

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 February 2006

Strikes continue in Vietnam's export zones

Unofficial strikes by thousands of workers in foreign-owned plants in Vietnam's export processing zones (EPZ) are continuing. Last week Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, concerned about the impact on investment, instructed the Ministry of Planning and Investment to intervene.

The workers want the government to adjust basic wages in line with inflation and cost of living rises. Workers are furious that the government postponed a 40 percent increase in the basic wage it promised would become effective this month.

Up to December 2005, Vietnam received \$8 billion in Foreign Direct Investment, much of it from Taiwanese and Korean companies seeking cheaper labour than in China where the basic wage is currently \$US63 a month. The Vietnamese government set the basic wage at around \$45 to \$50 in 1999 but has reduced it to between \$35 and \$45 for export processing zone workers.

While Vietnam's labour codes "allow" workers to strike, this is only "legal" if called by the state-controlled unions. Pham Van Hung, head of labour management for Ho Chi Minh City authority for EPZs, said the present strikes were "illegal" because "they were organised spontaneously, without a trade union". He criticised the unions for not intervening to prevent them.

Low paid workers in locally-owned companies are also considering industrial action.

Sri Lankan postal workers strike for overtime

Some 200 postal workers at 51 sub-post offices in Sri Lanka's Rathnapura area stopped work on January 25 to demand overtime pay owing since November. The stoppage brought most postal services in the area to standstill.

They have not been paid for overtime worked during the 2005 November presidential election, even though the necessary funding has been allocated by the election secretariat and given to the postal department.

A spokesman for the strikers warned that the industrial campaign would continue if authorities failed to resolve the problem.

Teachers in Sri Lanka strike against unfair transfers

On January 25, about 300 teachers from Sri Lanka's Western Province went on strike and protested outside the provincial chief minister's office over unfair and arbitrary transfers.

According to the protestors, around 1,000 teachers in the province have been transferred, causing incredible difficulties for them and their families. Among those transferred were teachers who were expectant mothers and many elderly teachers close to retirement. The strike ended after authorities promised to look into the matter.

Indian bank workers protest over jobs

On January 29, around 2,500 members of the All India Andhra Bank Award Employees Union demonstrated across India holding sit-down protests outside the bank's state and local offices.

The workers were demanding that 4,000 clerical and 2,100 sub-position vacancies be filled. They also demanded permanency for temporary and class four workers who have been working employed at the bank for between 15 to 20 years.

Queensland rail drivers walk out

Members of the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Employees (AFULE) in Queensland called a 24-hour strike on midnight February 2 affecting passenger and freight trains. The union accused Queensland Rail (QR) of renegeing on an enterprise agreement reached after four weeks of negotiations.

A union spokesman said that QR's actions were "a ploy" to establish negotiations for a new work agreement under the federal WorkChoices legislation. The legislation, due to take effect in March, will allow employers to eliminate work conditions and benefits, such as penalty rates, that were previously non-negotiable items.

QR and the Queensland state Labor government have viciously attacked the train drivers. QR chief executive Bob Scheuber branded the strike "deplorable" and Queensland Industrial Relations Minister Tom Barton condemned the industrial action as "outrageous and illegal". Barton claimed it breached an agreement last year that gave workers a paltry 4.5 percent pay rise over three years. The agreement apparently contained a no-strike clause.

Wine workers strikeover new pay deal

Workers at the Hardy Berri Estates vineyard in South Australia walked off the job on January 31 for 24 hours. The strike was over a new wages and conditions agreement, including an 18 percent pay rise over three years.

Negotiations between Hardy and the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union broke down because the company only

offered a 10 percent pay increase by the end of 2007.

The vineyard is owned by Hardy Wines, a subsidiary of the US Constellation Group. The company had net sales of \$A1.3 billion for the third quarter of 2005, a rise of 17 percent from the previous year. The Berri Estates strike comes a week after workers at Hardy Wines' Mildura site in Victoria struck over pay and conditions.

School support staff strike averted

A planned 24-hour strike on February 1 by 2,000 school support staff, including school registrars, officers and library staff, employed in state government schools in Western Australia (WA) has been called off. The decision came after the Community and Public Sector Union reached an agreement with the WA Education Department in a reclassification dispute.

The dispute centres on the Education Department's failure to honor a 2004 agreement on a new re-classification system, the product of six years of negotiations. Under the new system, hundreds of support staff should have been granted increases of between \$1,000 and \$5,000 over a four-year period. Of the 713 applications for re-classification the Education Department's review panel had accepted only 184 by December 2005.

Those rejected were not given explanations while many, particularly library staff, are still waiting for an official response to their applications. The Education Department has accepted a six-week deadline to reassess applications and present explanations on those rejected.

Union calls off bus strike

Strikes by MetroTasmania bus drivers due to begin on February 2 were postponed by the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), after the company applied to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) to end the official bargaining period. Strikes are only "protected action" or legal, during the official bargaining period for a new collective agreement. An AIRC decision to end the period means the bus strike would be illegal, leaving workers and unions open to fines.

The AIRC ordered the RTBU and the management to hold another week of negotiations. Despite the management's belligerence union secretary Sandro Amicosante said he was confident that there would be a "positive outcome".

While the union wants an 11 percent per year pay increase for three years for drivers, Metro has only offered 4 percent a year rise over three years. Drivers in Hobart, Launceston and Burnie had threatened to strike for three days.

New Zealand social workers impose work bans

New Zealand Child Youth and Family (CYF) social workers and administration staff have increased work bans and are now refusing to respond to inquiries by new clients. The workers are also refusing to make key statistical information available to the government and are maintaining a ban on after-hours duty.

Pay negotiations between CYF and the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) have been at an impasse for more than five months. A NUPE spokesperson said CYF's current

11 percent offer is less than the rate of inflation and less than half that offered to social workers in the health sector. Many frontline administration employees earn little more than the minimum wage, starting on less than \$10.50 per hour. CYF employs a total of 1,300 social workers and the NUPE represents about 350.

New Zealand fast food workers reject offer

A stop-work meeting on January 31 of fast food workers employed in Restaurant Brands-owned stores in Auckland unanimously rejected a final company pay offer. Delegates from KFC, Pizza Hut and Starbucks stores declared that they would continue their fight for a \$12 per hour minimum wage, an end to youth rates and for secure working hours. The vote followed a series of two-hour strikes and pickets by predominantly young workers over the pre-Christmas period.

A KFC shift supervisor told the meeting that the company's offer would only give her \$20 extra each week and decrease the pay difference for people with more responsibility. She also said the Labour government's promised increase of 75 cents an hour in the minimum wage, due in March, would not alleviate widespread poverty among low paid workers. A 15-year-old KFC worker said the company had promised to remove youth rates, but only in three to five years time.

The company offer would increase pay to only \$8.76, well below the minimum adult wage of \$10.25. A further stop-work meeting and mass public rally is planned at the Auckland Town Hall on February 12.

PNG nurses return to work

The 127 striking nurses at the Wewak Boram Hospital in the East Sepik district of Papua New Guinea ended a seven-day strike on January 28. The nurses were protesting over the Health Department's "unexplained and suspicious" removal of some hospital executives by the hospital board. Close relatives of board members have replaced them.

The nurses agreed to resume duties after the Health Minister Melchior Pep informed the hospital's Board of Management that he would investigate the nurses' concerns. The Minister and Health Secretary Dr Isaac Ake met with the nurses on February 1 but there have been no further reports.



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