Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 January 2007

Asia

South Korean autoworkers threaten strike action

Thousands of workers at South Korea's Hyundai Motors threatened to strike if the company did not pay a full annual incentive bonus by yesterday. The company, which is South Korea's leading automaker and has 44,000 union employees, slashed its bonus payment by a third last year, claiming that it failed to meet 2006 production targets.

The threatened strike followed an overnight sit-in at the main building of the company's Ulsan plant, 415 kilometres south of Seoul, by more than 40 union leaders on Thursday. Union members have also rejected company plans to introduce a second shift at its bus and truck plants.

Park Yoo-ki, leader of the Hyundai Motor union at Ulsan, told the media: "If management doesn't pay the full bonus by January 5, we will wage a strong fight, including strike action."

Hong Kong journalists protest

Thirty employees from Hong Kong's *Sing Pao Daily News* held an angry protest outside the newspaper's offices on January 1, demanding immediate payment of wages for November and December along with overdue travel expenses and mandatory pension contributions.

The newspaper's 300 employees have threatened industrial action if the company fails to pay the outstanding salaries by the end of this week. Last week, the newspaper axed 30 editorial jobs from the news, entertainment, sports and business sections of the newspaper.

Hong Kong Journalists Association chairperson Serenade Woo said management had breached the law by delaying payments and set "one of the worst examples in recent years for the local industry". The union said freelance columnists for the paper had also been affected, with one journalist owed hundreds of thousands of dollars in unpaid wages.

Chinese teachers demand wage rise

Hundreds of teachers in Haidu, an outer suburb of Guangzhou in southern China, held a one-day strike on January 1 to demand wage increases from education authorities. They held a silent protest outside a local government office and were joined by several thousands supporters.

More than 400 patrol and riot police attempted to break up the demonstration but the teachers refused to be provoked and reportedly broke their "silent protest" to sing "The Internationale". It is not clear what increase the teachers were demanding because the Chinese government has imposed a press blackout on the dispute.

Indian court employees walkout

Around 10,000 Madhya Pradesh court employees held a two-day strike on January 2 over increased working hours. The striking workers, which included readers, stenographers, clerks, record keepers, drivers and sanitation staff, demonstrated outside courts throughout the southern Indian state.

The Madhya Pradesh High Court increased the state courts' working times by an hour, starting on January 1, and curtailed holidays for the New Year. Court employees are demanding compensation for the extra work.

The strike action was organised by the Madhya Pradesh Judicial Employees Association.

Indian power workers on strike

Nearly 1,000 contract workers from the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) Simhadri thermal power station at Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh went on strike on January 2 to demand that the management and contractors pay them a 600-rupee ($US13) per month dust allowance and establish minimum wages for different work categories.

Semi-skilled and skilled workers are currently being paid 92 rupees per day, the same as unskilled workers.

Power generation was affected in both units of the thermal station by the strike action. Coal unloading and handling was also hit.

Indian paper workers protest

Hundreds of Mukerian paper mill workers in the Indian state of Punjab protested on January 1 over the non-payment of wages during the past year. Workers burned an effigy of Labor and Local Government Minister Jagjit Chaudhary.

The mill stopped production last year axing around 250 employees. These workers have not been paid any dues or provident fund. About 1,000 other mill workers have not been paid salaries since March.

Protesting employees have accused management of deliberately stopping the production at the mill and referring the case to the Board for Industrial and Financial Reconstruction in order to raise loans for the paper mill. Workers claim there are no real financial problems with the mill, the area has ample raw material for production, and paper is in demand on the market.

Paper mill employees have made representations to the state government and the Labor Department over the past year but have been ignored.

Punjab cleaning workers on strike

Strike action by Jalandhar City sanitation workers (safai karamcharis) since December 22 is continuing as city officials refuse to grant employees' demands for a wage rise, permanent employment after five years, and other basic demands. The striking workers are among the poorest paid and most oppressed sections of the Indian working class.

While garbage continues to pile up, impacting in particular on older parts of the city, such as Kot Pakshian, Mohalla Khodian, Kishan Pura, Kot Kishan Chand and Attari Bazaar, municipal officials refuse

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to discuss workers' demands.

This week, the strikers targetted Congress Party mayor Surinder Mahey for their protests. In the last week of December, their demonstrations were directed against state industry, commerce and environment minister Avtar Henry.

