

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 December 2006

## Asia

### Sacked Indonesian aircraft workers begin protest march

Over 2,000 former employees of state aircraft manufacturer PT Dirgantara (PT DI) began a 100-kilometre march on December 19 from Bandung to the presidential palace in Jakarta to demand the government provide a long outstanding 40 billion rupiah (\$US4.5 million) compensation payment. The march, which will pass through ten towns and cities, is expected to take 12 days.

The workers are wearing orange t-shirts and carrying banners reading, "Demand the government keeps its promise". Arief Minardi, a PT DI Workers Union official, said: "This is our final effort to ask the government to show the political will to address our fate, which has been uncertain for three years."

Around 6,560 PT DI workers were fired on January 29, 2004 after being stood aside on July 2003 when the company filed for bankruptcy. While many rejected the company's compensation package, they eventually accepted it after the Central Committee for the Settlement of Labor Disputes approved the dismissals. PT DI then claimed it could not afford to pay dismissal packages totalling 200 billion rupiah.

The government eventually agreed to pay 40 billion rupiah in stages with the company to pay the remainder. The deadline for the government to pay-up, however, passed and workers have still not received anything.

### Jakarta rally calls for national wage scheme

About 500 workers, members of the Workers Criticism Alliance (ABM), rallied at the State Palace in Jakarta, Indonesia on December 16 to demand the government abandon its regional wage system and replace it with a national scheme.

The Jakarta provincial minimum monthly wage is around 900,000 rupiah (\$US99.32) while in regions such as Tangerang it is only 882,000. Participants in the rally came from Tangerang, Bekasi and Bogor, as well as Jakarta.

### Chinese police detain former bank workers

Police detained more than 50 protesting workers from the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), the country's largest lender, on December 14. The laid-off employees, who were waving banners with slogans, "Give us back our working rights" and "Give us back our living rights," were arrested after they attempted to march to the main government offices in Zhongnanhai, Beijing.

The bank employees, who had gathered outside the headquarters of the government-sanctioned All-China Federation of Trade Unions, decided to march to Zhongnanhai following fruitless talks

with ICBC officials in the street outside the union office.

About 100,000 staff were laid off and given a one-off compensation payment when the ICBC was privatised. Many remain unemployed and face financial difficulties.

### Filipino communications workers protest

Philippines Cable Corporation Davao Employees Union (PCCDEU) members demonstrated outside the SkyCable Office in Cabaguio on December 20 to demand that their new employer, Philippine Cable Corporation (PCC), recognise them as employees and give permission for the Davao regional management to negotiate a collective agreement.

The workers want the dispute resolved. It began when the two regional cable operators they were employed with merged with PCC. Although PCC pays the workers, it claims that it is not the immediate employer and will not negotiate directly with the union. The union had been negotiating with regional management since June but broke off talks after learning that any agreement would have to be approved by PCC.

A union spokesman said the demonstration was a notice of intent to strike, possibly before the end of December. The employee status issue is currently in the Court of Appeals.

### Indian village and municipal workers protest

Hundreds of Andhra Pradesh Gram Panchayat (Village Council) employees in southern India held a sit-down protest (dharna) at Indira Park in Hyderabad on December 19 over a series of outstanding demands.

These include the payment of salary arrears, regularisation of part-time and daily wage employees' services and a minimum wage for contract staff. They also want wages paid on the first of every month and an extension of provident fund coverage. The protest was organised by Andhra Pradesh Gram Panchayat Employees and Workers Union.

In a separate dispute, contract sanitary workers at Anantpur Municipal Corporation (AMC) in Andhra Pradesh demonstrated on December 15 against the non-payment of wages for the last four months.

The workers marched to the AMC main office and rallied at Mayor R. Parasuram's chambers and the town collectorate. To placate the protestors, the mayor promised the immediate payment of two months' wages. Workers demanded at least three months.

The AMC employs 225 contract sanitary workers who are paid just 3,300 rupees (\$US73) a month. They are members of the Sanitary Workers Union, an affiliate of the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU).

### **Sri Lankan state sector workers demand salary increase**

Workers from state corporations, boards and authorities protested outside Fort Railway station in Central Colombo on December 14 to demand a 35 percent pay rise and the abolition of wage anomalies within the state sector. They also want pension benefits and housing loans.

