

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 February 2007

## Asia

### **Filipino maids protest in Hong Kong**

Thousands of Filipino maids in Hong Kong rallied on February 4 outside the Philippines consulate to protest new employment proposals by the Philippines Department of Labor and Employment covering Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs).

The proposals include a two-week training and assessment program for overseas Filipino maids, which would cost up to 15,000 pesos (\$US3,000) and set a minimum wage of only \$US400. The maids oppose the suggested wage level because they currently receive higher rates in Hong Kong.

The Philippines Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) has agreed to exempt currently employed maids from training but insists on the new minimum wage. About 250,000 Filipinos work in Hong Kong's special administrative region.

The proposed minimum wage, however, benefits about 20,000 Filipino maids working in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (a US territory in the Pacific) who are currently paid just \$US300 a month or 95 cents an hour. The new minimum rate of \$1.26 per hour will apply when existing contracts run out but it is still far short of the Commonwealth's \$3.05 minimum hourly rate for indigenous workers.

### **Philippines port workers issue strike notice**

Unionised workers at Oroport Cargohandling Service Incorporated (Oroport) at the Cagayan de Oro City Port on February 2 officially registered their intention to strike with the National Conciliation and Mediation Board (NCMB). Current labour laws stipulates a 150-day cooling-off period followed by another seven days for a secret ballot before any strike.

The Phase II Port Workers Union (PPWU)-ALU-TUCP cited unfair labour practices as grounds for striking. Union spokesman Arturo Climaco said Oroport management was imposing harsh disciplinary measures,

including dismissals, against union officials and workers without valid grounds.

Climaco also accused Oroport of pressuring workers to resign from the union through provocations, by threatening transfers and refusing to follow grievance procedures stipulated in current collective bargaining agreement. The union expects the NCMB will call a hearing before the "cooling-off" period expires.

### **South Korean doctors strike**

Around 4,500 doctors rallied on January 7 outside a government complex in Gwacheon, in South Korea's Gyeonggi province to demand the Health Ministry withdraw a revision of laws governing the medical service sector.

A spokesperson for the Seoul Medical Association claimed that the strike resulted in the closure of 2,000 out of 6,500 clinics in Seoul and 400 out of 1,200 clinics in Incheon. The doctor's claim that new laws would give lesser-trained medical staff a broader role in examining patients with less serious ailments and does not specifically spell out doctors' role in prescribing medication.

### **Sri Lankan chemical workers strike for pay and conditions**

Euroasia Chemical Factory workers in rural Uduthuthiripitiya walked out on January 30 over ten demands. Their log of claims include a cost of living pay increase, provision of medical facilities and protective work gear, incentive and overtime payments, funeral assistance and confirmation of employment for casual workers. Workers carrying placards picketed the factory.

### **Sri Lankan health workers on strike**

Auxiliary staff at Nagoda Base Hospital in the Kalutara district in the country's Western Province went on strike from February 5 over the unwarranted transfer of a union activist. The worker in question is currently on a hunger strike in the hospital premises. The strikers believe he is being victimised and are threatening to spread the strike to

other hospitals if the transfer is not cancelled.

### **Bank of India workers oppose privatisation**

Workers at 40 branches of the Bank of India in Vellore and 32 branches in Tiruvannamalai in the southern state of Tamilnadu went on strike for 24 hours on February 5. Staff at the bank's main office in Vellore also struck. The strike was timed to coincide with a public share issue; a move workers believe will inevitably lead to the complete privatisation of the nationalised entity.

The strike was organised by All India Bank Employees Association, the Bank Employees Federation of India, All India Bank Officers' Association and the Indian National Bank Employees Federation.

### **Indian railway workers protest against harassment**

Railway workers from the South Western Railway in Hubli in the southern state of Karnataka demonstrated outside the general manager's office Hubli on February 2. They were protesting against the use of vigilance inspectors to harass workers.

The workers claim that a senior railway official has been pressing vigilance inspectors to bring more cases against employees for alleged breaches of working guidelines even if they have to fabricate evidence. The workers demanded management ensure a fair inquiry into all alleged breaches and not transfer workers only on the evidence of inspectors. The protesters, who are members of the South Western Railway Mazdoor Union, presented a memorandum to a senior officer of South Western Railway.

### **Australia and the Pacific**

#### **Union refuses to condone strike over safety**

Railway workers employed by Pacific National in the Australian state of Tasmania went on strike on February 8 over safety related issues. The strike occurred without the consent of the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) which covers the workers. Union secretary Samantha Simonetis branded the action "a wildcat strike" and said "It's not endorsed or condoned by the RTBU and I'm unsure of the issues."

Pacific National, Australia's largest private rail operator, has been in the news recently with three derailments of the company's trains in the last year. In the latest derailment, just one week ago, a train carrying paper came off the tracks near Ulverstone between Hobart and Burnie. Last September, a 55-year-old worker was killed after being pinned by a train carriage in a shunting accident. It has not been confirmed if the strike is related to any of these incidents.

#### **Construction workers to vote on strike action**

Construction workers at Mitolo Constructions in South Australia will vote on February 21 for industrial action over a new enterprise work agreement.

The company, known as Mitcon Formwork, has refused to discuss a new work agreement, even though the current one expired almost 13 months ago. The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union has accused the management of using the new WorkChoices laws to avoid entering negotiations.

While the new laws allow for so-called protected industrial action during negotiations for a new work agreement, this can only take place after a long drawn-out set of procedures. These include making an application for an Australian Electoral Commission-run secret ballot stipulating the reason for the strike and its timing. Failure to comply can lead to heavy fines for individual workers and unions.

The secret ballot at Mitcon will be the first in the South Australian construction industry since WorkChoices came into force in March last year.

#### **Strike breakers used in New Zealand newspaper dispute**

The *Oamaru Mail* used alternate labour to replace staff that walked off the job on February 1 in a pay dispute. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) said strikebreakers were used to publish the newspaper and that it was "following up concerns". The union believed the company's action breached the Employment Relations Act and it may take legal action.

Editorial, administration and distribution workers went on strike after three months of negotiations between EPMU and the newspaper's management failed to produce a contract agreement. While the company lifted its pay offer from 3.2 percent to 3.5 percent it was rejected by workers because it was less than cost of living increases since the last pay rise. Workers have indicated they will continue to strike if there is no satisfactory resolution.



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