Sri Lankan development officers demand higher salaries

On December 28, around 27,000 Sri Lankan development officers launched a picketing campaign to demanding a 35 percent wage increase and the abolition of salary anomalies. Other demands include a revamping of the divisional secretariat's promotion scheme and the payment of entitlements received by other state service employees.

Development officers are involved in disbursing government assistance to needy people and also work in the Samurdhi, or so-called poverty alleviation banks. They have threatened to launch a national strike if their demands are not met.

Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific

Ajax parts workers end sit-in

Former Ajax Fasteners workers voted unanimously on December 21 to end a sit-in at the company's Melbourne factory after a proposed takeover of the bankrupt company by Specifix Fasteners.Ajax Fasteners, which makes automotive and industrial fasteners for Ford, General Motors Holden, Toyota and Mitsubishi, was placed in voluntary liquidation just before Christmas.

Under the proposed deal, Specifix Fasteners would resume production this month but only an estimated 60 or 70 of the former 187-strong workforce would be re-employed. Australia Workers Union officials urged employees to accept the deal. Workers were told they would receive redundancy payouts and those rehired could keep this payment.

New Zealand radiation therapists to resume strike action

Radiation therapists employed by New Zealand District Health Boards (DHBs) are set to resume strike action next week over a cost of living dispute. Canterbury DHB workers are walking off the job for three days and therapists at all other DHBs, except Otago who are running an administration ban, are striking for one day at a time. Workers in Canterbury will strike from January 9-12, Auckland and Wellington on January 11 and 15 and MidCentral (Palmerston North) between January 15 and 19.

About 170 radiation therapists, who provide cancer treatment, took industrial action last September during a two-week period. The action included overtime bans or stopping work for periods of between 45 minutes and 4 hours. Next week's industrial action was decided on December 22, after the DHBs rejected a deal of a 3 percent pay rise for 2006 and a further 3 per cent in 2007. The employers' first offer was zero percent and then moved to 1.4 per cent after the first strike.

PNG teachers maintain protest over entitlements

About 400 angry teachers from the Central Province of Papua New Guinea, protesting outside the provincial headquarters at Konedobu, prevented the administrator's vehicle leaving the premises on January 2. After several attempts by the administrator to leave the compound, police were called to escort the vehicle past the demonstrators.

The teachers are protesting over the non-payment of their 2006 travel and leave entitlements and have threatened to boycott classes if they are not paid their entitlements before January 22. Central Province Administrator Raphael Yibmaramba continues to claim that funds for the teachers' entitlements are in the hands of the Treasury and being processed.

Meanwhile, 147 teachers in West New Britain have taken the provincial administrator to the Kimbe National Court to force payment of their travel and leave entitlements. The court has given the administration until January 5 to explain why the payments have not been made.

West New Britain Administrator Joshua Giru alleges that the province has no funds for the entitlements but will make the payments in instalments in 2007.

PNG doctors walk out nationwide

Papua New Guinea doctors struck for 24 hours on January 2 over the Health Department's failure to meet a series of demands, including employment contracts, accommodation problems and other issues. While the Health Department agreed on November 21 to resolve doctors' grievances by December 22, it had done nothing.

The accommodation problem has become urgent, with doctors across the country being evicted from their dwellings due to non-payment of rent by the Health Department. At the same time over 40 doctors nationwide have been acting in higher positions for up to seven years. The department, however, has refused to officially appoint them to the positions and pay the required salaries.

National Doctors Association (NDA) members held a sit-in outside the Port Moresby General Hospital during the strike and presented a petition to Health Minister Sir Peter Barter.

Later that afternoon, acting Health Secretary Dr Nicholas Mann and Sir Peter addressed the NDA and claimed that the accommodation issue would be settled by the end of the week. Mann also agreed to resolve the acting positions and doctors' contracts within four weeks and 14 days respectively. The NDA accepted these assurances and the doctors voted to end their strike.

Fiji council workers win their jobs back

More than 400 Public Works Department Road Works Unit employees have been reinstated and put on holiday leave after negotiations between the Fijian Ministry of Works and the Finance Minister.

The workers, who were sacked a week before Christmas, held a massive protest in October after they were told they could no longer be employed because funds had to be transferred out of capital works and road maintenance to pay for a cost of living adjustment (COLA) for public servants. While these protests did not avert the sackings they were delayed until a week before Christmas.

Last week workers were told that the finance ministry had agreed to make funds available and they would be called back to work when capital works begin in 2007. The Public Employees Union (PEU) has threatened to call national strike action if anyone else is made redundant due to diversion of funds for COLA payments.

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