour employees' demands.

These include a renewal of a wages agreement that expired on April 1 last year, an increment payment equal to 25 percent of the base wage until a new agreement is finalised, and time-bound promotions. The workers also want the removal of a recent requirement that all office staff pass the Maharashtra State Certificate of Information Technology (MS-CIT) within 10 months

or lose annual wage increments.

### **Sri Lankan hospital workers demonstrate**

Some 200 employees at the state-owned Sri Jayawardanapura hospital in Colombo demonstrated on the hospital premises at lunchtime on January 16. They were opposing privatisation of the hospital and called for the reinstatement of two suspended trade union activists.

The government wants to sell the hospital, and hand over the pharmacy to the State Pharmaceutical Cooperation. More broadly, the government has decided to outsource all kitchen services in government hospitals to private contractors.

A spokesman for the Sri Jayawardanapura workers said: “We will go for an island-wide campaign if the government fails to respond to our demands by January 20.”

### **Australia and the Pacific**

#### **Catering workers stop over death of colleague**

Workers at catering company Caterair—a fully owned Qantas subsidiary—stopped work in Sydney for two hours on January 16 to discuss the death of a colleague on December 22. Klima Lambeska had been left alone in a Qantas sickbay for 12 hours after complaining of chest pains.

She began work at 4 a.m. on December 22 and went to the sick bay some time around 10 a.m., after telling her supervisor she was unwell. No one on the next shift knew Lambeska was in the first-aid room. She was found dead shortly after 10 p.m., having apparently suffered a heart attack.

A Transport Workers Union spokesman said the 150 workers at the meeting were “distressed, very emotional and they want answers”. There had been no apology from Qantas and from the company’s comments “they don’t believe it (the death) was their fault”.

The catering workers are considering further industrial action if their concerns are not addressed. A WorkCover inquiry into Lambeska’s death began last week.

#### **New Zealand bank workers reject pay offer**

Westpac bank workers in New Zealand have voted down the bank’s latest pay offer. The offer allowed for an across-the-board increase of 5.2 percent over 18 months. Talks between the bank and the Financial Services union (Finsec) had previously broken down over sales targets which forced bank staff to load-up customers with debt in order to qualify for performance components in their pay.

About 1,500 Westpac staff struck for two days before Christmas, forcing the bank to close about 30 branches on one of the busiest days of the year. Hundreds of bank workers took to the streets in marches and rallies in Hamilton, Tauranga, Rotorua, Gisborne and Hawkes Bay. They also picketed Westpac offices in downtown Auckland and its Wellington headquarters. Finsec has agreed to reopen negotiations with the bank next week.

#### **Non-union strike ends at PNG gold mine**

About 1,000 striking employees at the Porgera gold mine in Papua New Guinea’s Enga Province began returning to work on January 18, ending a seven-day strike. The workers—mostly truck drivers and low-paid employees at the mine—went out on January 9 over fears that existing contracts and benefits will be reduced in a proposed takeover by Barrick Gold Corporation, a Canadian

company. The men are also demanding 50,000 kina (\$US16,600) each as a bonus payment for Barrick Gold’s 33.5 billion kina takeover bid.

The company declared the strike illegal and the national government sent 60 police personnel from the Southern Region Mobile Squad to secure the mine and “maintain the peace”. Mine operations were stopped and non-striking unionised workers on award agreements stood down and flown back to their home provinces. Remaining staff were locked inside the mine’s perimeter.

The striking employees slowly began returning to work only after the mine’s owner, Placer Dome Inc, gave assurances that existing contracts would not be affected by the takeover. The strikers also came under pressure from the local community, which stands to lose a portion of the royalties it receives from the mine’s profits.

The Porgera Workers Union refused to intervene on behalf of the strikers and instead sided with management. Union secretary Steven Nion told the company that local truck driver Kevin Moses was the leader of the strike.

Even though the strike has ended, issues remain unresolved, including the 50,000 kina bonus claim. Anticipating further unrest, the government is maintaining a police presence at the mine.

#### **Fiji miners’ union agrees to assist employer to cut costs**

On January 18, Mine Workers Union of Fiji (MWU) general secretary Satish Chandra accepted an Emperor Gold Mining (EGM) proposal for the reinstatement of 128 union members made redundant along with 246 non-union employees in December. The sackings were part of the company’s cost-cutting program.

The union workers will be reinstated without loss of pay after Chandra agreed to assist EGM implement cost-saving measures. This is the third EGM proposal accepted by the MWU leadership. Union members rejected the first two.

On January 12, MWU officials were forced by rank-and-file members to withdraw from an agreement with EGM that would have allowed the reinstatement of 55 union members and provided a redundancy package for 86 others—only a small proportion of the 374 workers made redundant. The union had also agreed to redundancy pay far below the going rate.

The first deal allowed for the reinstatement of all 141 union members but stipulated they work six days a week for the next four months for five days pay. Management promised to pay the balance after three months but there was no guarantee this would happen.

From the outset, the union turned its back on the sacked non-union members—who did not receive a severance package—saying it was only interested in representing unionised workers. The latest agreement still has to be ratified by union members.



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