

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 January 2007

Asia

West Bengal jute mill workers on indefinite strike

On January 5, nearly 250,000 jute workers from more than 50 mills in the Indian state of West Bengal went on indefinite strike over pay and bonuses. Their demands include the clearance of outstanding gratuity payments and the payment of bonuses and a dearness allowance. Bonuses have not been paid for four years.

Strikers demonstrated outside the one of closed mills which produces hessian, burlap, wine bottle bags, bags and geo-textiles. The last jute industry strike occurred in 2004 and continued for nine days. Unions agreed to productivity-linked wages to end the industrial action.

Indian village council workers demonstrate

Village council (panchayat) workers in the Tiruchi area in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu protested on January 8 to demand a wage rise for overhead tank operators and sanitary workers who have not had a pay increase since 2000. They also want the prompt payment of salaries in the first week of the month. The demonstration was called by the Tiruchi District Rural Development Local Administration Department Employees' Union.

Indian food corporation staff oppose outsourcing

Food Corporation of India (FCI) employees held a sit-down protest (dharna) in Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu on January 6 against the outsourcing of work, such as procurement, accounts and security, which is normally performed in-house.

Workers condemned management for victimising field staff, who are blamed for lapses in quality control during rail transit. They also want FCI to stop allocating storage space to private companies.

Other demands include promotions for all workers who have completed 12 years of service in the same post, payment of an overtime allowance, new classifications for clerks and watchmen and the establishment of FCI accommodation adjacent to corporation offices in major towns.

Indian teachers demonstrate

Teachers held a march and sit-down protest in Ongole, Andhra Pradesh on January 4 to demand a pay increase, an automatic advancement scheme for apprentice teachers, recognition of special science teaching volunteers and an aged-pension scheme for the volunteers.

The teachers, who members of the Joint Action Committee of Teachers Organisations (JACTO), are also seeking the filling of all vacant posts in municipal and aided-schools together with a

provident fund and medical reimbursement for new employees.

Sri Lankan police and military attack transport workers

Police and military brutally attacked striking transport workers from the Ceylon Transport Board (CTB) who were demonstrating outside the Railways and Transport Ministry in Colombo on January 9. Some of the workers and union officials assaulted were admitted to the National Hospital after they were taken into police custody. Workers claim the protest was peaceful and that the attack was unprovoked.

Thousands of CTB workers went on strike on January 9 for a salary increase promised in the 2005 budget and other allowances. Other demands include the incorporation of allowances into the basic wage, payment of salaries and other entitlements when due, payment of provident funds into the CTB account and the reversal of privatisation processes already implemented into the CTB.

Hyundai workers threaten to strike over unpaid bonuses

Over 1,000 workers demanding full payment of an end of year bonus protested outside Hyundai Motors' headquarters in Seoul, South Korea on January 10. Three hundred security guards and 1,500 riot police confronted the protesters. Around 60 police buses blockaded the main offices and research centre while a police helicopter circled overhead.

While Hyundai Motors' 44,000 employees are due to vote on a national walkout the South Korean government has threatened to "crack down hard" if a strike goes ahead. Labor Minister Lee Sang-Soo said, "[I]f the union resorts to violence or stages an illegal strike, the government will strongly deal with it."

Hyundai refused to pay the full bonus, claiming that production targets for 2006 had not been met. Hyundai is the world's sixth largest carmaker and produced 1.6 million vehicles in South Korea last year.

Chinese furniture workers protest beatings

Hundreds of workers demonstrated outside the Italian-owned DeCoro furniture factory in Schenzhen, southern China on January 4. They were protesting the severe beating of three employees who had demanded an improved severance package after the company announced it intended to lay off 75 employees and pay them substandard compensation.

Workers claim that 100 security guards wielding iron bars attacked the men after management stormed out of a meeting discussing severance arrangements with employees targeted for dismissal. While most of the workers escaped, three men were cornered and bashed so badly that they had to be hospitalised. One was found unconscious with three broken ribs.

Local police refused to talk to the media, but an unofficial police report said five security guards have been arrested over the incident. Factory management has not commented.

This is not the first time that workers have suffered beatings ordered by DeCoro management. In November 2005 over 3,000 employees took to the streets in protest over the bashing of 10 colleagues by supervisors during a dispute over pay cuts. Three of the workers were hospitalised.

