

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 December 2006

Asia

Indian construction workers protest site death

More than 6,000 construction workers at the Deenbandhu Chhottu Ram Thermal Power Plant construction site at Yamunanagar, in the north Indian state of Haryana, boycotted work on December 11. The workers were demanding compensation for the family of fellow employee Ramesh Chander Meena, 25, who died the previous day from a fall caused by the failure of a safety belt.

The construction workers, who are employed by the Reliance Energy Limited, also wanted Ramesh's body brought to the site so they could pay their respects before it was sent to his home in the Dosa district of Rajasthan.

Indian teachers continue protest campaign

Teachers and staff at state-aided schools in the Indian state of Punjab protested for the eighth consecutive day on December 11 to demand medical allowances, the lifting of a ban on sanctioning posts and the provision of benefits for workers with four, nine and fourteen years service.

In the latest protest, teachers blocked traffic outside the Shri Guru Ram Dass Senior Secondary School in Amritsar. The teachers are members of the Government Aided School Teachers Union.

Indian retail workers strike

About 130 employees of the Vishal Mega Mart in Ludhiana, Punjab went on strike and protested outside the store on December 10. They were opposing employment irregularities, management violation of labour laws and disparity in salaries. The workers are paid 3,000 to 3,500 rupees (\$US66 to \$77), which is far less than employees in similar establishments.

Satish Sharma said: "We work for about 16 to 18 hours, even though it is clearly mentioned in our agreement with the management that we are supposed to work for just eight hours." Another worker, Sunny Katyal, said: "Salesmen are made to work as manual labourers, unloading the products from delivery trucks. But the salary given to them is very poor."

Workers also allege that even though the store has been in operation for two years, no one had been provided with an Employees State Insurance (ESI) number, Provident Fund number, pay slip or other documents acknowledging that they were employed by Vishal Mega Mart. Management has promised to pay bonuses and increment every year but this has not happened.

Strikers have threatened to continue the industrial action if the issues are not addressed.

Kerala co-operative workers locked-out

Kerala State Rubber Co-operative Limited (RUBCO) management locked out around 500 employees at the company's Rubco-Huat Woods Division on December 7. The lockout was imposed after

workers began a go-slow demanding the abolition of salary anomalies.

RUBCO, which was formed in 1997 and currently employs more than 1,000 workers in four units, manufactures a range of furniture and quality panels using "eco-friendly" rubber wood.

The cooperative is controlled by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), the ruling party in Kerala. The locked out workers are members of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which is affiliated to the CPI-M.

Sri Lankan health workers demand overtime pay

Around 380 auxiliary health employees from Karapitiya Teaching Hospital in the southern city of Galle held a lightning strike on December 12 to demand the immediate payment of outstanding overtime. Around 2,000 patients who attend the hospital's outdoor dispensary and clinics were turned away due to the walkout.

Strikers returned to work in the evening, after receiving assurances from the hospital administration that the overtime would be paid within three days.

Government intervenes in Filipino port strike

Workers at the Dumaguete City Port in the Philippines ended a five-day strike on December 6 after the Department of Labor and Employment ordered a return to work. The Dumaguete Port Workers Arrastre and Stevedoring Services members struck on December 1 to demand the Philippine Ports Authority (PPA) renegotiate a collective work agreement that expired in 2004.

The PPA has repeatedly refused to recognise the union and told workers that they will have to negotiate with a new employer. Tenders from companies aiming to take over port work are currently under consideration and the PPA will make a decision before the end of December.

Workers protest inadequate minimum wage

Hundreds of workers in East Java protested on December 13 in opposition to new minimum wage levels due to be implemented across the province next month. Demonstrators came from factories in Surabaya, Malang, Pasuruan and Sidoarjo.

The workers want the East Java provincial government to increase the minimum wage from a proposed 746,000 rupiah per month (about \$US82) to 975,000. The government set the minimum for Malang at only 743,000 rupiah.

An Alliance of Workers Struggle spokesman said the survey taken by the authorities to determine workers' needs was "invalid". He demanded the governor take into account the 8 percent inflation rate when resetting the wage, and declared there "should be transparency and accountability when determining the wage and workers' basic needs".

Thai contract workers win compensation

On November 30, 17 contract workers once employed by Goodyear

Thailand in Bangkok won a legal case in the central labour court over unfair dismissal. The men were sacked in October 2005 after taking legitimate action in support of a collective bargaining agreement.

While the court ordered Goodyear Thailand to pay more than one year's backpay, the company has appealed the ruling. In May this year, the Industrial Court Commission ruled the men should be reinstated but when they turned up at the factory the management refused them entry.