Somasiri Dassanayake, a spokesman for the Joint Union Federation of Corporations, Boards and Authorities, said state workers had not received a pay increase “even though the cost of living is increasing drastically”. He said they were determined to press ahead with their demands.

### **Sri Lankan transport and health workers protest**

On December 12, Dematagoda Power Transmission Sector of the Sri Lankan Railway walked out over salary and overtime arrears. The strike delayed a number of trains.

The next day, 14 Sri Lanka Transport Board (SLTB) employees demonstrated at bus depots throughout the country. They were seeking a 5,000-rupee (\$US50) pay increase, wage arrears, the payment of salaries on time and the streamlining of the employees’ provident fund. Hundreds also picketed the SLTB head office in Narahenpita, Colombo.

On December 15, health workers protested outside the National Hospital in Colombo to demand immediate outstanding holiday and overtime payments and salary arrears.

### **Australia and the Pacific**

#### **Power workers meet over workplace deaths**

On December 18, power and construction workers attended a mass meeting in Morwell, in southeast Victoria over two workplace deaths in the last six weeks. The workers, members of affiliates of the Gippsland Trades and Labour Council, are concerned that private contractors at power stations in the region are not complying with safety standards.

On October 31, Rick Gucci was killed when a beam fell on him at Yallourn power station. On December 9, a worker was killed and another seriously injured at the Loy Yang power station when a 300-kilogram metal door collapsed on them. All three were employed by Silcar, a subsidiary of Thiess and Siemens.

#### **Health workers lift bans**

About 3,000 South Australian public health workers agreed to lift all work bans and limitations this week. The bans were part of a two-week campaign for a new professional classification structure.

The Health Service Union (HSU) and the South Australian Labor government have agreed to continue negotiations on the new structure, which would include a 3.5 percent pay rise. The agreement would be separate from the general enterprise agreement covering the state’s 30,000 public servants.

#### **Childcare workers strike over conditions**

About 35 Department of Child Safety employees in far north Queensland walked off the job for four hours on December 19 in protest over inadequate resources.

The workers passed a no-confidence resolution in the Department of Child Safety’s general management, citing concerns over the lack of transport and accommodation and excessive workloads. They claim that current conditions make it impossible to adequately protect children in isolated areas such as

Cape York and the Torres Strait islands.

### **New Zealand aged care workers take action over pay**

Over 1,100 caregivers for aged and disabled people held protests and placed work limitations on Health Care New Zealand services this week in a bid for higher pay. The industrial action, which followed a breakdown in pay talks, involves bans on driving HealthCare vans and all non-essential paperwork.

The workers are paid between \$10.25 and \$13.50 an hour and want this increased to between \$12.50 and \$17. A spokesman for the Public Service Association threatened rolling strikes next year if the issue is not resolved.

### **PNG police called to disperse court workers protest**

On December 18, police in the town of Kundiawa in Papua New Guinea (PNG) dispersed court employees demonstrating outside the provincial governor’s office. The protestors were accused of throwing stones at the building and damaging government vehicles. Several police were injured in clashes before the protesters agreed to attend a hastily arranged meeting at the police station with court administrators.

The workers were protesting the court administration’s failure to honour promises to pay outstanding allowances by midday December 18. Many of the protesters, who were from outlying areas, said they had been stranded in Kundiawa for three weeks awaiting payment. Further protests were called off after administrators assured workers they would be paid the next day.

### **Solomon Island teachers to be paid partial travel allowance**

On December 15, the Honiara City Council (HCC) in the Solomon Islands agreed to pay 300 teachers part of an overdue holiday travelling allowance. The payments range from \$500 to \$2,000 (\$US66 to \$US298).

While the decision came after a December 11 teachers’ protest, the arrangement is far from satisfactory because many of the teachers need the allowance to return to isolated home villages during the school break. An HCC spokesman claims that the council is short of funds and will address the outstanding amount next year.

The teachers have accused the council of dishonesty and have demanded the allowance payment be taken out of its hands and placed with the department of Local Purchase Orders. This would effectively make the national government responsible for future payments.



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