

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 December 2007

Chinese riot police use electric prods against strikers

On December 13, striking workers at the Hong Kong-listed container board manufacturer Dragons Paper (Holdings) Limited were dispersed by over 200 riot police armed with electric prods. One worker was severely beaten.

The workers at the factory in Dongguan struck when the company tried to force them to sign new contracts with a Guangzhou-based human resources company instead of being directly employed by Dragons Paper Limited. The issue has since been settled with many of the striking workers taking a severance payout rather than signing a new contract.

The company's conduct is not an isolated occurrence. New labour laws, due to come into force on January 1, will make it harder for companies to fire workers at will, and outline specific compensation terms. The law also imposes specific penalties for hiring a worker without a contract. Currently, thousands of workers have no contract.

In an attempt to circumvent the new laws, many employers are either outsourcing labour or sacking workers, forcing them to sign up with outsourcing companies. Reports of mass lay-offs have steadily increased over the past few months.

Hong Kong flight attendants force partial back-down by Cathay

Cathay Pacific Airways has partly backed down on requiring staff to pay for doctor's visits under a new company medical plan, due to commence on January 1. Under the policy, 10,000 Hong Kong-based staff who previously had fees paid by the company, faced being forced to pay for medical consultations.

Following a number of street marches and protests in Hong Kong by members of the Cathay Pacific Flight Attendants Union, and their threat to take strike action during the busy festive season, the airline modified its proposal, saying each employee could make ten free visits in the first year.

Korean workers protest over deaths

Striking workers from the Korean aluminum wheel manufacture, ASA Co. Limited, an affiliate of Hankook Tire, have been staging a protest since December 16 at the parent company's headquarters in Yeoksam-dong, Seoul.

The workers, members of the Korean Metal Workers Union, are from ASA's factory in Daejeon (about 150km south of Seoul) and have been on strike since November. They are protesting the unexplained deaths of 15 co-workers over a short period at the Daejeon plant, and condemn Hankook Tire for not allowing the establishment of a union at the plant.

The workers are also complaining of excessively long hours. One union member said the factory operates a day-and-night shift system, which means employees have to work for 12 hours straight for seven days a week. He also said they work at least 110 hours overtime per

month.

Union members said poor air conditioning caused build-ups of dust, gas and heat, creating a deadly environment. Relatives of the 15 deceased workers say they were killed by solvents used in the manufacturing process. The Labor Ministry is currently investigating the deaths.

Karnataka hunger strikers hospitalised as protest enters third week

A hunger strike by daily-wage workers of government departments at Bidar in Karnataka, India has entered its third week with two strikers hospitalised on December 14.

The strikers are demanding to be regularised (made permanent) and provided with basic facilities that permanent workers have. Thousands of government daily-wage workers are paid only one fifth of permanent workers' salaries.

Daily-wage workers have been holding protest campaigns for two years. When they launched an indefinite hunger campaign at Bangalor in June last year, the government promised to appoint a cabinet sub committee to look into their demands. The strikers have vowed to maintain the "fast unto death" strike until their demands are met.

New Delhi hospital employees end strike

Group C and D staff at five major hospitals in New Delhi, India, called off their two-day strike on December 17 after negotiations with the Delhi government's health and family welfare department.

Workers at G.B. Pant Hospital, Lok Nayak Jayaprakash Narayan Hospital, Maulana Azad Medical College, Guru Nanak Eye Centre and Maulana Azad Dental Hospital struck over an acute staff shortage. The Hospital Workers Union said it called off the strike after the government agreed to reduce the probation period for contract workers from five to two years.

Bangladesh jute mill workers launch hunger strike

On December 15, workers from six jute mills at Aleem, Khulana in Bangladesh held an eight-hour hunger strike, demanding arrears and annual bonus payments. The workers and their families said the authorities had made several promises to pay but they were still waiting.

Jute mill workers are among the lowest paid and poorest employees in Bangladesh, and are compelled to work under deplorable conditions.

Sri Lankan nurses strike to defend waiting room

Nursing staff at the Peradeniya government-run hospital in Sri Lanka went on an indefinite strike on December 18 to protest the demolition of one of their waiting rooms. The waiting room will be replaced with a new one for doctors only.

The nurses said they were not against the doctors but were fighting to defend their facilities. They are demanding that hospital authorities

build a separate waiting room for doctors in another location.