Union leaders and workers arrested in Korea

Police in South Korea arrested two leaders of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and detained 25 workers at a rally on December 13. KCTU vice president Huh Yong-gu and the union's organisation director Park Min were charged with organising an "illegal" rally.

The arrests occurred during a protest of over 600 union members outside the National Assembly building in Seoul against the government's new restrictive labour regulations.

Australia and the Pacific

Union calls off strike by parking officers

The Australian Services Union (ASU) has called off a strike by 102 parking officers in Melbourne planned for December 14. The strike was abandoned after the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) ruled in favour of a Melbourne City Council application to stop the action. Parking officers were threatened with heavy fines if they failed to comply.

The parking officers were opposing council moves to change an existing policy restricting officers from working outdoors when the temperature topped 38 degrees centigrade. The AIRC ruled that the ASU must attend compulsory arbitration with the council next month before union members can consider taking industrial action.

New Zealand hospital workers strike

Nearly 3,000 New Zealand public hospital support workers went on strike on December 13 after negotiations with district health boards (DHBs) stalled. The Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU), representing hospital orderlies, food service workers and home-help aids, has been trying unsuccessfully for six months to negotiate a multi-employer collective agreement (MECA) with 21 DHBs.

The DHBs are refusing to negotiate a MECA and want to keep tendering out jobs to contract companies paying the lowest wages. Service workers are paid an average of \$12 to \$13 an hour but many are on the minimum wage of \$10.25 an hour. The union limited the strike to 1½ hours, saying it did not want the action to "impact on patients".

The strike follows industrial action by junior doctors, radiation technologists, radiographers and laboratory workers over the past six months. Some 1,200 hospital laboratory workers returned to work last week after being on strike for seven days. They are waiting for a response from DHBs and the blood service on their claim and have not ruled out further action.

Meanwhile, aged-care workers marched on parliament this week to deliver a 30,000-signature petition organised by the Nurses Organisation and SFWU to Health Minister Pete Hodgson calling for increased pay and staff increases across the sector.

Council staff strike in Auckland and Christchurch

On December 14, hundreds of workers from the Christchurch City Council walk off the job for 24 hours, closing city libraries and service centres. Essential services such as water supplies, sewage treatment, rubbish collection and Eco Depots were not affected.

The action follows a first-ever combined strike on December 8 by

workers at Christchurch and Auckland city councils over managements' refusal to consider a pay increase in bargaining for a new collective work agreement.

Employment agreement reached with NZ McDonald's

After several months of negotiations, the Unite union in New Zealand has reached a collective employment agreement with fast food chain McDonald's. Earlier this year, following a campaign of strikes, pickets and demonstrations by young fast food workers, Unite signed agreements with Red Rooster and Restaurant Brands, the owners of KFC, Pizza Hut and Starbucks.

Under the agreement, McDonald's workers under 18 years of age will receive an 11.6 percent increase after being employed for 6 months, taking their hourly rate to just \$9.50. Those over 18 years of age will get a 15.7 percent rise after six months, increasing the hourly rate to \$10.75. McDonald's agreed to implement a minimum shift and pay union members a bonus.

The union expects Burger King to finalise an agreement this month, lifting the youth pay rate next year from \$8.35 to \$9.00, while adult workers will get a 7.3 percent increase.

Northern Mariana Islands garment workers protest closure

On December 7, garment workers employed at the Concord Garment Manufacturing in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) protested inside the factory after its owner, Tan Holdings Corporation, announced the plant would close permanently in February.

The factory employs 1,400, mostly from China and the Philippines, and many are owed tax rebates from 2002. More recently recruited employees paid thousands of dollars to Chinese recruiting agencies. Most borrowed money to pay the fees and will find it impossible to repay the loans.

On December 8, about 1,000 workers marched to the company's Fiesta Resort & Spa Hotel in Garapan chanting, "Justice, justice, give us our rebates, give us our recruitment fees."

Several days later, police and Federal Bureau of Investigations officers were called to the Concord corporate office after several employees entered the building and prevented five representatives from a China-based recruitment agency and the Chinese Economic Development Association from leaving. Assisted by police, the representatives eventually escaped through a rear door.

On December 11, after further protests, Concord accountants supervised by Department of Labor officials paid workers a portion of their recruitment agency fees. The company then closed the factory and padlocked all gates.

Solomon Islands teachers protest for unpaid allowances

Over 300 teachers from 13 Honiara City Council (HCC) schools gathered outside the HCC headquarters on December 11, demanding the immediate payment of travelling allowances and two weeks of unpaid wages.

Many teachers are from outlying islands and rely on the travelling allowance to go home for the Christmas holiday period. Teachers have been waiting for three weeks for the allowance and are threatening to extend their holiday leave if the issue is not settled by December 15.



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