

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 February 2007

Filipino workers protest over wages Bill

Several hundred protesting workers and teachers picketed the Philippines' House of Representatives in Manila on January 22 over the Arroyo administration's decision to defer House Bill 354. The Bill would have delivered a daily wage increase of 125 pesos (\$US2.50) to workers on the minimum wage. The house voted to defer the Bill, pending debate in the Regional Tripartite Wages and Productive Board (RTWPB).

Bill 354 was first submitted to the House of Representatives in 2001 but only gained enough support in December 2006 allowing it to proceed to the Senate. President Gloria Arroyo said she would veto the bill if it were accepted in both houses. This was avoided, however, after Labor Secretary Arturo Brion deliberately convened a meeting of the country's 17 RTWPBs this month to cut across the Senate debate.

Around 500 teachers from the Teachers Dignity Coalition also rallied at the plenary hall of the lower house to condemn government inaction over several bills to improve teachers' welfare.

Dolefil workers accept wage ruling

Over 3,000 workers or more than half the union members at pineapple processing giant Dole Philippines Incorporated (Dolefil) voted on January 28 to accept a wage and allowances deal handed down by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) secretary Arturo Brion.

The vote ends a 10-month battle between Dolefil and union Amado Kadena-Naflu-KMU over a new collective bargaining work agreement.

DOLE ordered a 15.6 percent wage increase over three years to be retroactive from February 2006 and one million peso (\$US20,000) research and education fund.

The settlement, however, falls far short of the union's original demand for a 10 percent pay increase for each

of the three years, plus a 1.3-million peso research and education fund. The union is refusing to comment on the decision or the fate of several workers sacked during the dispute.

Ambulance workers in Jakarta stage protest

Over 200 members of the Emergency Ambulance 118 Workers Union rallied on January 18 at the Hotel Indonesia to demand that the city administration urgently deal with an outstanding grievance.

Protest coordinator Arif Fatahilla said that workers' employment status was unclear and insecure because it fell between two categories—permanent and contract.

"We are not asking the city administration to make us civil servants, we just want job security as compensation for having to deal with critical incidents and people who are in distress," he said. The workers dispersed at noon after holding a sit-down protest.

Indian Provident Fund employees protest work-related death

Provident Fund (EPF) staff at several offices in Karnataka struck and demonstrated on January 24 over workplace harassment. The strike was triggered by the death of section supervisor Shivashankar Shastri (54) on January 23. Shastri suffered a heart attack at home after being harassed by a senior official during working hours. Accounts and enforcement officers, who normally do not become involved in industrial action, also participated in the strike.

Workers claim that widespread and continuous harassment, along with increasing workloads, has led some employees to suicide. Clerks, who once handled 2,200 accounts, are now assigned over 10,000 accounts.

Indian workers demand improved welfare

Hundreds of workers, mainly from construction sites, demonstrated near the Mahatma Gandhi statue in Bangalore, Karnataka on January 23 to demand the state government establish a Labor Welfare Board.

They also want the government to drop plans to collect monthly contributions for the Labor Welfare Fund and only collect registration fees.

The demonstration was organised by the All India Central Council of Trade Unions and All India Agricultural Labor Association.

Indian farm workers blockade road

Morning peak hour traffic was disrupted on the busy Marudhamalai Road in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu on January 24 when farm workers from the Agricultural University set up a blockade.

The workers want a minimum of five days employment each week, a rest day every Saturday, a Pongal festival allowance, permanency for workers with 10 years' service and the right to conduct union elections. The university administration, however, issued a statement on the day of the protest rejecting these demands. The Tamil Nadu Agricultural University Farm Workers Union organised the protest.

Nurses to vote on strike action

Nurses in Australia's Northern Territory (NT) are preparing to vote on industrial action after opposing a 3 percent pay offer from the NT Labor government. Nurses rejected the offer, which is below the current inflation rate, on January 23.

According to media reports, one in five nurses work up to 70 hours a week due to staff shortages. A spokesperson for the Australian Nursing Federation's NT branch confirmed that on average nurses work between 14 to 18 hours a day and were "also working long stretches without days off" because of "insufficient staff".

She said: "We hope that this (strike threat) will be the catalyst that ensures that the Martin Labor government takes its nurses seriously. We want the government to acknowledge the shortage of nurses in the territory and take steps to attract nurses to the territory and retain the nurses we have."

The Australian Medical Association also attacked government claims that "all was well" in the NT public hospital system declaring: "The state of the hospitals is appalling ... it's held together by the good work of nurses in particular and doctors as well who are working above and beyond the call of duty."

New Zealand newspaper workers vote to strike

Workers at the APN-owned newspaper the *Oamaru Mail* walked out on Friday to demand a wage rise.

While negotiations have dragged on for three months the company has refused to improve its 3.2 percent pay offer.

A spokesman for the Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) said that the offer was less than recent cost-of-living increases and effectively represented a pay cut. The EPMU covers the majority of staff at the *Oamaru Mail*, including editorial, administration and distribution workers.

PNG teachers demand reinstatement

Teachers in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea met on January 24 to discuss industrial action. They want reinstatement of eight teachers suspended or demoted during a strike in July 2006. The PNG Teachers Association ended the strike after the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) agreed to demands over back pay and promised to reinstate sacked and demoted teachers.

The TSC is now refusing to honour this commitment, claiming that the strike was illegal and the action against the eight teachers therefore justified. The TSC has challenged the union to take the matter to court, declaring that "tougher disciplinary measures await teachers planning to go on strike".

Solomon Islands teachers end boycott

Solomon Island teachers called off a classroom boycott and resumed normal duties on January 29 after the Solomon Islands National Teachers Association (SINTA) signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the government. The two-day teaching boycott forced the government to reschedule a parliamentary budget debate on funding for teachers' claims and Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare agreed to take charge of negotiations.

The MOU provides for the implementation of the revised Teaching Service Handbook, which has been outstanding for two years, and resolves long-standing issues over allowances for leave, housing and teachers' contracts. SINTA agreed to discontinue industrial and work cases it had brought to the Trades Disputes Panel.



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