Indonesian electricity workers protest over outsourcing

On December 14, current and former workers of the state-owned electricity company PLN gathered at the company's South Jakarta headquarters to protest a company scheme in which workers are involuntarily fired and rehired by outsourcing companies. Many workers are unclear who is employing them.

The protest was organised by the Indonesian National Front for Labor Struggle (FNPBI). FNPBI leader Domingus Oktavianus said PLN's East Java Branch uses 200 outsourcing companies.

After the rally, workers marched to the Corruption Eradication Commission to register their complaint.

Victorian healthcare workers walk out

Up to 4,000 hospital workers across the Australian state of Victoria staged a 24-hour stoppage on December 20 and marched to parliament house in Melbourne after negotiations broke down with the state Labor government over a new enterprise bargaining agreement.

Physiotherapists, social workers, radiographers and speech pathologists have been in dispute with the government since December 5 when 500 delegates voted to take industrial action over a log of claims that include better pay, extra staff and a better career structure.

The Health Services Union (HSU) initially suspended industrial action last week after the government agreed to conciliation in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC). But the AIRC ordered the workers not to take unprotected industrial action, while the HSU claims the action is protected. Hospital managements are threatening to take the workers and the union to the Federal Court to enforce the AIRC order.

NZ Automobile Association workers strike

Roadside auto mechanics employed by the New Zealand Automobile Association (AA) walked off the job on December 17 after talks over annual leave entitlements and pay broke down. More than 130 of the 160 workers struck for just the second time in the AA's 105-year history, in what is the busiest period of the year. Some vehicle inspectors also joined the strike. Striking workers picketed outside the AA Towers in Auckland.

A spokesman for the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) said that despite weeks of negotiation the AA insists on cutting the extra week of annual leave that AA roadside workers currently get after six years of service. Workers are seeking a pay rise of above 5 percent and pay parity across the regions. The AA has offered a 3.6 percent increase, provided they accept the cut in annual leave.

Picketing over job losses at New Zealand port

Picketing began on December 15 at the Port of Napier in protest at the loss of jobs. About 25 permanent and 60 casual staff employed at Hawke's Bay Stevedoring Services have been threatened with job losses after the port handed the contract to rival Mount Maunganui-based company International Stevedoring Operations. Six dockers from Australia joined the 120 picketers from around New Zealand.

Port operations resumed on December 19 after an injunction by the Employment Court forced container handlers, who had been refusing to cross the picket lines, to return to work. The unions and the port management were directed to enter another round of mediation.

Protesting Bunnings workers threatened with trespass

Workers at New Zealand branches of the Bunnings retail chain have been threatened with trespass if they protest over a nil percent wage increase. Bunnings workers protested on December 15 at Botany

Downs, Auckland while workers took action at other stores around the country.

Bunnings has stalled negotiations on a new pay deal since May. It has also rejected a reduced claim from the National Distribution Union (NDU) of a 75c an hour increase for six months and a joint working party to develop a pay system to come into affect on June 1.

Bunnings pays youth a minimum wage rate starting at \$11.25 (\$US8.78) an hour and a qualified tradesperson a starting rate of \$14.60.

New Zealand doctors vote to strike

New Zealand hospitals may face industrial action next year after nearly 2,000 senior doctors took an unprecedented vote to strike. The Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS) said this week that 88 percent of specialists who answered a postal ballot had supported industrial action, with 15 percent backing an indefinite strike. Most supported a mix of repeated two-day and week-long strikes. Seventy-five percent of senior doctors responded in the ballot.

An ASMS spokesman said the senior doctors had given district health boards (DHBs) a "massive vote of no confidence". However, the union immediately declared it would defer formal notice of action until its next executive meeting in February as an "olive branch" to the DHBs. That means any industrial action will not take place till late April, giving boards eight weeks' notice.

National collective agreement negotiations between the union and the DHBs have been going on for 18 months. The current salary for a 40-hour week runs from about \$113,000 to about \$163,000. Specialist doctors are seeking an extra 10 percent over two years, the ability for specialists at the top of the scale to continue advancing, and increased reimbursements for medical education. More negotiations are scheduled for February 11 and 12.

Fiji union calls off strike

Striking Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF) workers went back to work on December 17 after their union agreed to further talks. The 200 workers went on strike on December 13 after the FNPF management said it would not pay Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA) for the past three years, including bonus payments.

Pramod Rae, general secretary of the Fiji Bank and Finance Sector Employees Union, said the lifting of the strike came after acting Labour Minister Adi Laufitu Malani gave an assurance that there would be "some sort of resolution" this week.



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