

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

27 January 2007

Asia

Strike halts Indian port

A strike by around 500 cargo handlers on January 22 halted all activity at the south Indian port of Cochin. They were protesting the decision of the Kerala Headload Workers Welfare Board (KHWWB) to reduce the number of workers' pools in the port from 17 to 5. The move would lead to the shedding of hundreds of jobs, as a pool contains 100 workers.

The strike, accompanied by a sit-down protest in front of the KHWWB's office, was organised by workers independently of the port unions.

Central Bank employees defend basic rights

Around 40,000 Central Bank of India employees went on strike on January 22 to protest against "unwarranted attacks" by management "on employees, officers, trade unions and trade union leaders".

The strike affected clearing operations in the bank's 3,200 branches, with only a few senior management officials reporting to work. The United Forum of Central Bank Unions said the protest was against unilateral changes in staff-related policies such as transfers and promotions, and attacks on trade union rights. The union warned that more strikes across various zones are planned for February.

School lecturers protest over conditions

School lecturers in the north Indian state of Himachal Pradesh held a mass sit-down protest (dharna) outside the deputy director of education's office in Hamirpur on January 22.

Their main demands are for a change in recruitment and promotion rules and the enforcement of the new elementary system of education in the next academic session. The lecturers oppose the system starting in mid-session and have decided not to teach classes 9 and 10 until their demand is accepted.

The School Lecturers' Association, which is organising the campaign, announced plans to continue sit-down protests at all district headquarters, and other actions.

Sri Lankan port, postal and railway workers hold protests

Port workers picketed the Port Authority in central Colombo on January 17, demanding the payment of a delayed salary increase. They also want the Authority to cease moves to privatise the south port, end improper recruitment methods and provide workers with decent meals. The workers are threatening strike action on February 2 if their demands are not met by the end of the month.

Postal workers held a fasting campaign in front of the postal headquarters in central Colombo on January 18. They want a salary increase and overtime payments. Other demands include the confirmation of employment for long-standing casual postal workers and the establishment of a proper replacement and promotions scheme. Workers from 13 unions participated in the campaign.

Railway workers also held protests across 11 districts, including Colombo, on January 17. They are demanding union rights and an end to management corruption, privatisation and sell-offs. Workers protested at Ratmalana rail workshop, Gampaha, Kalutara, Galle, Puttalam, Kandy, Badulla, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Trincomalee.

Health workers launch pickets

Health workers in Sri Lanka picketed 14 main hospitals across the country, including the national hospital in Colombo, on January 7. They are campaigning for a uniform allowance, overtime and holiday pay arrears and rectification of salary anomalies. They also want a decent promotions scheme for minor staff and allowances for trainee attendants.

All health workers, except doctors, participated in pickets at Nagoda, Ragama, Kurunegala, Matara, Galle, Monaragala, Badulla, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Kandy, Ratnapura, Ridgeway Children's Hospital and South Colombo Teaching Hospital.

Health workers at the Colombo Eye Hospital picketed on January 19 and implemented a work-to-rule, demanding the reinstatement of overtime entitlements. They are calling for removal of the hospital's director and resolution of outstanding administration problems.

Doctors at the hospital began a work-to-rule campaign over the same issues on January 22. The industrial action is

impacting on services at the eye hospital, which treats patients from all over the country.

Workers demand Philippines Labor Minister resign

On January 22, around 50 workers protested outside the Cebu office of the Department of Labor and Employment. They called for the resignation of Labor Secretary Arturo Brion and demanded the Senate approve a proposed 125 peso (\$US15) per day minimum wage.

Rally organiser Dennis Derige of Partido ng Manggagawa (PM) said the protest was part of a nationwide campaign as the Senate began deliberations on the minimum wage proposal which had already been approved by the House of Representatives

PM claims Brion is attempting to block the wage increase by calling a meeting of 17 regional Tripartite Wage and Productivity Boards to cut across debate in the Senate and create confusion. Employer groups across the country are backing Brion's manoeuvre. PM is threatening mass protests if the wage hike does not pass the Senate.

Taiwan factory workers protest redundancies

The union representing 389 workers at the Panchiao household appliance plant in Taipei, Taiwan called a rally at the plant on January 20 to protest the firm's decision to shut down part of its operations on March 25, making 189 people redundant.

The factory owners, Tutang Co, said labour intensive production is being relocated to Vietnam and China to cut costs. Management said it had complied with the country's Labor Standards Law by giving 60 days notice before acting on the redundancies.

Protesters accused the management of embezzling money from the corporation's funds. A union representative said workers would stage another protest next week to pressure the company to change its decision.

Australia and the Pacific

ACT teacher's pay dispute halted

A long-running pay campaign by teachers in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) was resolved in arbitrated talks this week. The ACT Labor government offered an 11 percent pay rise over three years and the union agreed to a one-hour teaching increase for secondary school teachers.

The dispute held up transfer applications of 200 teachers because a demand for job cuts by the government made it impossible for schools to determine staff levels. The transfers are now being processed and 45 new teachers appointed.

In a separate dispute, public hospital nurses in the Northern Territory (NT) voted on January 23, by a margin of 90 percent, to reject a 3 percent pay offer by the NT Labor government. Further negotiations are scheduled between the Australian Nursing Federation and the government.

Four-month strike in New Caledonia ends

The Federation of New Caledonia Workers Union (CSTNC) and the SLN mining company reached an agreement on January 22, ending a four-month-long strike. The strike affected SLN smelter operations in Noumea and construction at the new Goro nickel mine site in the south of the island.

SLN had sacked some of the protesting workers but agreed to reinstate them if the strike was called off. Details of the agreement have not been reported but it appears the union has dropped its original demands, which were mainly directed against the government.

The demands included a call for the government to resign, cheaper living costs, tax on high-income earners and for a greater share of New Caledonia's mineral wealth to remain in the country. The union also made a reactionary call for the expulsion of Filipino guest workers employed at Goro.

Solomon Islands teachers boycott classes

Teachers from the Solomon Islands capital Honiara who work in the provinces met on January 22 and agreed to continue a boycott of classes. Solomon Islands Teachers Association (SINTA) industrial relations officer John Lee Hatimoana said the industrial action would continue until teachers' travelling allowances for last year were paid. The teachers are also demanding the government withdraw and review work contracts they have been asked to sign.

SINTA officials met with the prime minister to discuss the issues but the results of their discussion have not been reported.



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