

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 December 2007

Indian police arrest thousands of protesting workers

On December 4, police in Tamilnadu arrested nearly 5,000 daily-paid and part-time workers participating in protests against the Indian government's failure to implement an 18-point charter. The action included road blocks and sit-down protests.

The workers were demanding the provision of social security schemes for unorganised and agricultural workers, the lifting of a ban on recruitment, the implementation and enforcement of labour welfare laws and the withdrawal of a new pension scheme that lowers benefits. They also called for the setting up of a provident fund and an end to outsourcing by state-run agricultural services.

The protest was called by the All India Trade Union Committee (AITUC) and Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). The workers have threatened to strike on December 20 if the government fails to satisfy their demands.

State bank employees protest merger

State Bank of Tiruvencore (SBT) employees in the Indian state of Kerala went on strike for one day on December 3 against the government's plan to merge SBT with the State Bank of India (SBI). The strike crippled SBT operations across the state.

Workers believe the merger will result in the closure of many SBT branches and lead to significant job losses. The strikers demonstrated outside SBT's district headquarters and held a mass rally in Thiruvanthapuram. The protest was called by the Bank Employees Federation of India (BEFI) and the Kerala branch of the SBT Employees Union (SBTEU).

Chinese taxi drivers strike over rising costs

Taxi drivers in the north-eastern industrial and tourist city of Harbin went on strike on December 5, demanding relief from management fees and high fuel costs. The strike, combined with poor public transport, severely restricted tourists and business people from getting around the city. The official government-controlled taxi drivers union did not call the strike and authorities are now hunting for "instigators".

The drivers are also complaining about low wages of around 1,000 yuan (\$US135) a month and claim that a fare increase is needed to cover the rising costs of fuel and basic commodities. The strike follows stoppages by drivers in other parts of China, all of them unsanctioned. Most go unreported in the state-

controlled media.

Flight attendants oppose Cathay's new medical policy

Cathay Pacific Airways flight attendants have scheduled a rally for December 10 to protest the Hong Kong-based company's plan to change its medical policy on January 1. The Flight Attendants Union warned that it will consider industrial action, including strikes, collectively taking sick-leave and withholding cabin service.

Over 6,000 ground staff and hourly-paid flight attendants who joined the company after June 1997 will be affected by the changes. They will have \$HK30 (\$US3.80) deducted from their salary for each doctor's visit and \$HK50 for each specialist visit. All medical consultations are free under the current scheme.

Nike workers in Vietnam return to work

Striking workers at a Nike shoe factory in Vietnam's southern province of Dong Nai returned to work on December 3 after their demands were met. The South Korean owners of the Tae Kwan Vina factory agreed to give workers a 72,300 dong (\$US4.50) monthly transport allowance and improve the factory canteen's food.

The plant employs over 14,000 workers, most of them young women from rural areas. Prices of basic commodities in Vietnam have increased by 10 percent over the past twelve months, fuelling over 400 strikes around the country during that period.

Indonesian labourers rally for national minimum wage

Around 150 labourers' representatives from industrial zones, including Cakung in East Jakarta, Kampung Muara in North Jakarta and Tangerang, rallied outside at the Presidential Palace in central Jakarta on December 2. The workers demanded a national monthly minimum wage of 1.2 million rupiah (\$US133).

The token rally was organised by Indonesia's Labor Struggle National Front. Currently, there is no national minimum wage and monthly rates vary across regions from 750,000 to 950,000 rupiah. The government has promised to raise provincial minimum wage rates by 10.3 percent in 2008 but has refused to set a national minimum.

Indonesian nickel miners return to work

Around 2,500 miners at PT International Nickel Indonesia (PT Inco) ended an 11-day strike on November 26 after

winning gains in wages and bonuses. PT Inco, which employs around 3,500 workers, is located on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi and is a unit of Brazilian-owned CVRD-Inco.

Under an accord struck with labour union FSP-KEP, the company agreed to pay a third-quarter 2007 bonus, but a production bonus for 2008 is subject to global nickel prices. Only if prices reach \$US13 per pound will workers receive a 12 percent monthly bonus. The company also agreed to provide education scholarships for employees' children.

Adelaide transport workers vote for industrial action

Workers at public transport operator TransAdelaide in South Australia voted on December 5 for industrial action over a new enterprise agreement. The state Labor government has offered a two-year agreement with a \$30 a week increase for train and tram drivers, passenger service assistants and platform co-ordinators.

A spokesman for the Rail, Tram and Bus Industry Union (RTBIU) said the offer was inadequate and the union was seeking a better deal but did not specify an amount. TransAdelaide is also seeking new flexibilities in work arrangements as a trade off for what amounts to a 3.6 percent pay increase.

The union called the stop-work meeting after negotiations with the company that begun in May stalled. A new round of negotiations will begin on December 11. Union official Ray Hancox said: "It is hoped the government will act before workers proceed with any disruption to train services."

Several options were discussed at the membership meeting, including 48- and 24-hour strikes and a series of rolling strikes across different depots. Workers also endorsed further four-hour stop-work meetings to hear report-backs.

Healthcare workers demand better pay and conditions

On December 5, a meeting of over 500 delegates representing healthcare professionals across the Australian state of Victoria voted to take industrial action in a dispute over a new work agreement.

The professionals, including physiotherapists and social workers, are demanding a pay increase, extra staff and a better career structure. The Department of Human Services web site admits to a chronic shortage of healthcare staff, particularly in the state's rural and regional areas.

Engineering workers strike to defend conditions

Engineering workers at Scott Automation in New Zealand walked off the job for two days on November 29 and picketed the company's Christchurch and Dunedin sites. The strike was to protest the company's refusal to offer a decent increase in pay and conditions. The 95 workers plan to follow up the strike with an overtime ban and a series of rolling stoppages.

An Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) spokesman said its members wanted recognition for skills and long service with the company. The strike followed five weeks of bargaining and a two-hour lightning strike last week.

EPMU members at Atlas Specialty Engineering also walked

off the job indefinitely on November 30, after the company refused to retain service leave. The 22 workers picketed the company's site in South Auckland and pledged industrial action will continue until Atlas agrees to maintain the current scheme that provided for an extra week of annual leave after six years of service.

The EPMU said problems arose at both companies because management refused to "recognise and reward the gains they make though retaining experienced workers".

In another dispute, more than 30 workers at United Containers Ltd (UCL) went out on a lightning two-hour strike and picketed the plant on December 4. They were protesting being forced to work from six o'clock in the morning until nine at night without being paid overtime.

At the same time, some workers have not had a pay rise in two years. An EPMU spokesman said the company relies on "having overtime on tap in order to meet its contracts but so far they haven't been willing to provide even basic conditions like overtime rates." UCL's core business is refitting and maintaining shipping containers. Following the industrial action management approached the EPMU for mediation.

Health sector strike called off in French Polynesia

An 11-day strike by doctors and nurses in French Polynesia has been called off after talks between the doctors' union and the government reached a "compromise" settlement over hospital funding.

Health workers had been pushing for increased funding to tackle the run-down state of the public health system. Under the compromise agreement, the government will only increase the 2008 budget to provide more funding for the main public hospital Mamarua, in the capital Papeete.

The extra funding will reportedly go toward improving cardiovascular emergency and paediatric outpatient services. It was also agreed that staff contracts will undergo a review and audit in time for hiring for a new general hospital, currently under construction and due to open near the end of next year.



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