Australia and the Pacific

ABC workers threaten further strikes

Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) workers in Brisbane met on January 10, voted “no confidence” in management and are threatening further strike action. They condemned management for failing to properly plan the relocation of staff after the closure of the corporation’s Toowong site and have demanded the state-funded broadcaster provide the union with detailed daily updates. Staff are now temporarily based at a studio in the Ten Network building at Mount Cootha, also near Brisbane.

In July 2006, some 90 ABC workers called a snap-strike over the high rate of breast cancer among female employees at the Toowong site and demanded relocation to a suitable permanent work site. Workers suspected possible contamination at the site was to blame. An independent panel of experts found the breast cancer rate at the site was up to 11 times higher than in the general working community.

New Zealand radiation therapists strike over wage claim

Last minute talks between New Zealand District Health Boards (DHBs) and the Apex union failed to avert rolling stoppages by 170 radiation therapists this week. Negotiations are deadlocked. Canterbury DHB therapists walked out for three days on January 9. Therapists in Auckland, Capital and Coast stopped work for one day on January 11 and will strike again on Monday. MidCentral therapists also struck for a half-day.

The therapists first took industrial action last September in support of a 6 percent cost-of-living increase over two years. The union claims that when historical grading scales are removed, the DHBs’ base pay offer is only 1.4 percent. The total difference amounts to \$150,000—well below \$500,000 the boards recently paid to send 36 breast cancer patients to Australia for treatment in an attempt to circumvent the effect of the strikes.

An Apex spokesperson said the union had dropped its claim from 5 to 3 percent in an attempt to reach a settlement in the last mediated talks prior to the strikes. The union has accused the DHBs of refusing to negotiate in good faith and is calling on the government to intervene in the dispute.

New Zealand meat workers return after lockout

Meatworkers at the Affco plant in Feilding returned to work on January 11 after a two-month lockout. The company decided not to reopen for the season in December after the 250 workers refused to do extra kills without pay. This week, Affco dropped its demands.

Meat Workers Union secretary Roger Middlemass said the workers had defended their position against immense pressure but had paid “a high price to return to the status quo” and that lost wages would not be recovered. The union, however, had foreshadowed it was preparing to accept the company’s demands with a meeting last week approving up to 50 extra kills a day,

provided workers could resume immediately.

The plant is one of 11 in New Zealand recently taken over by Talley’s Fisheries. The union had denounced the demand for increased production as a “test case” for all the Affco plants but indicated it would accept speedups. “We are quite prepared to work smarter. We want to look at machinery or technology and to work with the company to explore ways to speed it up,” Middlemass said.

PNG mine workers strike for improved pay and conditions

More than 50 workers employed by contractors at the Ramu nickel mine construction site at Basamuk in the Madang Province, Papua New Guinea remain on strike. They walked out on January 5 over poor working conditions, low wages and the lack of safety equipment and medical supplies. They are only paid 10 kina (\$US3.30) per day while other workers at the site receive 15 kina.

Officials from the Madang Development Corporation and Madang Acting Governor Bunang Kiup visiting the mine site this week were confronted by village women appealing for specific funding and assistance because much of the local land used for gardening has been taken over for mine development.

The Acting Governor told a village meeting that the workers’ grievances would be “looked at soon”. A spokesman for the workers said that the strike action, however, would continue until the employer and government responded favourably.

Northern Marianas guest workers hold street rally

About 2,000 guest workers demonstrated outside the Horiguchi Building in Garapan in the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands (CNMI) on January 5 to demand improved immigration status and an increase in the minimum wage.

Most were from the Philippines and Bangladesh but the protest also included workers from China, Korea, Thailand, Nepal and Sri Lanka. The rally was organised by the Dekata Movement, which was formed several years by foreign workers to lobby for permanent status.

After speeches by several lawyers and teachers, the gathering marched to central Garapan and past the Fiesta resort and spa where an interior ministry official was attending a chamber of commerce meeting.

The CNMI has a dual-wage system with the minimum wage for guest workers set at \$3.05, well below the minimum wage of \$5.15 paid to civil servants. Many guest workers have lived and worked in the CNMI for over 10 years and have children born there.

While the CNMI Congress is due to debate the minimum wage and guest worker status, a recent bill opposes granting “alien” workers permanent resident status and requires that they exit the CNMI periodically prior to reemployment.



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